

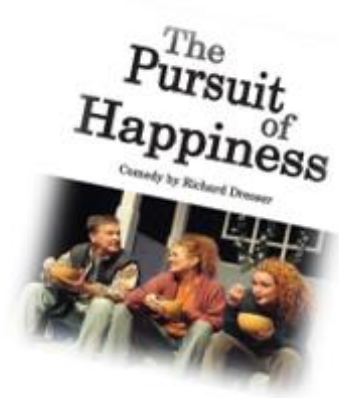
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #185

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### 'The Pursuit of Happiness'



*"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**" (emphasis added). [1]*

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What does the “pursuit of happiness” mean?

What does it mean to 21st century Americans? In Will Smith’s dramedy (combination of drama and comedy), the “Pursuit of Happiness” involves Chris Gardner’s ascent from near homelessness to earning millions as a stockbroker so that he can care for his son Christopher. In Richard Dresser’s comedy “The Pursuit of Happiness,” the pursuit involves two middlingly successful parents’ obsession with getting their daughter into an elite college, which in our time has become the path most taken to material success (or hoped for material success).

In short, “the pursuit” seeks wealth as the path to “happiness.”

Armina and Lawrence Langer’s 1933 Broadway hit “The Pursuit of Happiness” works the same theme, but with a bit more of what the American founders might have intended. It tells the story of Hessian turncoat Max Christman, who deserts the British to join the Colonial Army because he “loves the American spirit, carries a copy of the Declaration of Independence in his wallet, and believes that everyone in America is just ‘chasing happiness.’” [2]

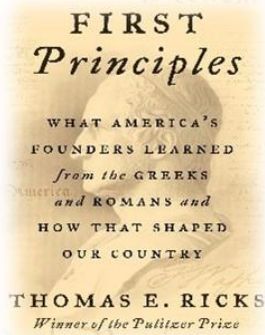
For Max, although his “pursuit” involves gaining the love of the beautiful Prudence Kirkland, it is less selfish than 21st century Americans because it entails seeking the freedom, to paraphrase a slogan from 20th century Army recruiting posters, to become “all he can be.” And, in that pursuit, Max is eager to do his duty and join the Colonial Army, for he understands, borrowing yet another slogan, that “freedom isn’t free.”

Which is closer to what the Founders had in mind.

Which was what, exactly?

Well, “exactly,” the bogus claims of legal originalists aside, might be difficult to say. It did include attaining and maintaining prosperity, which for them would have meant the defense of private property. But not only, for as James Madison said, that equating happiness with the “augmentation of property and wealth, nothing can be more false.” [3]

What else might Madison have had in mind?



In a marvelous book, *First Principles*, Thomas Ricks tries to answer that question. Its full title describes Ricks' intent: ***First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country.*** In what might have been an arid reading, Ricks' refreshingly easy style brings the story to life. He does four things: 1) he tells mini-biographies of America's first four presidents and Alexander Hamilton, who while never president [4] was as much a Founder as George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison; 2) in their biographical sketches he focuses on their classical education analyzing the values they imbibed studying the ancients; 3) he tells the oft told story of the American Revolution and the Constitutional Convention from the vantage point of these five Founders; and, 4) he concludes with some suggestions about what we might do in our time to re-energize their founding values.

Of those four, the most interesting is Ricks' parsing of the Founders' values derived from their classical education. Did they live by these values? The answer, as it would be for most of us, is a decidedly mixed "Yes and No." In a recent conversation about Ricks' book, a friend opined that the Founders were no more driven by virtue than we 21st century Americans. They were motivated by self-interest; the southern tobacco planters wanted to be free from the clutches of British tobacco merchants. The northerners were farmers, tradesmen and merchants, such as John Hancock, who made a fortune as what we would call a general wholesaler (or middleman or commercial intermediary). He was also a smuggler (a charge he would not deny for smuggling to beat the British tax collector was very much a colonial game). Hancock supported breaking free from Britain after the British began to aggressively enforce the laws against smuggling.

