The Impossible Dream

David Wooten wonders how have we come to build a whole culture around a futile, self-defeating enterprise: the pursuit of happiness in *Lapham's Quarterly*:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*
> *—The Declaration of Independence*

These words, from John Locke, in his *Two Treatises* of 1690, said we are all created equal and have inalienable rights, including those to life and liberty. But for Locke the third crucial right was the right to property. In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, also published in 1690, he wrote about the pursuit of happiness, but it follows from his account there that there can be no right to pursue happiness

because we will pursue happiness come what may. The pursuit of happiness is a law of human nature (of what we now call psychology), just as gravity is a law of physics. A right to pursue happiness is no more necessary than a right for water to run downhill.

Jefferson meant, I think, that we have a right to certain preconditions that will allow us to pursue happiness: freedom of speech, so we can speak our minds and learn from others; a career open to talents, so our efforts may be rewarded; freedom of worship, so we may find our way to heaven; and a free market, so we can pursue prosperity. Read this way, Jefferson's right to the pursuit of happiness is an elaboration of the right to liberty. Liberty means not only freedom from coercion, or freedom under the law—or even the right to participate in politics—it is also a right to live in a free community in which individuals themselves decide how they want to achieve happiness. The "public happiness" to which Jefferson aspired can therefore be attained, since public happiness requires liberty in this expanded sense, as Adam Sternbergh explains, we trick ourselves into thinking we know what is needed to be happy: a promotion, a new car, a vacation, a good-looking partner. We believe this even though we know there are plenty of people with good jobs, new cars, vacations, and attractive partners, and many of them are miserable. But they, too, imagine their misery can be fixed by a bottle of Pétrus or a yacht or public adulation. In practice, our strategies for finding happiness are usually self-defeating. There's plenty of empirical evidence to suggest that much of what we do to gain happiness doesn't pay off. It seems that aiming at happiness is always a misconceived project; happiness comes, as Aldous Huxley, "is nothing else than the right to disillusionment phrased in another way."

This problem is particularly acute in our modern consumer economy, in which political institutions, the economic system,

and popular culture are all now primarily dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. This has had the perverse effect of creating a world of frustration and disappointment in which so many discover that happiness is beyond their grasp. The economy fails to deliver for the majority but urges everyone to spend beyond their means. We engage in “retail therapy,” spending for the momentary gratification of acquisition. We encounter advertisements that wrap themselves around us like a blizzard of snow, each promising that if we spend, and go on spending, we will be rewarded with endless delights. This spending helps drive climate change, which threatens to make the planet uninhabitable. Moreover, our sense of who we are seems to be increasingly detached from reality; we live out fantasy versions of ourselves, playing our own private form of air guitar. To constantly pursue something you can never catch is a form of madness. We have built this madness into the very structure of our lives. Every society in the world aims at economic growth, and every society encourages the endless accumulation of wealth. When it comes to wealth, we have great difficulty in saying enough is enough, because it is hard to know when we can safely say we have enough to face down every possible catastrophe.

How then have we come to build a whole culture around an impossible, futile, self-defeating enterprise?

The word *happy* in English originally simply meant lucky. Are you lucky? It’s always too soon to tell, till death closes your account. For the Greeks and Romans, happiness was linked to success: the happy man (barbarians, slaves, and women hardly counted) was someone good at living up to the ideals of manhood. Virtue, happiness, and success were inextricably intertwined, so that in the end they amounted to the same thing, the ultimate objective. An impartial observer could best judge if someone was virtuous, happy, or successful, because the standards were objective, not subjective. And just

as one should withhold judgment on someone's luck until they are safely dead, so the Greeks held that you could really tell if someone had been happy only when they were securely buried.

This all changed during the seventeenth century, when a few thinkers, Niccolò Machiavelli's account of politics and generalized it as an account of human life. Machiavelli said human beings have insatiable appetites, and Hobbes constructed his psychology, moral philosophy, and political theory around this perception. We all, he claimed, endlessly compete with one another over limited resources. This statement seems obvious to us, so we are surprised to discover that the word *competition* was a new one in Hobbes' time, as was the idea of a society in which competition is pervasive. In the pre-Hobbesian world, ambition, the desire to get ahead and do better than others, was universally condemned as a vice; in the post-Hobbesian world, it became admirable, a spur to improvement and progress.

The appetite for pleasure, as understood by Hobbes, has two disturbing features. First, it never ends until death. There is no stable condition that counts as being happy; there are only fleeting experiences that must be renewed constantly. We are (though Hobbes doesn't use the phrase) in an endless pursuit of happiness, and in order to attain happiness, we are in pursuit of the power and wealth that we believe will make it possible. Second, we take an imaginary pleasure now in our future pleasures. And since happiness is subjective, imaginary pleasures are just as authentic as real ones. Thus fantasy and reality become interchangeable.

Hobbes' account of happiness was radically modified in the eighteenth century by the introduction of sympathy. Hobbes, following Voltaire's novel *Candide* (1759), written as a defense of Bayle against Leibniz. Candide and Cunégonde are driven out into a world of violence, persecution, and catastrophe. It is the worst of all possible worlds. Any hope of reform is doomed to disappointment. And yet, finally,

stranded on the shore of the Bosporus, they settle down to cultivate their garden, working hard but also savoring candied lemons and pistachios. They find happiness precisely when they stop looking for it. When you pursue happiness, it will flee from you, but if you are lucky, you can stumble upon it when you least expect.

Voltairean happiness always carried with it survivor guilt. Voltaire told Dubravka Ugreši?, began its advance on the masses in the nineteenth century, the age of industrial production; she deems it a peculiarly American product. Given its origins in Enlightenment psychology, America was, from the moment of its founding, dedicated to its pursuit. But is subjective happiness simply the by-product of a consumer society, one that follows urbanization and factory production? When Locke was writing, Chinese porcelain was an expensive rarity; a century later Wedgwood was mass-producing "china" for the new middle classes, Ho?garth was producing engravings for them to hang on their walls, and new luxuries (coffee, tea, sugar, newspapers) were becoming widely available. This economic explanation for the triumph of happiness is superficially plausible, and it may to some extent be true—but as we have seen, the timing is wrong. The intellectual revolution preceded the social and economic revolution. The consumer society did not generate a preoccupation with happiness. The relationship ran in the other direction: the pursuit of happiness gave birth to the consumer society.

If the consumer society helps explain how subjectivity became self-evident, its roots must lie elsewhere. The best place to look is the religious conflict that scarred European life from the beginning of the Reformation in 1517 until the English Revolution of 1688, and continued in much of Europe until the age of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Bayle, even Voltaire—to spend a significant part of their lives in exile. In substituting happiness for honor, virtue, and piety, the new philosophy emphasized private choice and individual preference and sought

to construct a bulwark against religious intolerance. This new subjectivity tackled the central problem exposed by the religious divisions of Europe: If theologians could not agree on salvation, what form of knowledge could be trusted? The Reformation led directly to skepticism, and to a new word from the ancient Greek: *atheism*. In this new world, unbelief was possible. Pleasure was the one thing whose importance nobody could deny.

If we want to trace the origins of the new attitude to happiness, we need to go back to