



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ON AMERICAN HAPPINESS

Jerry Weinberger

Are Americans happy? In his unequalled *Democracy in America*, written after his visit to Andrew Jackson's America, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that Americans, despite living in the most prosperous and egalitarian society in history, were restive and melancholy: "grave and almost sad even in their pleasures." Long before psychologists discovered the paradox of choice, Tocqueville saw that the pursuit of happiness, the third of the rights proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, was a mixed blessing.

Tocqueville says that one sometimes finds in Europe a small population totally isolated from the revolutionary turbulence sweeping the Continent. These people are often ignorant, politically apathetic, and oppressed. But despite their wretchedness, "they ordinarily show a serene countenance and they often let a playful humor appear." Not so with the rich, free, and equal Americans. The reason, says Tocqueville, is that the ignorant people don't think of the evils they endure, while the Americans dream constantly of the goods they do not have.

For the acquisitive and free Americans, says Tocqueville, life is too short to get a hold of all the possessions and comforts that are possible to be had. And one's station in life, whatever it is, always is bested, however marginally, by another's. As death hurries us along, and as we become more equal, the remaining inequalities, small as they might be, grate far more than the massive inequalities unnoticed in aristocratic societies. The two things the American wants most and in principle can have—prosperity and equality—always recede, just out of reach.

According to the philosophers of the pursuit of happiness, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, this situation is no American accident; it's the human condition properly understood. Nature condemns us to shop until we drop. According to Hobbes, there is no "repose of a mind satisfied" and "felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter." Human beings are inclined to a perpetual, restless desire for power after power that ends only with death. Locke is no cheerier. He tells us that human desire always looks beyond present enjoyments to an absent good, and the minute we find ourselves contented by something, a new "uneasiness" disturbs us and "we are set afresh on work in the pursuit of happiness." By this argument, the pursuit of happiness means that happiness as such is the Holy Grail.

It's hard to deny that American life is always in flux: for immigrant and blue-blood and Wall Street maven alike, fortunes rise and fall; and in our present economic troubles, we're told paradoxically to spend our way out of our inability to spend. From the time of Montesquieu, analysts of commercial republicanism and capitalism have worried that material acquisition requires bourgeois virtues, such as thrift and self-reliance, which the affluence they produce then undermines. It's no accident that the American counterculture's first anthem, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, was written in the business-obsessed and super-bourgeois 1950s. We're thus in a happiness double bind: our pursuit of happiness first makes us unhappy, as Tocqueville suggests, and then makes us poor because it makes us corrupt, which then makes us even more unhappy.

Tocqueville wasn't all doom and gloom on the happiness front. He was careful to show how the family and religion shore up the traditional bourgeois virtues and, by tempering American materialism, provide for islands of tranquility and happiness. Moreover, Tocqueville understood the trade-off at stake: he preferred our more limited happiness to the sheeplike contentment he predicted for Europe. If ever the Americans suffer the decline of religion and the rise of administrative centralization, they'll also become insipid clients of a self-imposed soft despotism—the egalitarian welfare-security state. In the 1830s, Tocqueville showed clearly that while Americans didn't think themselves in heaven, their lives were in fact more interesting than any in the emerging modern age. America, he showed his fellow Frenchmen, is where the action is.

