CHAPTER 19

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IN HISTORY

DARRIN M. McMAHON

Florida State University, USA

If the pursuit of happiness is as old as history itself, then it is surely worth asking what the sources have to say about this perennial human quest. The time to do so is now. For at no other point in human history have so many men and women believed with such unquestioned certainty that they *should* be happy, that this is their inherent state and natural right. Thomas Jefferson's proud affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that the *pursuit of happiness* is a basic human entitlement—a truth at once God-given and self-evident—has slowly evolved into a much wider assumption about its capture and attainment. We deserve to be happy, Americans and many others now tend to believe, and we should be so.

In truth, the assumption that happiness is the natural human state is a relatively recent phenomenon—the product of a dramatic shift in human expectations carried out since the eighteenth century. Remembering that fact, and recalling, too, the received wisdom of some of the many historical observers who have pointed out the potential perils of pursuit may help us to view our own search for happiness in a slightly different light. In the end, I want to suggest, perhaps the best way to find happiness, paradoxically, may well be to look for something else.

Ancient Greek Philosophy of Happiness

But let us begin at the beginning—or at least with what scholars usually agree is the first work of history in the Western tradition, *The History* of Herodotus (1987), set down in Ancient Greece in the first half of the fifth century BCE. Croesus, the fabulously wealthy king of Lydia, has summoned before him the itinerant sage, Solon, lawgiver of Athens and a man who has traveled over much of the world in search of wisdom. The Lydian king lacks nothing, or so he believes, and he attempts to convince Solon of the fact, leading the wise Athenian round his stores of treasure so that he might marvel at their splendor. Ostensibly needing

nothing, Croesus nonetheless reveals that he is in need, for he is overcome by a "longing" to know who is the happiest man in the world. Foolishly, Croesus believes that he himself might be that man, or that he might strive to become him.

Solon's wisdom, however, and the succession of distinctly unhappy events that follow, succeed in dispelling this illusion. When Solon observes cautiously that the "divine is altogether jealous and prone to trouble us" (Herodotus, 1987, p. 47), adding that in the span of a human life "there is much to see that one would rather not see and much to suffer likewise" Croesus is unmoved. And when Solon points out further that because of the unpredictability of human affairs, he cannot yet say if Croesus is, or will ever be, happy, for "man is entirely what befalls him," the proud Lydian is openly contemptuous, dismissing Solon as "assuredly a stupid man."

No sooner has he done so than Croesus receives a great visitation of evil. His son is killed in a freak hunting accident, Croesus himself misinterprets an oracle at Delphi and is lured into a disastrous war, and his kingdom is destroyed by invading Persian armies. Only as a captive, facing imminent death atop a funeral pyre whose flames lick at his feet, does Croesus realize the wisdom of Solon's words and the folly of his own presumption. "No one who lives is happy," he exclaims, calling out his own fate for the benefit of all who "are in their own eyes happy" (Herodotus, 1987, p. 74).

Now it may seem that this tragic tale of divine retribution and frustrated human aims is a particularly morbid introduction to history—any history—let alone a history of happiness. But in an era of inflated expectations, it is worth listening to precisely this sort of wisdom. For Solon's message that the relentless pursuit of happiness threatens always to subvert itself is one that resonates again and again.

Consider the very word that Herodotus (1987), employs to describe the elusive thing that his tragic hero seeks. In truth, Herodotus employs several terms—among them, the ancient Greek *olbios*, *eutychia*, and *eudaimon*,—which all, like their close cousin *makarios*, signify good fortune and blessedness, divine favor and prosperity. But it is above all *eudaimon*, and the noun *eudaimonia* (happiness) that features most prominently in Herodotus's work. In the succeeding 100 years it would emerge as an absolutely critical term in the lexicon of Greek philosophy.

