

The Pursuit of Happiness: From Philosophy to Political Economy

Optional Undergraduate (Licenciatura) class in the Instituto de Estudos Politicos at Universidade Catolica Portuguesa (IEP-UCP).

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42 hours long, 5.5 ECTS.

Schedule:

Taught exclusively in English

The Pursuit of Happiness: From Philosophy to Political Economy is a **cross-disciplinary** course combining elements of political theory, philosophy (ancient and modern), empirical psychology, and economics. The subject-matter—human happiness and its political significance—is complex and elusive. This requires a multi-faceted study and analysis, drawing on theories, concepts, and empirical findings from different fields and crossing conventional academic disciplinary boundaries.

I. Course Overview:

It is widely held that **human happiness** is fundamentally important—perhaps even the most significant goal of all—in both individual life and politics. The American *Declaration of Independence* famously affirms that it is “self-evident” that “all men” have “certain inalienable rights” to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” and that government itself is instituted to secure such rights. Thinkers in the British Utilitarian tradition go further and argue that the ultimate goal and standard of morals and good government is the maximization of overall social happiness or wellbeing of citizens (and, conversely, the minimization of pain and suffering). Famously, the Utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham sought to reform British politics, law, and morality through the application of a modern hedonistic “calculus” of individual and social happiness.

In the last decades, numerous prestigious academic institutions, think-tanks, international organizations, and non-governmental bodies have followed Bentham’s lead and sought to scientifically quantify human happiness and, thereby, provide policy guidance and metrics to rank the average happiness (or “subjective well-being”) of different countries. The United Nations (UN) “World Happiness Report” and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) “Better Life Index” both claim to provide quantitative rankings, based on our best social science, of different countries average levels of happiness (typically couched as subjective “life

satisfaction”). Portugal, for instance, ranks as 66 out of 156 countries on the UN 2019 “World Happiness Report”—with a population that is less happy, apparently, than that of Kazakhstan (60) and Kuwait (51), and roughly on par with Pakistan (67). Even the World Economic Forum at Davos has recently taken up the theme of how different countries and large corporations can scientifically measure, compare, and promote happiness and well-being of individuals and groups.

But when you look more carefully behind the metrics, numbers, and trendy catch-phrases (like “Gross National Happiness”), the topic begins to look more complex, puzzling, and politically fraught. What are all these institutions really measuring and promoting? What *is* happiness, after all? And what significance does happiness have for morality and politics? More concretely, what aspects of modern life most promote human well-being, and what aspects most frustrate the pursuit of happiness.

The central questions of the class can be grouped as follows into four general areas:

- **Philosophy (and a bit of Psychology):** Is happiness equivalent to a subjective feeling or sensation of *pleasure*, as Bentham and his many modern followers hold? How does this compare to the ancient Epicurean doctrine of hedonism? Can happiness truly be quantified in terms of a single psychological metric—or, on the contrary, is happiness constituted by a plurality of separate, distinctive elements (mental, physical, active, sensual, spiritual)? Is pleasure *always* good, and pain *always* bad—or are there “bad pleasures” and “good pains,” as some philosophers argue? Are there “higher” and “lower” forms of pleasure—i.e., distinct “qualities” of happiness that are incommensurable, as John Stuart Mill claims? Some philosophers (including J.S. Mill) have argued that there is a “paradox of hedonism”: that if we intentionally, purposefully seek happiness directly, we are less likely to achieve it. Is the “paradox of hedonism” real, and, if so, how does it affect the project of pursuing happiness as individuals and communities? Aristotle and other Ancient Greek philosophers treat human happiness as *eudaimonia*: not a subjective feeling, but an objective activity of human *flourishing* or *thriving*, involving the exercise of distinctively human virtues and capacities of thought, feeling, creative action, and inter-personal friendship and community. Does Aristotelianism provide a more satisfying conception of human happiness than modern hedonist views? How is happiness related to psychological concepts such as desire, enjoyment, absorption, skill, and experience in “flow”?
- **Politics:** What are the different political implications of Bentham’s hedonistic Utilitarianism, on the one hand, and Aristotelian *eudaimonism*, on the other? Should governments measure levels

of happiness across their populations and use (direct) public policy and (indirect) “nudges” to move their citizens towards happier, healthier life-styles, as the economist Richard Layard argues? When does this project become objectionably paternalistic? How should we understand the claims made by the UN and OECD metrics of national happiness and wellbeing: Are the Danes really so much happier than the Portuguese? On a global level, are wealthy nations in Europe and North America under a strict moral obligation to transfer large sums of money to poorer nations to alleviate human unhappiness, as the contemporary Utilitarian Peter Singer argues?

- **Economics:** Some economists claim that levels of subjective happiness rise alongside rising material wealth only until certain threshold point, after which more wealth is not generally correlated with higher levels of happiness. How should this finding be understood? How is happiness affected by free markets, economic growth, productivity, material wealth, and economic inequality?
- **Technology:** Some thinkers have assumed that greater material wealth and more technological development would naturally lead to greater happiness. However, some recent social scientific studies claim that levels of self-reported happiness have remained flat over the last decades, or even that there have been significant rises in levels of self-reported *unhappiness, depression, anxiety, and loneliness*, especially among younger generations in advanced economies. Some studies claim that happiness and wellbeing are negatively affected by weakening community bonds and increasing use of online social networks. How should we interpret these findings? What aspects of contemporary life and technology may be contributing to unhappiness and what, if anything, should be done?

II. Course Bibliography

Most of the class texts will be available as PDF documents on the course Moodle page.

However, students must purchase three texts which will be read extensively, noted below:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (**students must purchase text**)
- 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* (**students must purchase text**)
- John Stuart Mill, “Bentham,” in *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*
- John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*
- Julia Annas, “Happiness as Achievement,” *Daedalus*
- Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (**students must purchase text**)
- 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*

IV: Grading Methodology

The Pursuit of Happiness: from Philosophy to Political Economy is theoretical-practical in nature. Student grades are based on the following:

- Mid-term test, with two essay questions, two hours in length (30%)
- Final test, with two essay questions, two hours in length (30%)
- Attendance, participation, and one short reading-response paper, which is presented in class (a combined total of 40%).