Still, just as most 21st century Americans pursue their own self-interest that pursuit is tempered by a set of values derived from our parents, our education, and such lessons as we might have learned in church or Sunday school. Do we always adhere to those values? No, but that does not mean they are not important and that we are not aware of their tempering influence. If we weren't, would we ever feel guilty, or second guess ourselves?

Did the Founders pursue their own individual and collective self-interest? Yes, but that self-interest was tempered by the values they had imbibed from their families, from their education, and from their religious heritage. Curiously, of those three sources, the claims of 21st century religious nationalists notwithstanding, the Founders' primary source of ethical or moral values came from their classically based education.

How do we know?

Because they wrote extensively about it, citing classical sources and examples to justify their actions. With the possible exception of that old Puritan John Adams, although they frequently mentioned providence, they rarely made recourse to Christian rationales. For them, the models of good citizenship were all ancient, primarily Roman.

And their chief value was public virtue, by which they meant disinterested (that is, selfless) service to society. However, being practical citizens of the world, they knew that they could not rely on the “selfless service” of the people, for the people were also selfish. Therefore, they needed to build a society and a government that provided a check against selfishness so that a balance between private and public interest could be achieved.

How did they do that? What was the Founders’ genius? What can we learn from them?

Taking the last question first, regarding “first principles” we can learn a great deal, but regarding the particular nuances of specific of 21st century public policy perhaps not as much as Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas apparently think. The Founders, for example, were silent on abortion and, more to the point, having just rid themselves of a king would be horrified at the decision in *Trump v. the United States* essentially making the president immune to prosecution for any act deemed official.

More generally, as noted above, the founding southerners were aristocrats and the northerners highly successful merchants and lawyers; both groups, with the exception of Washington, were highly educated elites in an agrarian society in which most people did not even attain a grammar school education, much less a high school (which had not yet been invented) or college education. We do not live in an agrarian society, and we have a paradoxical relationship with elites (everyone wants to be one while attacking them as unworthy of emulation – cf. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and U.S. Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio).

Yet the American Founders’ genius created a form of government that has survived 235 years.

What was their genius?

Based upon their reading of classical thinkers and, for them, the modern philosophers of the Enlightenment, in particular John Locke and Montesquieu, they devised a form of government capable of balancing competing and conflicting

interests. Their system of checks and balances has failed only once, in 1860, although it came close during the 1790s, and the elections of 1800, 1824, 1876, 2000, and 2020. With Project 2025 looming in the background as a neo-fascist blueprint, 2024 is another test.

What were the conflicts they sought to balance? In the broadest sense, they understood that balancing the self-interest of individuals and specific groups against the common good of all of society was the great challenge because protecting the common good required sacrificing some portion of an individual or group's self-interest. The Founders' deep immersion in classical culture taught them to value above all else "public virtue," which requires the "self-restraint of those in power to act for the common good and not their personal interest. ..." [5]

Which brings us back to the "pursuit of happiness."

What did Thomas Jefferson mean by that phrase and what would his contemporaries have understood him to mean? Jefferson was an Epicurean, that is, one who seeks "pleasure," but like Epicurus, who first enunciated these ideas, Jefferson did not mean mindless pleasure or hedonistic sensuality. There is no way to know, but I think Jefferson would be aghast at the public sensuality, the culture of excess, and licentiousness on view 24/7/365 on television and the internet. As Epicurus said in a letter to Laertius, "we are not speaking of the pleasures of a debauched man ... but we mean the freedom of the body from pain, and of the soul from confusion." [6] Jefferson worked this out for himself to mean:

"Happiness is the aim of life.  
Virtue is the foundation of happiness  
Utility the test of virtue ...  
Virtue consists in

1. Prudence
2. Temperance
3. Fortitude
4. Justice" [7]

"The soul free from confusion": for Jefferson, "happiness" meant people at peace with themselves for they lived true to their values – to their "virtues." Now, I am not so sure how "free from confusion" Thomas Jefferson the man as opposed to the icon actually was. The great apostle of "men are created equal" nevertheless owned slaves and fathered a second family with Sally Hemmings, an enslaved woman and the half-sister of Jefferson's first wife Martha. He built his mansion on a mountaintop situated in such a way that one could not see the slave quarters from the manse itself, and the house servants (slaves) worked in the lower level, rarely coming to the upper floors.