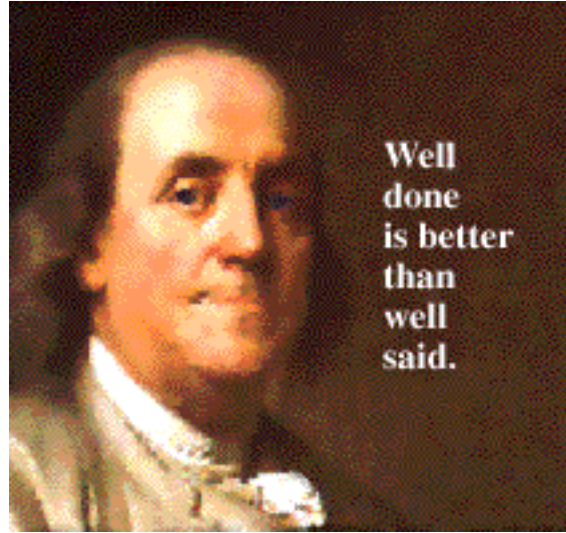
That's still true today, but we're at a crossroads. What if the family and religion and economic liberty lose their sway? What if, like many Europeans, we stop having kids and stop believing in the immortality of the soul? What will happen now that health care is becoming the modern equivalent of corrupting affluence: an ocean of "entitlements," managed by the administratively centralized nanny state? If Tocqueville is right, we'd better hope all this doesn't transpire. But it might be prudent, at least as individuals, to plan for the worst. To whom might we repair for some good advice on how to live life as best and as happily as we can in a post-traditional and post-religious world? Our serious pastors would be out of business, not to mention the blow-dried, drawling Jesus-will-tell-you-the-fed-funds-rate evangelists. We'd be stuck with the psychobabble happiness gurus, or, perhaps the best alternative, left on our own. But as luck would have it, a wise advisor has been around for over 300 years: none other than the First American, Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin was as American as apple pie. Talk about a man on the move in the social flux! Born to a poor but hard-working family, he got but two years of formal education and was, at 17, a runaway apprentice on the lam in Philadelphia with nothing but his wits and some bakery buns on which to subsist. From this bad start, he pulled off the American dream: at 19 in London, a pal of the coffeehouse intellectual elite; rich and retired from his vertically integrated publishing empire at 42; famous scientist soon after; big-time politician and public improver and then bigger-time revolutionary diplomat; Constitutional framer; and everlasting *glory* as the face of the \$100 bill.

There were two things Franklin wasn't so good at: the family and religion. In matters of faith, he was at best a Deist, denying that God interferes in any way with human life; and in matters of the family, he was a decent father but a poor husband who reacted with indifference to his wife's death in Philadelphia while he was in London hobnobbing with the rich and famous. So we need to revise a bit: Franklin perhaps was not as American as apple pie, but he was as American as the carnival hustler's corn dog.

Franklin was, in fact, an American for all seasons. On the one hand, we read in the pages of *Poor Richard's Almanac* and elsewhere homilies about sobriety, thrift, hard work, self-reliance, the way to wealth, the virtues of marriage, and especially (as for Tocqueville later on) the importance of tolerant religion and divine reward and punishment. If men are so bad with religion, he once said, imagine what they would be like without it. The famous *Autobiography* is a tale of self-redemption and self-mastery. There we learn that, from reading the Enlightenment philosophers, Franklin became a free-thinking libertine, even a nihilist, until he realized the practical and moral danger he was in, cleaned up his act, put himself to thrift and incessant work, and then dedicated his life to public service and easy-going, do-good piety.

On the other hand, the bourgeois and pious Ben Franklin is hard to square with much of what he wrote throughout his life, especially about morality, the family, and religion. The bourgeois, believing Franklin is a fiction, and more than a few people who knew him, including John Adams, thought so. But despite his skepticism, he was so happy in his life that he offered to live it over again, exactly as it had transpired. So what was the secret to his felicity? What was Franklin's idea of happiness and the good life apart from bourgeois virtue and tolerant piety?



First, Franklin didn't buy the shop-till-we-drop ideas of Hobbes and Locke. In a 1753 letter (to Peter Collinson) on the topic of support for the poor, Franklin argued that human beings are by nature prone to desire "a life of ease, of freedom from care and labour." This proneness can work in two directions: toward work and acquisitiveness to provide for such an easy life, as in civilized societies, or toward extreme simplicity and a wandering and care-less life, as one sees among the American Indians.

The Indians, said Franklin, are "not deficient in natural understanding" and see clearly the advantages of the arts and sciences among the whites. But they refuse to give up their indolent ways. In fact, when whites are raised among the Indians and subsequently get ransomed, they soon become disgusted with civilized life and escape back into the woods. Civilization and hard work are not the spontaneous products of our ever-acquisitive natures; they result rather from accidents that force people to live together in quarters so close that subsistence can't be had without hard labor. For a smart and lucky person in civilized society, the wise thing to do is to work hard and then retire as early as possible (which is exactly what Franklin did).

But what's in store for the stupid or the unlucky? Even they can find complete happiness, said Franklin: it just depends on seeing one's situation clearly. In 1732, in "Proposals and Queries for the Consideration of the Junto," Franklin posed the question of whether a human being can reach perfection in life. Franklin said yes, it's possible indeed. His argument is typical Franklin, stupidly funny until you think about it more than once: the perfection of a thing is "the greatest the nature of that thing is capable of." Different things have different degrees of perfection, as do single things

at different times. “Thus an horse is more perfect than an oyster yet the oyster may be a perfect oyster as well as the horse a perfect horse. And an egg is not so perfect as a chicken, nor a chicken as a hen; for the hen has more strength than the chicken, and the chicken more life than the egg: yet it may be a perfect egg, chicken and hen.”

