

A Pursuit of Happiness

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14 October 2012

Good evening everyone. I hope you are comfortable, and if not comfortable then at the very least, in a state close to happiness. This paper, I hope, will disprove common misconceptions of happiness, explore different definitions, possibly change your mind about what happiness really means, and reveal to some while reminding others of its importance.

Important figures throughout history have each attempted to describe their version of the vague and abstract concept of happiness and each has only succeeded in describing just that, their *own* version. To impress how vague happiness has become, and how differently it has been described over the years, I have here just a few of thousands of quotes pertaining to the subject. Ideas have spanned from Freud who thought happiness was simply, “lieben und arbeiten” or “to love and to work,” to the Beatles song “Happiness is a warm gun” to finally Charles Schultz, the author of the comic strip, Peanuts, who believed “happiness is a warm puppy.” Even the founding father and co-founder of this college, Benjamin Franklin, has said, “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” I’m kidding. This is a common misquote, but I wanted to make sure I have your attention. This cacophany of different voices and trouble of finding a standard of happiness arises from the obvious fact that different things cause happiness in different people and also suggests that many may not know the right way of achieving it. Too many forget that happiness, as characterized by the belief that acting in a certain way changes the future for the better, is the motivation for one’s actions. Losing sight of this means losing sight of the reason why we do anything. But before I begin to delve further into the issue of happiness I believe it is important to start by explaining why I chose the subject and why it is important for myself and for you.

Chemists question the universe around them using the physical dependence and properties of the subject they are studying. Philosophers also question the universe, but focus

more on abstract concepts such as identity, alternate universes, and the existence of free will. As a chemistry major and philosophy enthusiast, I often find myself as the skeptic trying to tackle abstract questions using only physical explanations (which usually ends in frustration)...

So, I picked the state of happiness to be the subject of my thoughts. “Why not study patience, annoyance, contempt, or any of a myriad of other possibilities?” you may ask, “Isn’t happiness just one of many emotions we of the sophisticated human species are capable of exhibiting?” As it turns out, happiness is so much more than an emotion, but my initial answer was, “I am a college student.” And as a college student, many have impressed upon me the importance of my decisions in these pivotal years. I am sure that my fellow students and especially the college graduates here who have experienced the effects of important decisions in their own lives can relate. The college we enrolled in, the classes we chose to take, and the first jobs and graduate schools we choose to enter will have the greatest influence on where we end up in the future geographically, financially, socially, and, for lack of a better phrase, on a scale of happiness. Who knows what might have happened if you didn’t take that foundations class about chocolate? If the decisions students make today will determine their happiness in the future, it is imperative then, for us to know what decisions in the present will achieve the greatest level of future happiness.

Some may argue that success in life is what we really aspire to and happiness is only one of many necessary requisites of success; it can’t possibly be as important as I am suggesting. Actually, I will take it a step further. Not only do our actions determine our future happiness, but in fact, the reverse is true. Or rather, our expectation for future happiness is the single and sole driving force behind everything we do. To be happy *is* to be successful in life. All of the other factors associated with success are things we subconsciously hope will make us so. Mattieu

Ricard, a molecular biologist from France who became a Buddhist monk, and who I will reference later for a solution to another problem with happiness, says that, “whether it is conscious or not, directly or indirectly, in the short term or long term,” even if the decision takes a split second or deliberated over for weeks, months, or years, whatever we plan for or dream for is part of a deep desire for one’s well-being, or happiness (Ricard, 2007).<sup>1</sup> For some here tonight this may seem intuitive, but for those of you who are still skeptical of this claim, I will take a minute to try to convince you.

A child in a candy store will pick the candy they think they will enjoy the most. Never in the history of the world has it happened that a child has wanted a candy they know from past experience to be the foulest tasting thing they’ve ever eaten. You might try to argue that experiencing and even enjoying the taste of sugar cannot be considered happiness. What if the child regrets his or her choice and ends up hating the supposed treat? Though the child’s anger and frustration were not the intended emotions, it was the expectation that the satisfaction in the taste of the candy would translate into happiness that drove the child to buy the candy. Even a masochist, who volunteers for physical punishment, believes that this pain will bring him or her satisfaction. One who would go as far as to try to commit suicide, believes that the cessation of misery is better than continuing on with their lives (Ricard, 2007). Whether it is the taste of candy or physical pain, any decision made is the product of weighing all opportunities and picking that which will bring the greatest happiness.