Comprised of the Greek *eu* (good) and *daimon* (god, spirit, demon), *eudaimonia* contains within it a notion of fortune, for to have a good *daimon* on your side, a guiding spirit, is to be lucky. It also possesses a notion of divinity, for a *daimon* is an emissary of the gods, a personal spirit who watches over each of us, acting invisibly on the Olympians' behalf. But what is most interesting is that this *daimon* is an occult power, a hidden, spiritual force that drives human beings forward, where no specific agent can be named. It is this mysterious quality that helps account for that unpredictable "something" that impels Croesus along, driving him in pursuit of he knows not what. For though to have a good *daimon* means to be carried in the direction of the divine, to have a bad *daimon*—a *dysdaimon*—is to be turned aside, led astray, or countered by another. The gods, alas, are as capricious as mortals, as that unhappy wife of Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona, learns to her dismay. Her name is simply a variation on the Greek word for unhappy, *dysdaimon*, as Shakespeare certainly knew. He was probably also aware that *daimon* is the Greek root of the modern word "demon," a fiend or an evil spirit who haunts and threatens us, who always has the power to do us wrong (Burkert, 1977/1985, p. 180).

Something of that vaguely sinister connotation lurks in *eudaimonia* itself. Thus, when Croesus asks, "Is the happiness (*eudaimonia*) that is mine so entirely set at naught by you…?"

(Herodotus, 1987, pp. 46–47). Solon responds that although Croesus's life may seem good now, it is far too early to predict where his *daimon* will finally lead him. In an uncertain world, life is unpredictable, less something to be made than to be endured. Only those who do so successfully—until the very end—can be deemed fortunate, blessed, happy.

Historians of Greek philosophy will point out that this emphasis on the chance or unpredictable nature of human affairs—an emphasis so central to the entire tradition of Greek Tragedy—was challenged in the centuries that followed (Nussbaum, 1994). From Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the 4th and 5th-centuries BC to the Epicureans and Stoics who enjoyed such favor throughout the Mediterranean world in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander, lovers of wisdom and their devotees declared happiness (*eudaimonia*) to be the final aim of philosophical reflection and virtuous activity (Annas, 1993). To discover the secret of the flourishing life became for these men the *summum bonum*, the highest good, one that they were by no means willing to leave entirely to chance. On the contrary, they took as their point of departure the belief that human beings could exercise considerable control over the fate of their lives by living virtuously. Thus does Aristotle (1985), declare famously that happiness "is an activity of the soul expressing virtue" (p. 22). To the extent that we can learn to be good, he believed, we can learn to be happy.

All this is without question; it is also inspiring. Yet it would be wrong to assume that the Classical philosophers' stress on human virtue succeeded in banishing the demons from *eudaimonia*. "Someone might possess virtue," Aristotle (1985), himself concedes, but still "suffer the worst evils and misfortunes" (p. 7–8). He calls this the (bad) "luck of Priam," in reference to that unfortunate father of Hector in Homer's *Iliad*, who is forced like Croesus to endure the death of his beloved son and the destruction of his kingdom through no real fault of his own. To call such a person happy would be perverse, Aristotle insists, thereby acknowledging our inability to eradicate completely the uncertainty bound up with the pursuit of our highest end.

But Aristotle's reservations about the pursuit of happiness run deeper than this. Even if the virtuous man succeeds in running life's gauntlet without serious misfortune, he must deal with the paradoxical fact that the closer he comes to his end, the more cause he will have to regret what passes him by. "The more he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worth while to be alive, and is knowingly deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful" (Aristotle, 1985, p. 45). As the happiness of the happy man increases, so does his suffering at its loss.

Aristotle (1985), like the Stoics, counsels bravery in the face of this contradiction—recommending in effect that the virtuous man look death in the eye, grin, and bear it. We may find this admirable advice, but that it was not entirely satisfying to the denizens of antiquity is confirmed by the tremendous success of the next great philosophy of happiness to sweep the ancient world: Christianity. In this new faith, the paradoxes of pursuit were only further multiplied.

Christianity's Philosophy of Happiness

"Blessed are those who mourn," (Matthew 5:4), we read in the Gospel of Matthew in the New King James Translation, or "Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake"

(Matthew 5:10–11). Similarly shocking to our received assumptions are the beatitudes of Luke. "Happy are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you …" (Luke 67:22–24). Those who weep are apparently "happy," like those who are hungry or are poor.