He goes on to say that it may well be true that we cannot be as perfect as an angel or as we ourselves might be in heaven. But that doesn't alter the fact that we can be as perfect here as we are capable of. To deny this makes no sense: “It is as if I should say, a chicken in the state of a chicken is not capable of being so perfect as a chicken is capable of being in that state. In the above sense if there may be a perfect oyster, a perfect horse, a perfect ship, why not a perfect man? That is as perfect as his present nature and circumstances admit?” In answering a series of follow-up questions, Franklin notes that a sound mind is God's gift of the capacity of “reasoning justly and truly in searching after and discovering such truths as relate to my happiness,” which reasoning can be “improved by experience and instruction into wisdom.” That wisdom is “the knowledge of what will be best for us on all occasions and of the best ways of attaining it.” And while no man “can be wise at all times and in all things,” some men “are much more frequently wise than others.”

What Franklin means by this humorous verbal doodle is not that there is a teleological or rank order from oysters to horses to human beings (that we have a natural *right* to break horses and eat oysters), but simply that horses can do and experience more things than can oysters and human beings can do and experience more things that can horses and some men can do and experience more than other men. No one, knowing what it is to be human, would wish or choose to be an oyster or a horse. And this means that we prefer not to be dead, since if we really became a horse, we would not be aware of what we lost. And if a horse could know what it's like to be a horse, it wouldn't want to be an oyster. Given these simple facts, it is possible and makes sense to do and experience the things we can as fully as we can: if we are capable of strength, it's better to be strong than weak; if we're capable of knowing, it's better to know than to be ignorant.

By the same logic, however, if we happen to be stupid, then it's best to know whatever we can within the limits of that stupidity. This is the clear implication of Franklin's conclusion that if there can be a perfect oyster and horse, there can also be a perfect man, “as perfect as his present nature and circumstances admit.” If we

add this conclusion to the stipulation that specific things have different degrees of perfection at different times, the result follows that for human beings a state of perfection is possible for every nature and set of circumstances. At the very least, it's better to be what one is than to be dead. Of course, life could be so wretched that death is better, but even then life affords the possibility of something better, death.

Franklin doesn't mean that life is at any time as perfect as it can be (the Panglossian idea that this is the best of all possible worlds), or that we should do nothing to change our circumstances for the better. The inventor of the Franklin stove could hardly believe that. He means, rather, something like this: happiness consists in knowing what can and cannot be done in life and in knowing that what can be done is circumscribed by conditions and events over which we have no control. So if a person is born poor and doesn't like it, it makes sense to try to become rich. But if he is born poor and doesn't like it but lacks the temperament or brains or luck to do better, then wisdom would disclose that, while there's little to be done, it makes sense to take as much delight in such goods as life still affords—not the least of which is not being an oyster, but eating them whenever possible. So Franklin might say: just ask a poor, lazy, stupid, and unlucky man who can still smell and taste and hear music and drink whisky and have sex if he'd rather be a horse or chicken than a man?

Likewise, it makes no sense to think that, beyond the reasonable best he can do, a man can ensure for the future the circumstances that obtain at any time. People may think that they command life altogether and thus act as Hobbes says we do by nature, striving incessantly and restlessly “to assure forever the way of . . . future desire.” But for Franklin, people act this way only because they lack wisdom (which most do and always will). For Franklin, most of the ills of the world trace back to this lack. We should be amazed to learn this from the man who was America's model public projector and self-improver.

In 1734, Franklin wrote and published a piece, now known as the “Parody and Reply to a Religious Meditation,” in his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. It was a reply to Reverend Joshua Smith's poem, “Meditation on the Vanity and Brevity of Human Life.” Smith's poem went as follows, with Franklin supplying the appropriate “translation” (in roman below).

All the few days we live are full of Vanity; and our choicest Pleasures sprinkled with bitterness:

All the few Cakes we have are puffed up with Yeast; and the nicest Gingerbread is spotted with Flyshits!

The time that's past is vanish'd like a dream; and that which is to come is not yet at all:

The Cakes that we have eaten are no more to be seen; and those which are to come are not yet baked.

The present we are in stays but for a moment, and then flies away, and returns no more:

The present Mouthful is chewed but a little while, and then is swallowed down, and comes up no more.