Now that we know more about happiness and how it influences our actions, I’d like to analyze the current social mentality toward happiness. America established its stance toward

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, this sounds a bit like what Ayn Rand might say, indeed she says, “Achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life, and that happiness, not pain or mindless self-indulgence, is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values.” Whether you disagree with this I think it is still possible to be reach happiness by spreading it to others, so it is not exactly her disbelief in ethical altruism.

happiness quite early in its history as demonstrated by the famous words of the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson wrote that one of the three inalienable rights of human beings was the “pursuit of happiness.” It is true that he had originally written “estate” and replaced it with “pursuit of happiness” later, but this does not change the effect it has had on Americans to this day. While this phrase makes its importance to Americans evident, the “pursuit” connotation makes happiness sound like an external entity that one must search or fight for to find. Our coined Manifest Destiny, our industrialization, and our free market economy all scream ambition and a search for something more.

When a young elementary student is asked what he/she wants to be when they grow up, you may get a countless number of different answers and yet none of them say what they are all subconsciously thinking: to be happy. Anything from aspirations to be a scientist, a mailman, a cowboy, or a dolphin all stem from what these children currently think will make them happy. They’ve already translated the abstract concept of happiness that is so hard to determine into a goal on which they can focus. Yet these students are not naïve in comparison to an individual of any age. We are all seeking a future that we *think* will make us happy such as trying to accrue wealth, raise social status, etc. Daniel Gilbert (2012), a psychologist at the University of Harvard who conducted a study called *The Science Behind the Smile*, suggests a reason for how and why we translate our desire for happiness into desires for other objects, and probably the evolutionary development of happiness itself (Morse). The prefrontal cortex of the human brain controls judgement, is the source of what many call wisdom, makes both our conscious and unconscious decisions, and is what separates humans from instinctual animals. Gilbert states that the prefrontal cortex also has a unique ability to simulate experience. As humans, we are able to model a future situation and simulate future possibility to predict what outcome will end in the

most favorable way; the one that theoretically has the greatest amount of happiness. But the truth is the many different definitions of happiness have confused us. Our simulators are faulty and expect a different level of happiness than what actually occurs. This has caused humanity to continue to search for the wrong things for generations believing that they will make us happy.

The two examples I used previously, the child in the candy store and the masochist, demonstrate the complexities of this false happiness we pursue so blindly that have contributed to the confusion with the real definition. A complication arises when you consider that though every decision individuals make is expected to increase their happiness, this is obviously not the case. This proves, first, that some people's feelings of happiness and pleasure are in conflict with each other. Schadenfreude, or satisfaction at another's misfortune, perfectly describes this condition, but every clash of wills does not account for all of the lack of happiness in the world. Gamblers make decisions to bet their money on a race or a hand of cards because they believe more money will bring them greater happiness. A majority of the time, they do not receive this reward for which they hoped. But even beyond random chance, there is still a discrepancy between humanity's desire for happiness and their actually reaching it, yet again demonstrating that our thoughts of what causes happiness is flawed. It's possible for a person who has reached all of their goals in life, taken the job with the highest income, bought the most luxurious house they could afford, and married their so-called soul-mate, to still feel unhappy. As the Dalai Lama once commented on the industrialization of a city in Portugal, “even [if] you get [a] high-tech flat on the 100th floor of a super-modern and comfortable building, if you are deeply unhappy within, all you are going to look for is a window from which to jump,” (quoted by Ricard, 2007).

Most individuals in our society are unaware of this wisdom and continue to believe that material possessions and other common desires are the requirements for greater happiness and so strive for them. The result is that for the past fifty years or more, Americans as a whole have been steadily increasing their income and improving their standard of living. And yet, happiness has not increased at a comparable rate. A study conducted by Elizabeth Dunn, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia, and Michael Norton, a professor at Harvard Business School, showed that a “national sample of Americans thought that their life satisfaction would double if they made \$55,000 instead of \$25,000. Yet those who earned the higher amount were only 9% happier than the lower income level. Anywhere above \$75,000 dollars per household, happiness levels did not improve at all (Dunn & Norton, 2012). This study shows that while income and standard of living do help to increase happiness at very low incomes when people struggle for necessities, the law of diminishing returns between money and happiness is powerfully present. At some point, money is no longer a factor, yet the highest level of the world who manages to make over \$75,000 continues to believe in a linear correlation between money and happiness.