Admittedly, the critical word in question here is no longer *eudaimon*, but the Greek term *makarios*. Frequently rendered in English as "blessed," *makarios*, however, may just as validly be translated as "happy," as in fact it is in some other versions of the Bible. Many Greek authors, including Aristotle and Plato, used the two words (*eudaimon* and *makarios*) interchangeably. But this is not to deny that the Evangelists themselves meant something very different from what their Classical forebears intended by either term. Indeed, in some ways, their meaning is precisely the opposite. For if one can be genuinely "happy" or "blessed," in this new Christian sense, while mourning, or weeping, or starving—happy, in a manner of speaking, while sad—does it not follow that those who are "happy" in a more conventional sense are quite possibly flirting with the ultimate sorrow? The prosperous, the well-fed, those who feel good and are quick to laugh should beware, at the very least, that their earthly rejoicing is dangerously premature: God may well have other plans in store for them. Meanwhile, those who suffer unjustly in this world may take heart. "Now is your time of grief," Christ tells his disciples in the Gospel of John, "but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22).

In one sense, this was simply the re-assertion of the wisdom of the tragic tradition. We should call no man happy until he is dead, Christians might legitimately claim, because God, who through his Providence controls both fate and fortune, may quickly bring our earthly striving to naught. As the monk in that classic account of Christian pilgrimage, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reminds his fellow travelers as late as the fourteenth century:

> And thus does Fortune's wheel turn treacherously
> And out of happiness bring men to sorrow.
> (McMahon, 2006, p. 496)

The same admonition is repeated throughout the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the very period that gave rise to the modern words for "happiness" in the principal Indo-European languages (McMahon, 2006, pp. 136–137). It is hardly surprising that every one of these words—from the German *Glück* to the French *bonheur*—is linguistically related to good fortune or luck, what the Old English called "hap." Well after the coming of Christ, the earthly variety of "happiness" continued to depend on what *happened* to us, and this, good Christians knew, was ever prone, like Fortune's wheel, to take a turn for the worse.

But if in this respect the Christian world made a place for the older tragic understanding of happiness as divine fortune or good luck, it should also be clear that it considerably altered the meaning of the phrase "call no man happy until he is dead." Strictly speaking, happiness in the Christian conception *was* death (McMahon, 2006, p. 106). No longer considered a boundary marking off the conclusion of a life well lived, death was treated as a gateway that led from the inescapable striving and suffering of our earthly pilgrimage to the conclusion and rest of endless ecstasy, rapture, and bliss. Nothing, nothing at all, will be lacking in death's everlasting life, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1988), affirms typically in the *Summa Against the Gentiles*, for "in that final happiness every human desire will be fulfilled" (p. 9). In heaven, it seems, the saints will "inebriated" by the plenty of God's house, and shall drink of the "torrent" of God's pleasure. Quite literally, the saved will get drunk on God.

For all who suffer from the thirst of human dissatisfaction, this was—and remains—an inspiring prospect, providing what St Augustine (1984), termed the "happiness of hope." But

as he fully appreciated, this same hope necessarily cast a dark shadow on the prospects for happiness on earth. If perfect happiness could only come in death by the grace of God, then it followed that the struggle to obtain earthly happiness was in vain. Pouring scorn on "all these [pagan] philosophers [who] have wished, with amazing folly, to be happy here on earth and to achieve bliss by their own efforts" (p. 852), Augustine (1984), argued at length in the *City of God* that "true happiness" was "unattainable in our present life." Due to the lasting consequences of original sin, we are condemned to suffer on earth—to yearn and long for a satisfaction that we can never as mere mortals know.

Adding yet another paradox to this already paradoxical history, Augustine (trans. 1984), and his Christian brethren thus imagined the pursuit of happiness as a form of punishment, a continual, nagging reminder of our banishment from the Garden of Eden and the consequent human inability to live contentedly without God's grace. According to this perspective, every time we long for happiness, we remind ourselves of our unworthiness and inability to attain it on our own, a vicious cycle whose necessary byproduct was guilt.

Which is not to suggest that there were no counter-veiling impulses in the Christian tradition. The antinomian ecstasies of the early messianic communities, who believed, with Matthew, that the kingdom of God was at hand, certainly had cause for rejoicing. And it is equally true that the Jewish tradition had long acknowledged a healthy place for the enjoyment of God's earth, giving Christian interpreters sunny precedents for their surmise (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2003). Similarly, St Francis observed cheerfully that "It is not right for the servant of God to show sadness and a dismal face" (Smith, 2001, p. 132). And both Luther and Calvin would later emphasize that happiness and good cheer may be viewed as the fruit of justification, a sign of the presence of God's redeeming grace (McMahon, 2006, pp. 164–175).