Still, the psychological acrobatics aside that Jefferson must have performed to maintain his mental balance, he enunciated as well as any of the Founders their guiding principle: the greatest virtue is public virtue, which is selfless service to the common good. That public virtue rested on a foundation of private virtue.

According to Jefferson, the purpose of life is the attainment of “happiness.” For Jefferson, as we noted, “happiness” is not the selfish pursuit of pleasure, although pursue pleasure he did, so maybe more accurately, “happiness” is not only the pursuit of pleasure. “Happiness” is also, and more importantly, attaining contentment by living in a manner consistent with one’s values, for they are the foundation of “happiness.”

What are those values? They are one’s virtues (in this context, virtues and values are synonymous). How do we know if our actions are virtuous? By their “utility,” asks, “Do our actions conform to our virtue’s ‘tests’?” Which is another way of asking are our actions prudent, tempered, brave (one might say resilient, strong, and brave), and just?

What does prudent mean? In this context, prudent means not simply short term, expedient and merely seeking a temporary or transient pleasure or gain, but do our actions show a care or thought for the future? In short, do we behave in a manner consistent with our and our society’s long-term welfare?

What does temperance or temperament mean? It means moderation in action, thought, or feeling. In short, do we exercise self-restraint deferring immediate personal or selfish gratification for our and our society’s long-term welfare?

What does fortitude mean? It means strength, but, more importantly, it means the strength of mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage. Less melodramatically, fortitude means do we have the strength “to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done whether we want to or not?” [8] Which is another way of asking, regarding prudence and temperance, do we have the strength to set aside our personal selfish interests for the greater good of our society?

What does justice mean? It is the quality of being just, impartial and fair, particularly regarding conflicting claims. What ought the standard be? Although it smacks of Benthamite utilitarianism, it asks if our actions, which one expects to have been prudent, tempered, and brave, contribute to our and our society’s long-term “happiness,” by which is meant a general level of contentment in which all are free to become all that they can be.

In sum, then, following Jefferson's logic, private virtue consists of behaving in a prudent, tempered, resolute, and just manner so that one not only contributes to one's own "happiness," but also to the "happiness" of one's society. In such a way, then, private virtue slips into public virtue.

But Jefferson was not alone in this thinking. Although following different paths, Adams, Washington, Hamilton, and Madison arrived at the same conclusion. Steeped in Roman literature and Joseph Addison's 18th century play *Cato* about the selfless Roman who died protecting the Republic, private virtue – that blend of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice – gave rise to public virtue. Public virtue was the selfless service of a true patriot to the common good (the "commonweal" from whence the term "commonwealth" or *common welfare*, which means the overall health of society protecting its citizens). Public virtue was the highest value, for as Adams said, "Public virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics." [9]

Why is this important?

Well, paraphrasing Madison in "Federalist 51," if men were angels there would be no need for governments. [10] Or, himself a paragon of "public virtue" and a person whose integrity Thomas Jefferson described as "most pure," [11] it was the least educated among them, but perhaps the wisest, George Washington, who said, anticipating Kevin McCarthy and Donald Trump, "Few men have virtue to withstand the highest bidder." [12]

This is important because people are not angels; this is important because in our time a selfish, hyper-libertarianism of both the left and the right is descending into a clash of all against all; it is important because in a democratic republic of the people, by the people, for the people, the people and their leaders must be virtuous, must be able to balance their and their group's selfish aims against the claims of others so that all can live in peace and contentment – that is, "happiness."