In Daniel Gilbert’s study, he measured the happiness levels of two groups: recent paraplegics and recent lottery winners. As expected, the happiness of the lottery winners was much higher than average, and the paraplegics were very unhappy. Surprisingly, after one year, neither group was significantly different from the average. The lottery winners found that money wasn’t everything, and the paraplegics learned to cope with their lives and found it wasn’t so bad. Gilbert suggests that “synthetic happiness,” or the happiness we are able to produce ourselves by changing the way we look at the world around us despite things not working out for the best, is the reason for this result, and is just as real as happiness from external stimuli (Morse

2012). Don't be fooled ladies and gentlemen. This is not the internal common denominator of happiness beyond dependence on material possessions we are looking for. It sounds promising, but if these two feelings of happiness from external stimuli are quantitatively similar to this synthetic happiness, then the synthetic must also depend on the condition of the person.

Consider the controversy if we introduce antidepressants to the argument. If Gilbert believes that synthetic happiness is a physical change in our brains that cause us to be happy about our new conditions in life, artificial happiness, caused by drugs that physically affect the chemistry of our brains is no different. One would then conclude that to achieve the greatest amount of happiness, we should all get the strongest prescription for antidepressants we can, whether we need them or not. While I agree with Gilbert when he says that his quantitative definition of happiness, which is dependent on the outside world, is transient, it is the way he calculates happiness that causes problems. In the humorous fiction *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the author, Douglas Adams, tells the tale of a group of scientists who studied happiness and discovered how to make a robot happy by "sending an electrical signal from one computer chip to another computer chip." They were then able to make robots want to do their bidding by giving the robots tasks and programming the electrical signals in the robots to be set off once the tasks were complete. At one point in the story a protagonist, Ford Prefect, infiltrates a building and kidnaps a robot. Though the robot's original task was to apprehend Ford Prefect and wanted to do so, Prefect short-circuits the robot by placing a piece of wire between the chips allowing electrical signals to flow between the happiness chips freely and continually. The robot no longer has the desire to do its masters bidding because it is in a constant state of ecstatic happiness (Adams, p. 364). This allegorical situation that Adams presents raises the all important question



of antidepressant drugs: are they the hotwiring of our brains? If we take them, are we really the person we should be? Or are we meant to suffer in depression?

I've spent a lot of time so far proving what isn't happiness, but I haven't provided any alternatives yet. Returning to Matthieu Ricard, the Buddhist monk provides this new and exciting definition of happiness that entirely avoids the controversy surrounding antidepressants or indeed any feelings dependent on external stimuli because it has very little to do with the chemical condition of the brain. I believe this better definition of happiness is what our decisions in life should strive for despite its distance from any chemical explanation. Happiness should not be confused with experiencing mental or physical pleasure. Pleasure is "contingent upon time, upon the object, and upon the place." The true happiness that Ricard thinks we are really looking for is not an emotion dependent on one's physical condition, but a state of well being, or, "a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment, a state that actually pervades and underlies all emotional states," (Ricard, 2007). It is not something that needs to be pursued, but rather, practiced. While there are those who require and live better lives taking anti-depressants, changing the chemistry of the brain should also not be associated with happiness, but really only as the name suggests, a tool against depression. This works without contradiction because the new definition of happiness is not the converse of depression.

While antidepressants may be necessary for some, it is best not to overindulge in pleasure or other false imitations of happiness. Instead of striving for something beyond ourselves in search of happiness, we must remember that these external factors may have an effect on our happiness for a while, but their influence is minimal and fleeting. Instead, we should practice a state of well being, resilience against the bad in our lives, and greater appreciation for the good. Now, I understand that I am speaking to the Junto Society. I think I can safely speak for

everyone when I say we believe strongly in higher education and its key role in becoming successful. So before I am excommunicated for fear of starting another hippie revolution where students, who have invested huge amounts of both time and money into their education, are convinced that it's perfectly alright to become a happy bum on the street, I would say continue with your goals in life, keep your ambition, and strive for success. If you ever find yourself unhappy, you will now be equipped with the knowledge to alter your path and reach a state of true well-being and happiness.

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Nikolas Economy is from Madison, New Jersey. He grew up with a strong passion for chemistry as well as interests in many other fields. Franklin and Marshall has been a good home for this reason.