Philosophy of Happiness in the Enlightenment

All this underscores the rather straightforward point that Christianity, like any religious tradition, is necessarily replete with rival tendencies and competing claims. Yet it is also fairly easy to show that this same tradition's more general misgivings about happiness succeeded in dampening human expectations for some time. It was only in the seventeenth century—at the dawn of the period that we now call the Enlightenment—that men and women in the West dared to think of happiness as something more than a divine gift or otherworldly reward, less fortuitous than fortune, less exalted than a millenarian dream (McMahon, 2006, p. 177). In the Enlightenment, for the first time in human history, comparatively large numbers of men and women were exposed to the novel prospect that they might not have to suffer as an unfailing law of the universe, that they could—and should—expect happiness in the form of good feeling and pleasure as a right of life.

The causes of this momentous transformation range from developments within the Christian tradition that gave greater sanction to earthly enjoyment and de-emphasized the impact of original sin; to new secular attitudes regarding the pleasures of pleasure; to the birth of consumer cultures able to offer an ever-expanding array of luxuries to ever-widening circles (McMahon, 2006, p. 205). Fascinating in their own right, these

developments must cede their place in the present discussion, however, to what they wrought. For freed to think of happiness as something other than the superior striving of the happy few, men and women granted happiness on earth the privileged place they had once afforded to happiness hereafter. "Paradise is where I am," Voltaire (1736/2003), declared with his characteristically provocative wit in the first line of his 1736 poem "Le Mondain" (p. 303). By the century's end, his *bon mot* was more than just a happy phrase. Whereas, scarcely a century before, rulers had been enjoined to lead in the service of the faith and morals of their subjects—to lead in the service of salvation—they were now being asked to serve a different lord. "Happiness is in truth the only object of legislation of intrinsic value," the English utilitarian Joseph Priestley (Porter, 2000, p. 204), observed at the end of the eighteenth century, echoing Voltaire's own claim in a letter of 1729 that "the great and only concern is to be happy" (Craveri, 2005, p. 258). From the greatest happiness to the greatest number, this was the voice of a new age.

There was much to applaud in this new creed. If human beings were not required to look shamefacedly on enjoyment, they were increasingly free to seek their pleasures where they could. To dance, to sing, to enjoy our food, to revel in our bodies and the company of others—in short, to delight in a world of our own making—was not to defy God's will but to live as nature intended. This was our earthly purpose. Bringing with it a whole new range of attitudes that clashed with venerable taboos, the new bearing on happiness worked to overturn impediments to sexual pleasure, material prosperity, self-interest, and simple delight for simply standing in the way. At the same time, defenders of happiness focused their energy on "unnatural" barriers to our natural end. They assailed injustice and inhumanity, prejudice and superstition, barbarism and false belief for barring the way of the human pursuit (McMahon, 2006, p. 209). To the present day that same set of convictions remains at the heart of our closest-held humanitarian assumptions: that suffering is wrong and that it should be relieved wherever possible; that the enjoyment of life is, or ought to be, a basic human entitlement.

The liberating potential of this new creed notwithstanding, the belief that happiness was our natural condition entailed a vicious corollary. For if we *ought* to be happy, didn't it follow that when we were not, there was something wrong? For centuries Christianity had cast a pall over the prospect of happiness on earth, provoking guilt at the thought of worldly delight. But it also justified and made sense of human suffering and dissatisfaction. The long-term impact of the Enlightenment had precisely the opposite effect, creating guilt as a consequence of the failure to be happy, guilt at feeling sadness and pain (McMahon, 2006, p. 250).

It may well be that it is only now—when all must smile for the camera and sadness is treated as a disease—that human beings are experiencing the full force of this development. But even in the eighteenth century, keen observers were aware that the pursuit of happiness might have a dark side. "The time is already come," Samuel Johnson remarked in 1759, "when none are wretched but by their own fault" (1985, p. 87). If happiness were our natural condition, and if neither original sin nor the mystery of grace, the movement of the stars nor the caprice of fortune controlled our fate, then the failure to be happy would be just that—failure.

