

18. Masculinity Pursues Virtue, Not Happiness

On the Pursuit of Happiness - Happiness and Hedonism – “Living the dream”

How often do you hear people saying things like, “Do whatever makes you happy”? It’s ok, as long as it makes you happy. You can’t judge him - he’s just doing what makes him happy”? We hear and repeat these words, usually without questioning them. Masculinity is not hedonistic. Rather, it understands that happiness is not owed him, but only a potential *reward* for living a virtuous life. It is not a *goal*. When happiness is the goal, a man runs the risk of taking shortcuts and doing whatever it takes, right or wrong, good or bad, to achieve the goal. (Looking at the extremes illustrates the absurdity. What if killing kittens makes me happy. Is that ok?) Furthermore, as a goal, when a man confesses to not being happy at any moment, it is tantamount to admitting that he is a failure. So when he is asked, “Are you happy?”, typically a man will always say he is happy, whether or not he feels that way. He will even *believe* it’s true no matter what. Especially if he is popular conformist, making a lot money and gaining admirers, it’s easy. The important thing to the shallow man is to believe that he is happy and free, and to show others that he is happy and free, whether it is actually true or not. This sets the man up for an incredible degree of psychological contradictions, compartmentalization, and cognitive dissonance.

- Thomas Jefferson, a self-proclaimed Epicurean, replaced Locke’s natural right to “property” with “pursuit of happiness”. Never, however, did he abandon virtues like nonconformity, courage, and honesty.
- Epicurus taught that happiness was a good goal, but that a person can be happy *only by living modestly*, only by living a good life, stopping significantly short of Hedonism.

In modern times, it is my contention that the evidence shows that we pursue happiness, even at the expense of life and liberty, and at the expense of goodness.

"Our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress is increasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason, and the capacity for love in the individual; it tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure." - Erich Fromm

While it is true that the pursuit of happiness can indeed lead to pleasure, a man feels genuine fulfillment only if he is following an uphill path toward goodness and overcoming the obstacles, squarely and courageously, that inevitably occur along that path. “Life is suffering” - Buddha

When honest about it, life is very hard, even for modern man. Every one of us will confront something just awful – death, disease, of ourselves, and of our loved ones. This is natural. It’s how we evolved, under tremendous pressure, not “happy”.

A man needs motivation. He needs a challenge. He needs to be called-out to do something extremely difficult, just short of impossible, and to bear the heavy burden of responsibility. This is the noble path, the purpose-driven life. Only by aiming higher than mere childish self-

gratification will a man feel that his life has deep meaning and value. Taking on as much responsibility as a man can bear, for goodness sake, requires that he struggle. He may not be happy very often, but he will be satisfied that he is helping to reduce suffering for himself and his loved ones, and that he is making the world a better place. He knows that he is living in a manner justifies life and all its suffering. We know this intuitively, and it feels right, even if it doesn't make us feel "happy" right now.

It's the false promises of the rat race, the pride we feel when we're "winning", that blinds us to these ancient wise insights.

Our Greatest Obstacle Along the Noble Path: Addiction to Pride I'd like to return to my proposition in Chapter 6 regarding the addictive nature of our greatest vice, pride. Humans seek pleasure, often to the point of addiction, and will consciously believe whatever they need to believe, to secure the next fix. In his book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, Psychiatrist Gabor Mate makes a very persuasive argument that some of the larger pathological brain conditions that we don't normally think of as "addiction" per se - those conditions that lead to behaviors that we actually admire and respect - are often technically addictive, hence harmful to oneself and others. In particular, in Chapter 22, *Poor Substitutes for Love: Behavior Addictions and Their Origins*, the author deftly describes how addictive prone brain circuitry can drive an individual to obsessions with accomplishments (pride), wealth (greed), admiration (vanity), power (lust), etc. Mate explains that the cascade of neurological events that lead to these addictions are identical to those that lead to the lesser respected ones (such as gambling, sex, food) as well as the most stigmatized, criminalized addictions (illegal drug use). Only the trigger differs. The brain conditions underneath the compulsions are the same.

Why are we like this?

First and foremost, the addiction-prone brain (genetics aside, since we cannot control our genes) results from the experience very early in our lives of insufficient feel-good hormones and neurotransmitters, and of too many of the stress-induced chemicals. The latest research in epigenetics and perinatal care point directly to the nurturing environment from conception through the first year of life as the crucial period of brain development. This period will ultimately determine whether or not we later in life feel the pull toward compulsive behaviors/drugs to compensate for the dearth of "love", neurologically/physiologically speaking, we experienced in the womb and in infancy.