



The Pursuit of Happiness: From Philosophy to Political Economy

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Language: English

What is the connection between politics, economics, and human happiness? The American Declaration of Independence sees a close connection, famously affirming that it is “self evident” that all men have “certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” and that government is “instituted among men” to “secure these rights.” Utilitarian thinkers go further, arguing that the primary object of good government is to actively promote the happiness of all citizens. And the United Nations “World Happiness Report” even ranks different countries by their “national happiness” scores. This class will investigate a range of fascinating questions related to happiness and its proper pursuit. The class is interdisciplinary and draws on classic and contemporary work in philosophy, politics, economics, and social science. The class has four broad areas:

Part One - Philosophy: When we talk about "happiness," what exactly are we talking about? Is happiness definable as pleasure and the absence of pain, or as material well-being, or as the satisfaction of individual desires - or, alternatively, is real happiness a "higher" state of human flourishing, as Plato and Aristotle argue? What is the "World Happiness Report" really measuring, and does it make sense to rank countries' "happiness scores" in this way? Our first step in this class will be to find the right philosophical and psychological concepts for thinking about human happiness.

Part Two - Politics: Should governments directly aim to make citizens happy, or should the state only promote happiness "indirectly," by providing the general conditions within which people can "pursue their own good in their own way," as J. S. Mill writes. When and where is it legitimate to exercise political power to promote a view of the good or happy human life, especially when some citizens may not share that view? Is it okay for governments to "nudge" citizens towards behaviors and habits that may make them happier in the long run, or would this amount to an illegitimate form of paternalism, treating adult citizens like children?

Part Three – Economics: How is happiness effected by material wealth, work, and free markets? You cannot buy happiness, as they say, but does happiness reliably increase with the increase of material wealth? Or does the tie between wealth and happiness only hold up to a



development and exercise of skill in challenging and interesting work activities - is that correct, certain threshold? Some recent psychologists have argued that happiness is closely tied to the

and what economic and political issues does it raise? Is our contemporary conception of happiness excessively consumerist and 'unsustainable' in the long-run?

Part Four - Technology: Recent research in psychology and social science claim to find significant rises in levels of self-ascribed unhappiness, depression, anxiety, and loneliness among younger generations in advanced economies. Further, some of these studies claim that happiness and wellbeing are negatively affected by widespread and heavy use of online social networks. How should we interpret these findings and what aspects of contemporary life may be contributing to youth unhappiness? Does “addictive” patterns of internet and social media activity promote negative emotions (jealousy, anger, isolation, self-hatred) among younger generations, and, if so, what can and should be done?

Course Bibliography:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Aristotle, *Politics*
- Bernard Williams, “Against Utilitarianism,” in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*
- Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Wellbeing*
- Epicurus, selections, from *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings*
- Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*
- Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*
- John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren” in *Essays in Persuasion*
- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*
- John Stuart Mill, “Bentham,” in *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*
- John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*
- Julia Annas, “Happiness as Achievement,” *Daedalus*
- Martha Nussbaum; “Who is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy Poses Questions to Psychology,” *Journal of Legal Studies*
- Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*
- Richard Easterlin, “Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence,” in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth*
- Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life*
- Russell Schafer-Landau, “Is Happiness All the Matters?” in *The Fundamentals of Ethics*