Was it really so clear, Johnson (1759/1985) wondered, that human beings were intended to be happy, and that they could make themselves so? The supposition itself, he understood, involved an assumption—an article of faith—about the purpose of human existence, about man's final destiny and end. And if this supposition were wrong, as he well believed, then it

placed on human beings an awful burden: a responsibility that they could never entirely fulfill. "What … is to be expected from our pursuit of happiness," one of his characters asks in his masterpiece, *Rassellas*, "when we find the state of life to be such, that happiness itself is the cause of misery?" (Johnson, 1759/1985, pp. 116–117). It was a disconcerting question, and it haunted others of the age. After the untimely death of his mistress, Madame de Châtelet, and the terrible shock of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which wiped out thousands in a day, Voltaire himself came to doubt his earlier optimism. In response, he penned his famous *Candide*, mocking the optimistic faith that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1782/1979b), shared his reservations. "I doubt whether any of us knows the meaning of lasting happiness" (p. 88), he despaired after a lifetime of pursuit, confirming a suspicion he had voiced earlier in his career: "Happiness leaves us, or we leave it" (Rousseau, 1762/1979a, p. 447).

Unlike Johnson, however, and unlike Voltaire, Rousseau refused to leave the matter at that. Child of the Enlightenment that he was in part, he remained adamant in his faith that happiness must be our natural end. Perhaps long ago, in a primitive state of nature, he mused, when our needs and faculties coexisted in harmony as they should, human beings were readily content. But that equilibrium had been upset long ago, with the balance further swayed in the direction of discontent by forces central to life as it was lived in the modern world. Presenting us with ever-greater possibilities and ever-expanding needs, modern commercial societies multiplied human desires, which ranged steadily ahead of our ability to fulfill them, creating envy and dissatisfaction in their wake. And so, Rousseau concluded, if human nature as constituted in the modern world rendered us incapable of achieving happiness, the world and human nature would have to be changed. "As soon as man's needs exceed his faculties and the objects of his desire expand and multiply, he must either remain eternally unhappy or seek a new form of being from which he can draw the resources he no longer finds in himself" (Rousseau, 1782/1994, Vol. 4, p. 82). To do that required radically altering the structure of society.

This was the task Rousseau set himself in his most famous work, *The Social Contract*, which proposed, in an infamous line, that human beings could be "forced to be free." To his credit, Rousseau never made the same claim about happiness, and in fact explicitly states elsewhere that "there is no government that can force the Citizens to live happily; the best is one that puts them in a condition to be happy if they are reasonable" (Rousseau, 1782/1994, Vol. 4, p. 41). Such qualifications, however, went unheeded. Distorting Rousseau's original intentions, men and women at the time of the French Revolution sought to bring his new man and society into being—with terrible results. As France and much of Europe reeled from war and the ghastly slaughter of the Terror, the Jacobin leader Saint-Just declared in the Spring of 1794 that happiness was "a new idea in Europe" (Saint-Just, 1984, p. 715). His colleague and fellow "terrorist," Joseph Marie Lequinio, went further, seeing fit to utter the words that Rousseau himself had eschewed. In a secular sermon delivered in the fall of 1793, Lequinio ended with a chilling invocation. "May the sacred love of the fatherland … force every individual to take the only road that can lead them to the end they propose—the end of happiness" (Lequinio, 1793, p. 18–19). That "road," of course, was the road of the revolution; the "force" was provided by the guillotine; and the "end" was stated clearly in the first article of the Jacobin constitution: "the goal of society is common happiness" (McMahon, 2006, p. 261).

It is no exaggeration to say that this very same revolutionary promise—to remake human beings and their world in the service of happiness—lies behind every one of the terrible experiments in social engineering that have brought such misery to the post-Enlightenment world. The terrible history of these ventures is well known to us today. And perhaps, in the West at least, we can feel some confidence that this knowledge will help guard against similar experiments in the immediate future. To force human beings to be happy, it now seems clear, is no more practicable than to force them to be free.

Pursuit of Happiness in the United States of America

But what of that other revolutionary experiment—and its liberal promise of freedom, the freedom to pursue happiness anyway we choose? Jefferson, it is worth stressing, placed the emphasis on the *pursuit* of happiness in the founding document of the United States not its attainment—and he was enough of a realist to doubt whether we could ever firmly grasp so slippery a thing. As his collaborator Benjamin Franklin is said to have observed: "The constitution only gives you the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself." The lines are undoubtedly apocryphal—for one thing, Franklin well knew that it was the Declaration, and not the Constitution, that conferred this right. But the sentiment itself is an apt approximation of the intent of the Founding Fathers. Governments must limit themselves to providing the basic conditions for the pursuit of happiness—civil liberties, peace and security, the protection of private property, the rule of law—and allow individuals to do the rest for themselves.