The people and those who would lead them must be, not saints, because that is asking too much, they must be able to act with prudence, self-restraint, courage, and justice. As John Winthrop said about "a city on a hill," if it is to be true to its values, the people and their leaders must be able to set aside, not surrender but moderate, their own selfish desires and wishes in order to treat others as they themselves would wish to be treated.

To do that, they must create a government that is prudent, tempered, strong, and just enough to balance competing interests. Explaining how the Founders did that would be another **Book Note**. It is enough for now to know that the "pursuit of happiness" does not mean or does not only mean pursuing riches and seeking to



get your child into an elite college. It means pursuing goals that lead not only to one's own contentment, but also to the greater contentment of one's society. A society in which, as Washington said, "everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." [13]

That's the "pursuit of happiness."



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"*The Pursuit of Happiness theatrical release poster*" at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at [The Pursuit of Happiness - Wikipedia](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.  
"*The Federal Theater Div. of W.P.A.A. presents 'The pursuit of happiness' by Armina Marshall Langer & Lawrence Langer LCCN98512454.tif*" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [The Pursuit of Happiness - Wikipedia](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.  
"*The Pursuit of Happiness, a comedy by Richard Dresser*" at **Dramatic Publishing** available at [The Pursuit of Happiness - Full Length Plays - Browse \(dramaticpublishing.com\)](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.  
"*Thomas Ricks, First Principles cover*" at **HarperCollins Publishers** available at [First Principles – HarperCollins](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.

#### End Notes

1. "*The Declaration of Independence, Action of Second Continental Congress, July 4, 1776,*" in **The Constitution of the United States of America, with the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation**, Ed. R.B. Bernstein (New York: Fall River Press, 2002), p.81.
2. "*The Pursuit of Happiness*" at **Concord Theatricals. com** available at [The Pursuit of Happiness | Concord Theatricals](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.
3. Madison, James, "*Letter to James Monroe (October 5, 1786)*" at **Library of Congress** available at [Image 1 of James Madison to James Monroe, October 5, 1786. | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.
4. Hamilton was ineligible to be president because Article II, Section 1 restricts the presidency to "a Natural born Citizen..."; a native of St. Kitts in the Caribbean, Hamilton did not qualify. It has been suggested by numerous historians that the clause was explicitly directed at making Hamilton ineligible, for his assertive personality had alienated many of his contemporaries.



5. Ricks, Thomas. **First Principles: What America’s Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country** (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), p.10.
6. Ricks, p. 83.
7. Ibid., p. 84.
8. For years in commencement speeches and other occasions, I would quote Thomas H. Huxley, the great 19th century philosopher of science and defender of Charles Darwin who said “the purpose of education is to instill the courage to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done whether you want to or not,” or something to that effect. At the moment, I can’t find the exact quote, but I wanted to recognize my source.
9. Ricks, p. 119.
10. Madison, James. “*Federalist No. 51*” at **National Constitution Center** available at [Federalist 51 \(1788\) | Constitution Center](#) accessed Sept. 18, 2024.
11. “*Thomas Jefferson to Walter Jones, 2 January 1814*” at **Founders Online: National Archives** available at [Thomas Jefferson to Walter Jones, 2 January 1814 \(archives.gov\)](#) accessed September 8, 2024.
12. “*Quotes*” at **GeorgeWashington.org** available at [George Washington Quotes](#) accessed Sept. 8, 2024.
13. Quoted in Abrams, Elliott, “*Every One Shall Sit in Safety Under His Own Vine and Fig Tree*” at **Council on Foreign Relations** available at ["Every One Shall Sit in Safety Under His Own Vine and Fig Tree" | Council on Foreign Relations \(cfr.org\)](#) accessed Sept. 18, 2024.

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