Already we are dead to the years we have liv'd, and shall never live them over again:

Already we have digested the Cakes we have eaten, and shall never eat them over again.

But the longer we live, the shorter is our life; and in the end we become a little lump of clay,

And the more we eat, the less is the Piece remaining; and in the end the whole will become Sir-reverence [excrement].

Oh vain and miserable world! How sadly true is all this story!

Oh vain and miserable Cake shop! Etc.

In proffering this translation, Franklin says that he is objecting to the gloomy folks who see only the dark side of things. Franklin maintains that it's in fact a pretty good world; Job was wrong to complain that our days are few and full of trouble, because were it true that our days are few, so, too, would be our troubles. To complain as the reverend poet does is not much different from the child who gets angry because he wants to have his cake and eat it too. So Franklin closes by saying that we should stand with Solomon, who advises us to eat with joy and drink wine with a merry heart: "Let us rejoice and bless God that we are neither Oysters, Hogs, or Dray-Horses; and not stand repining that He has not made us Angels; lest we be found unworthy of that share of Happiness He has thought fit to allow us."


Again, this simple ditty is less simple than it appears. It's true: we die. But what we regret about death is leaving behind the cakes and the wine. Seen in this light, who is better off: the angels, who eat no cakes and drink no wine, or we human beings, who enjoy such pleasures? If our heads were clear, who would really want to be an angel? When we think of angels, do we not perhaps confuse two things: the continuation of life as we know and love it in the world and some strange incorporeal consciousness? Might we not, as remembering angels, be bored stiff and condemned to long eternally for past mortal delights? And if, as angels, we're spared this longing by remembering nothing of life, could we on earth really yearn to be—much less know what it would mean to be—angels?

If we think clearly about death and angels, then, we see that, though life must disappoint us by turning the cakes we eat and wine we drink and ourselves into dirt, it is foolish to think that the cakes and the wine and ourselves, while we have them, are nothing but Sir-reverence. Franklin certainly doesn't mean that we can put death out of mind if only we eat and drink enough. Nor does he mean that we have to put death out of mind in order to enjoy the cakes and the wine. Rather, the example of the angels suggests that we must keep death properly in mind to enjoy the cakes and wine fully. When we imagine ourselves as angels, perhaps we're just confused: we want life, but not the life we have; we fear death, but we think of it as an escape from our woes. Perhaps there is something better beyond the life we have in hand. But we certainly can't know this and have to admit that, because of death, the life we have may be the only one we'll ever have.

The idea of death may shake us from the dissatisfactions that make us dream of being angels. Death ends life and most of us cannot be happy about this fact. But it's not death that spoils life as we live it, it's how we think about life that does. We have no control over death, but we do have some control over what we think. So perhaps we can discern this truth: death is bad, but death is one thing and life is quite another. The life we have is a bird in the hand and whatever cares it may bring, we should not make those cares worse than they are. So there is no good reason to ignore the delights that life can offer. According to Franklin, happiness (perfection) is really possible, but only if (as Dirty Harry once said) we know our limitations and appreciate the differences between being an oyster, a dray horse, and a human being.

There's a big problem, however, with Franklin's view of happiness. It requires that one *not* think that other people, or God, or the cosmos *owes* us a particular nature or set of circumstances. That's

the basis of contentment with one's situation, whatever it is. But Franklin knew that most people will always tend to think that other people or God or the cosmos owes them a living, or at least a free lunch, if they're good enough to deserve it—and who isn't? And that's especially true if the state, not just their moral vanity, tells them so.

Recall Franklin's comments about a sound mind, wisdom, and the differing degrees of wisdom among men. Franklin knew perfectly well that moral wisdom is rare, not because passion gets the better of us, but *because we are rational creatures*. As he said of his rationale for giving up vegetarianism: "So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find a reason for every thing one has a mind to do." So if our American prosperity makes us unhappy and then makes us poor, and there's no virtue or faith to step into the breach, let's not expect much wise equanimity. Under such conditions, and especially as the siren of new entitlements beckons, Franklin would expect us to sell our self-reliance for security, and to demand our succor from the state, which would make us in the short run even more unhappy and poor. And if in the long run we become happy in our dependence, he'd think (in agreement with Tocqueville) we'd just be a bunch of bores. Were he alive today, old Ben would be at work on a new version of *Poor Richard* for our time; and he'd harp on the old bourgeois virtues, the family, self-help, and most of all, religion. 

From City Journal September 2010

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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