It was, and remains, a noble vision. But it is worth dwelling a little longer on just what this pursuit of happiness entailed. And here we should pause to consider the neglected term: pursuit. As the critic and historian Gary Wills (2002, p. 245) has emphasized, the word had a much harder meaning in the eighteenth-century than it does today, retaining a close link with its cognates, "prosecute" and "persecute." Thus, Samuel Johnson (1755) listed the word in his eighteenth-century *A Dictionary of the English Language* as:

> To Pursue... 1. To chase; to follow in hostility.
>
> Pursuit… 1. The act of following with hostile intention.

If one thinks of pursuing happiness as one pursues a fugitive (and indeed in Scottish law, criminal prosecutors were called "pursuers," a usage with which Jefferson was familiar), the "pursuit of happiness" takes on a somewhat different inflection. To pursue, in this sense, is to follow with hostile intention, chasing down a renegade wherever he might lead us, and growing ever-more frustrated as the sweat forms on our brow. Like the *daimon* who lurks in *eudaimonia*, happiness may lead us high and low, and often astray. And when it does, it is only natural to begin to resent the thing that continually eludes us.

Whether Jefferson himself and the other Founding Fathers made such conscious associations is far from clear. But it is hardly surprising to find perceptive observers who arrived at similar reflections. Think of Tocqueville who expressed such astonishment at the impatience

and agitation of Americans. "No one could work harder to be happy," (Tocqueville, 1840/1988, Vol. 1, p. 243) he observed in *Democracy in America*, marveling repeatedly at the ceaseless, restless energy they expend in search of a better life. Rushing from one thing to the next, an American will travel hundreds of miles in a day. He will build a house in which to pass his old age and then sell it before the roof is on. He will continually change paths "for fear of missing the shortest cut leading to happiness" (Tocqueville, 1840/1988, Vol. 1, p. 243). Finally, though:

> Death steps in … and stops him before he has grown tired of this futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes him. (Tocqueville, 1840/1988, Vol. 2, p. 536–537)

In dogged pursuit until the end, the restless American is brought up short only by death. And that, Tocqueville (1840/1988), concluded, in reference to America's related quest for an ever-elusive equality was "the reason for the strange melancholy often haunting inhabitants of democracies in the midst of abundance, and of that disgust with life sometimes gripping them in calm and easy circumstances" (Vol. 2, p. 538).

John Stuart Mill's Insight

As the last line implies, Tocqueville (1840/1988) intended his reflections as a commentary not only on the specific case of America, but on liberal democracy more generally, which he deemed rightly was the inevitable wave of the future. It is striking, then, that his correspondent and contemporary, the equally astute John Stuart Mill, observed a similar phenomenon in that other great liberal empire of the nineteenth century, Great Britain. Indeed, Mill even observed the phenomenon in himself. Raised to be an apostle of the philosophy of his father's friend, Jeremy Bentham, the proponent of "felicific calculus" and the "greatest happiness of the greatest number," the young Mill made the attainment of happiness his life's work. And yet in his early manhood, having suffered a debilitating breakdown and an extended bout of depression, he hit upon a strange insight. As he confessed late in life in his gripping *Autobiography*:

> I now thought that this end [happiness] was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way … Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life … This theory now became the basis of my philosophy of life. (Mill, 1873/1989, pp. 117–118)

This was a stunning avowal for one who continued throughout his life to hold happiness in the highest esteem. The way to reach it, he grasped, was to search for something else. Those who would capture happiness must pursue other things.

What are we to make of such talk from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century? It may be tempting to dismiss Mill's (1873/1989) reflections, along with those of many of the other thinkers examined here, as the abstractions of men of thought—fine *theories*, perhaps, but hardly grounded in solid research. And yet it is interesting to note that at least some

solid research has helped to bear out Mill's reflections, echoing the wisdom of the ages that appears to suggest that those who pursue happiness directly should watch their step. In his well-known studies of the experience of "flow," the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has found that those engaged in purposeful, challenging activity, pursued for its own sake, are apt to live more satisfying—more satisfied—lives than those who don't, and that their reported levels of subjective well being reflect this fact. The work of many other positive psychologists would seem to confirm such findings. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) himself even goes so far as to invoke Mill directly, arguing that "we cannot reach happiness by consciously searching for it," (p. 2) but only indirectly, by the by.

