

The Surprising Origins and Meaning of the “Pursuit of Happiness”

By Carol V. Hamilton

“The pursuit of happiness” is the most famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence. Conventional history and popular wisdom attribute the phrase to the genius of Thomas Jefferson when in an imaginative leap, he replaced the third term of John Locke’s trinity, “life, liberty, and property.” It was a felicitous, even thrilling, substitution. Yet the true history and philosophical meaning of the famous phrase are apparently unknown.

In an article entitled “The Pursuit of Happiness,” posted at the Huffington Post July 4, 2007, Daniel Brook summed up what most of us learned in school: “The eighteenth-century British political philosopher John Locke wrote that governments are instituted to secure people’s rights to ‘life, liberty, and property.’ And in 1776, Thomas Jefferson begged to differ. When he penned the Declaration of Independence, ratified on the Fourth of July, he edited out Locke’s right to ‘property’ and substituted his own more broad-minded, distinctly American concept: the right to ‘the pursuit of happiness.’”

Familiar as all this sounds, Brook is wrong on three points. John Locke lived from 1634 to 1704, making him a man of the seventeenth century, not the eighteenth. Jefferson did not substitute his “own” phrase. Nor is that concept “distinctly American.” It is an import, and Jefferson borrowed it.

The phrase has meant different things to different people. To Europeans it has suggested the core claim—or delusion—of American exceptionalism. To cross-racial or gay couples bringing lawsuits in court, it has meant, or included, the right to marry. And sadly, for many Americans, Jefferson might just as well have left “property” in place. To them the pursuit of happiness means no more than the pursuit of wealth and status as embodied in a McMansion, a Lexus, and membership in a country club. Even more sadly, Jefferson’s own “property” included about two hundred human beings whom he did not permit to pursue their own happiness.

The “pursuit of happiness” has led its own life in popular culture. It provided the title for a 1933-34 Broadway comedy written by Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall. That comedy became a musical of the same title in the 1940s. In the 1980s it was the name of a Canadian rock group whose first big hit was the single, “I’m an Adult Now.” In 1993 the phrase served as the title of a self-help book whose subtitle was “Discovering the Pathway to Fulfillment, Well-Being, and Enduring Personal Joy.” The phrase, coyly misspelled, was appropriated for the title of a 2006 Will Smith movie about upward mobility, the acquisition of wealth, and the triumph

of talent over adversity. Blogging on the subject on November 8, 2007, Arianna Huffington lamented contemporary greed, our happy hours and Happy Meals, but concluded, “but the American idea, embedded deep in our cultural DNA, is inspiring us to pursue a much less shallow happiness.” Most recently, in his new book *Kids are Americans Too*, Bill O’Reilly erroneously wrote, “the Constitution guarantees us life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” He was corrected by an American kid, Courtney Yong of San Francisco, a city O’Reilly often castigates.

If Thomas Jefferson did not coin the phrase, who did? Wikipedia (drawing on, I think, an old edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*) attributes its coinage to Dr. Samuel Johnson in his long fable *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, published in 1759. *Rasselas* is an Abyssinian prince who lives in the Happy Valley, a paradise in every respect imaginable. But the Prince is discontented. Accompanied by his sister Nekayah and a wise, well-traveled poet, he escapes from his utopia and travels around the known world. They visit the Great Pyramid, where a dear friend of Nekayah is kidnapped by Arabs. Wounded by this loss, the Princess laments: “what is to be expected from our pursuit of happiness when we find the state of life to be such, that happiness itself is the cause of misery?”

In 1770 Dr. Johnson used the phrase again in a political essay entitled “The False Alarm.” He began by observing that the “improvement and diffusion of philosophy” among his contemporaries had led to a diminution of “false alarms” about events such as solar eclipses, which once aroused terror in the populace. He predicted that advances in “political knowledge” and the “theory of man” will further erode “causeless discontent and seditious violence.” But while humans are neutral about scientific discoveries, they will never be neutral about politics. “The politician’s improvements,” he observed, in a statement that still resonates today, “are opposed by every passion that can exclude conviction or suppress it; by ambition, by avarice, by hope, and by terror, by public faction, and private animosity.”

What Dr. Johnson called “civil wisdom” was, he wrote, lacking in the English public. Therefore, in another resonant passage, he declared: “We are still so much unacquainted with our own state, and so unskillful in the pursuit of happiness, that we shudder without danger, complain without grievances, and suffer our quiet to be disturbed, and our commerce to be interrupted, by an opposition to the government, raised only by interest, and supported only by clamor, which yet has

so far prevailed upon ignorance and timidity, that many favor it, as reasonable, and many dread it, as powerful.”

It seems unlikely that Jefferson plucked “the pursuit of happiness” from the prose of a Tory like Dr. Johnson. Jefferson’s intellectual heroes were Newton, Bacon, and Locke, and it was actually in Locke that he must have found the phrase. It appears not in the *Two Treatises on Government* but in the 1690 essay *Concerning Human Understanding*. There, in a long and thorny passage, Locke wrote:

The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty. As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness; so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty. The stronger ties we have to an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general, which is our greatest good, and which, as such, our desires always follow, the more are we free from any necessary determination of our will to any particular action, and from a necessary compliance with our desire, set upon any particular, and then appearing preferable good, till we have duly examined whether it has a tendency to, or be inconsistent with, our real happiness: and therefore, till we are as much informed upon this inquiry as the weight of the matter, and the nature of the case demands, we are, by the necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desires in particular cases.

Just the ideas that inspired our intellectual Founders were primarily European imports, so that defining American phrase, “the pursuit of happiness,” is not native to our shores. Furthermore, as the quotation from Locke demonstrates, “the pursuit of happiness” is a complicated concept. It is not merely sensual or hedonistic, but engages the intellect, requiring the careful discrimination of imaginary happiness from “true and solid” happiness. It is the “foundation of liberty” because it frees us from enslavement to particular desires.

The Greek word for “happiness” is *eudaimonia*. In the passage above, Locke is invoking Greek and Roman ethics in which *eudaimonia* is linked to *aretê*, the Greek word for “virtue” or “excellence.” In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote, “the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action.” Happiness is not, he argued, equivalent to wealth, honor, or pleasure. It is an end in itself, not the means to an end. The philosophical lineage of happiness can be traced from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle through the Stoics, Sceptics, and Epicureans.

Jefferson admired Epicurus and owned eight copies of *De rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Lucretius, a Roman disciple of Epicurus. In a letter Jefferson wrote to William Short on October 13, 1819, he declared, “I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.” At the end of the letter, Jefferson made a summary of the key points of Epicurean doctrine, including:

Moral Happiness, the aim of life. Virtue, the foundation of happiness. and Utility, the test of virtue.

Properly understood, therefore, when John Locke, Samuel Johnson, and Thomas Jefferson wrote of “the pursuit of happiness,” they were invoking the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition in which happiness is bound up with the civic virtues of courage, moderation, and justice. Because they are civic virtues, not just personal attributes, they implicate the social aspect of *eudaimonia*. The pursuit of happiness, therefore, is not merely a matter of achieving individual pleasure. That is why Alexander Hamilton and other founders referred to “social happiness.” During this political season, as Americans are scrutinizing presidential candidates, we would do well to ponder that.