

The Pursuit of Happiness: from Philosophy to Political Economy

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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 philosophical, political, and economic questions related to the pursuit of happiness. The class will have the following three-part structure:

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 certain threshold? Some recent psychologists have argued that happiness is closely tied to the development and exercise of skill in challenging and interesting work activities - is that correct, and what economic and political issues does it raise about people who have to do uncreative and unfulfilling work? Lastly, does living in liberal democracies with (relatively) free-market economies and advanced levels of technology tend to make us more happy and fulfilled, or more anxious, perpetually unsatisfied, and lonely? Is our contemporary conception of happiness 'unsustainable' in the long-run?

Grading Policy: The class will be taught on an intensive format. The class grading will be comprised by two tests (each making up 30% of the final grade, for 60% in total), and several reading-response exercises throughout the semester, as well as attendance and participation in class discussion (40%). Regular attendance and active participation are mandatory.

Partial Bibliography:

Julia Annas, "Happiness as Achievement"

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle, *Politics*

Daniel Haybron, *Happiness: A Very Short Introduction*

Richard Easterlin, "The Economics of Happiness"

James Buchanan, "Natural and Artifactual Man"

Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*

John Stuart Mill, "Bentham"

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*

Nussbaum and Sen, *The Quality of Life*

Seligman and Seligman, *How Much is Enough: Money and the Good Life*

Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*

United Nations World Happiness Report