Devoting ourselves to activities that we ourselves deem meaningful is of course a long way from the Classical belief that we can reach a god-like happiness by treading a single path of virtue. It falls short, too, of Mill's own unrealized dream that some other highest end—the promotion of liberty, say, or service to society—might carry us to happiness collectively. Nor will the pursuit of purposeful activity do much to surpass the limitations of our genes. This is a less exalted path, a round-about way, one that makes no claims to offer up good feeling and ready delight in the form of instant gratification—or in a pill. A long-term journey, the pursuit of purposeful activity is almost always difficult, requiring planning, sacrifice, and dedication to an end deemed worthy of devotion in and of itself.

This may not be a sensational revelation—the stuff of best-seller lists or "seven easy steps." But in an age of inflated expectations, fed by false promises and excessive claims, it is probably worth heeding some tempered advice. We could do worse than to take counsel from a man who also felt the pull of the promise of paradise on earth, but who then thought better of the prospect. When Voltaire's hero, Candide, returns from circling the globe, wiser but no more happy than when he began, he concludes simply that "we must cultivate our garden." Those seeking happiness—or something like it—in the twenty-first century, could do worse than to take up the hoe.

References

Annas, J. (1993). *The morality of happiness*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Aquinas, T. (1988). Summa contra gentiles. In P. E. Sigmund (Ed. & Trans.), *St. Thomas Aquinas on politics and ethics*. New York, NY: Norton. (Original work written 1258–1264).

Aristotle. (1985). *Nichomachean ethics*. (T. Irwin, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (Original work written fourth century BCE.).

Augustine. (1984). *Concerning the city of God against the Pagans*. (H. Bettonson, Trans.). London, UK: Penguin Books. (Original work written circa 412–425).

Burkert, W. (1985). *Greek religion*. (J. Raffan, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1977).

Craveri, B. (2005). *The age of conversation*. (T. Wangh, Trans.). New York, NY: New York Review of Books.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Herodotus. (1987). *History*. (D. Grene, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work written circa 440 BCE.).

Johnson, S. (1755). *A dictionary of the English language*. London, UK: Strahan.

Johnson, S. (1985). *The history of Rasselas, prince of Abissinia*. (D. J. Enright, Ed.). London, UK: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1759).

Lequinio, J.-M. (1793). *Du bonheur* [On happiness] Archives National F17 A1003, plaq. 3, no. 1263.

McMahon, D. M. (2006). *Happiness: A history*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Mill, J. S. (1989). *Autobiography*. (J. M. Robson, Ed.). London, UK: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1873).

Nussbaum, M. (1994). *The therapy of desire: Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Porter, R. (2000). *Creation of the modern world: The untold story of the British enlightenment*. New York, NY: Norton.

Rousseau, J.- J. (1979a). *Emile*. (A. Bloom, Trans.). New York, NY: Basic Books. (Original work published 1762).

Rousseau, J.- J. (1979b). *Reveries of a solitary walker*. (P. France, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1782).

Rousseau, J.- J. (1994). *The collected writings of Rousseau*. (J. R. Bush, R. D. Masters, & C. Kelley, Eds.; R. D. Masters & C. Kelly, Trans.). Hanover, NH: University Press of New England. (Original work published 1782).

Saint-Just, L. de. (1984). *Oeuvres completes de Saint-Just*. [The complete works of Saint-Just] (M. Duval, Ed.). Paris: Editions Gérard Lebovici.

Smith, L. (2001). Heavenly bliss and earthly delight. In S. McCready (Ed.), *Discovery of happiness* (pp. 116–136). London, UK: MQ Publications.

Tirosh-Samuelson, H. (2003). *Happiness in premodern Juadaism: Virtue, knowledge, and well-being*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press.

Tocqueville, A. de. (1988). *Democracy in America* (J. P. Mayer, Ed.; G. Lawrence, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper Perennial. (Original work published 1840).

Voltaire, F. (2003). Le mondain [Man of the world]. In T. Besterman & W. H. Barber (Eds.), *The complete works of Voltaire. 16, Writings of 1736* (pp. 295–303). Oxford, UK: Voltaire foundation. (Original work published 1736).

Wills, G. (2002). *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*. New York, NY: Mariner Books.