

Utilitarianism the pursuit of happiness philosophy essay



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The phrase “ life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” enshrined in the founding documents of the United States, was derived from John Locke. Locke’s formulation, however, was “ life, liberty, and property.” In choosing the broader formulation “ pursuit of happiness,” the framers were certainly not drawing from John Stuart Mill, since they wrote many decades before he did. They were writing and thinking in the same philosophical tradition, which goes ultimately back to Aristotle. Mill, however, has given us in Utilitarianism the most concise, analytical interpretation of this concept.

What is meant by happiness, and what justifies regarding it as the goal either of a political system or of a system of ethical philosophy? In everyday usage, we use it most often in the sense of being pleased (“ I’m happy you could come”), or of general well-being (“ Happy Birthday!”). It has pleasant connotations, but not, in everyday usage, particularly lofty ones. One might expect moral philosophy, or even political philosophy and statecraft, to seek some more profound goal. Mill, however, constructs his approach to moral philosophy from the bottom up. He starts from the premise that we naturally seek out pleasant experiences, and try to avoid pain or unpleasant experiences. At first glance this might appear to be an invitation to mere hedonism, “ eat, drink, and be merry.” However, human experience shows that pleasant experiences are not limited to the material. We enjoy music, for example, and friendship, and seek these things out. Indeed, we often find satisfaction in experiences that might well be arduous and even unpleasant, such as running a marathon. Even the effort of living up to a system of values carries its satisfactions (7-8).

The sum total of these satisfactions and pleasures, or dissatisfactions and miseries, though the course of a lifetime constitutes our overall happiness or unhappiness (3-4). Happiness is therefore “the good life” — not in the narrow sense of a house in the suburbs, convenient to a golf course (though not excluding these things), but in the broadest sense of a satisfying and joyous human existence. This, suggests Mill, is our goal in life, not imposed on us by some moral authority or power, but as a consequence of our human nature.

Moreover, the pursuit of happiness extends — even as a purely practical matter — beyond our own condition of life to the condition of the society in which we live. Even if our motives are entirely selfish, for example, we have a vested interest in a society in which, for example, theft and robbery are not the general because we do not wish to be robbed or stolen from. (Even a professional thief benefits from not being a victim of theft as well.) The same practical principle can be extended to vices and virtues in general: We are all better off for living in a society where virtues are general practiced (31-32).

However, what produces the general condition of a society but the behavior of the people who make it up. A burglar may benefit from living in a society where people do not lock their doors, but his behavior makes society less likely to display such mutual trust. If we wish to live in a virtuous society, therefore, it is in our interest to practice the virtues ourselves. What goes around, after all, comes around. Indeed, Mill speaks of a “contagion of sympathy,” a sort of virtuous cycle (the opposite of a vicious cycle) in which the practice of virtue encourages virtue in others, and improves the condition of life for all.

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This implicitly is what the founding fathers had in mind. A free society does not seek to impose virtue by fiat, but depends on the general practice of virtue to sustain itself. By aiding in the pursuit of happiness by others, we improve our own chances of pursuing it.

A contemporary issue on which Mill's propositions might shed light is the controversy over gay marriage. Many people, perhaps most people, have found the idea strange or shocking when first presented. Some fear that it would destroy marriage. However, it is hard to see how permitting gays to marry detracts from marriages between men and women. Their marriages are unchanged. What permitting gay marriage does is permit a new satisfaction — a further pursuit of happiness — for gay couples. Moreover, by recognizing such couples, it encourages gay individuals to seek stable relationships, improving the condition of society as well as their own lives.

Thus, “ the pursuit of happiness,” combined with Mill's analysis of how ethical principles can be built up from our knowledge of human existence, casts a powerful light on how we can interpret social issues and their possible resolution.

Source Cited

Mill, John Stuart. Utilitarianism. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1979.

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