

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: THEN AND NOW

A Conversation with Edward Banfield, Allan Bloom, and Charles Murray

In February the American Enterprise Institute inaugurated a series of occasional lectures with a discussion titled "The Pursuit of Happiness: Then and Now." The three distinguished panelists were: Edward Banfield, George D. Markham Professor of Government Emeritus at Harvard University; Allan Bloom, Professor on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago; and Charles Murray, Bradley Fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Charles Murray is completing a book called In Pursuit. All three of these social scientists have published best-sellers: Edward Banfield's The Unheavenly City; Charles Murray's Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980; and Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Minds of Today's Students. AEI Resident Scholar Robert Goldwin suggested in his introduction that one definition of happiness might be pursuing one's own scholarship and then receiving the kind of public acclaim that these works produced. Excerpts from the discussion follow.

—The Editors

Charles Murray: I concluded my book *Losing Ground* with a thought experiment that goes like this: Let's say you have a two-year-old son or daughter. You know that tomorrow you and your spouse will be run over by a bus, and your child will be orphaned. You are unable to place this child with friends or relatives. Instead, you must choose between two alternatives. One is a pair of poor parents, so poor that your child will sometimes wear hand-me-down—even ragged—clothes, will be teased by schoolmates, and may sometimes go to bed hungry, even though he won't be malnourished. These parents have worked hard all their lives. They will make sure your child goes to school and

studies hard, and they will teach your child that integrity, honesty, and self-sufficiency are primary values.

The other choice is parents who are as affectionate to your child as the first couple, but who are incapable of overseeing your child's education. Words like integrity, honesty, and self-sufficiency are meaningless to them. They have plenty of food, shelter, and the rest of the necessities of life.

With which couple will you place your child?

Most people answer—often reluctantly—that they would put their child with the poor couple. If I ask why, they come up with a variety of explanations: "I want my child to become a reflective adult"; "I want my child to grow up valuing things such as self-sufficiency, hard work, and independence." If I were to push far enough, sooner or later the answer would be that they want the child to be able to pursue happiness—long-term, justified satisfaction with life.

Now, I am willing to bet that there is not a nickel's worth of difference among 95 percent of Americans' notions of happiness. Even so, just about everybody is convinced that everybody *else* has an idiosyncratic, hedonistic, ephemeral, or silly view of happiness. They may not have read Aristotle, but they accept an important, nontrivial sense of happiness.

Having said that, we still have a problem. By making the choice for your child, you have in mind a good you are trying to maximize. That good is complex, but nonetheless so important that you are willing to behave in accordance with your understanding of it.

When we think about social policy, shouldn't we try to have the same kind of complex, multidimensional understanding of what we're trying to accomplish?

Government, by setting the rules of the game, enables people to pursue happiness, and that is the entry point for any discussion of the relationship between happiness and social policy. We start with the raw material, the conditions that are required for pursuing happiness. We can all agree that it's difficult to pursue happiness if you're starving. So, material resources are an obvious enabling condition. Safety is another. One of the reasons human beings form communities is to be safe from the tigers beyond the compound. Self-respect is another enabling condition. So is enjoyment or self-fulfillment.

Thinking in these terms changes our approach to social policy. If you think about material resources as an enabling condition for the pursuit of happiness, for example, you are forced to think about poverty in a different way—as something more than an annual income figure alone could pin down. As you start to think about what poverty really is, the operational definition becomes meaningless. I'm not exaggerating. I wrote a book in which the poverty line figured very prominently. I'm not willing to use it anymore, except to say it doesn't mean anything.

Self-respect is as essential to the pursuit of happiness as material resources are. And this is something that statistics like the poverty line can't begin to take into account. If self-respect must consist of the conviction that we can and do measure up, then the implications for social policy are profound.

Folks who deal in policy think about certain topics, but they are oblivious to others. Take the issue of self-fulfillment, or enjoyment. John Rawls addressed this by condensing Aristotle into what he calls the Aristotelian

Principle: People enjoy the realization of their capacities. The more complex the capacity or the greater the development of it, the more it can be enjoyed.

A social scientist assembled a variety of people who engaged in various forms of play that they found absorbing and rewarding. He included rock climbers and basketball players and chess players and dancers. In a rigorous social science fashion he analyzed their enjoyment of the activities.

Apparently oblivious to the fact, he came up with a beautiful data statement of the Aristotelian Principle. People enjoy realizing their capacities. They enjoy being pushed to the edge of those capacities. Yet everything we know about how human beings enjoy themselves is at odds with the arguments behind some of the ways we do business as a society.

In the past, policy analysts said that government can provide for material resources because this is one thing government knows how to do. While analysts may have acknowledged the importance of self-respect, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging, they felt free to ignore such notions. People could try to work out these enabling conditions for themselves.

The longer you think about the kinds of issues I've raised, the more obvious it becomes that you can't do business that way. By providing the material resources, you have altered the ways in which other things happen. Such things as self-respect, enjoyment, and "belongingness" are intimately connected to the way in which one provides for one's own material resources.

The findings and the approaches I've been talking about can be used to rationalize either a socialist state or a libertarian one—one in which the government should provide for almost everything or for almost nothing.

We have tried a variety of social experiments that haven't worked very well over the last twenty years. We have to start thinking more imaginatively about what we're trying to accomplish. Thinking about the pursuit of happiness can contribute to that.

Edward Banfield: I intend to limit myself to the question: Has two hundred years of the pursuit of happi-

ness left us more happy or less happy? Almost all of those who have pronounced on this question say it has left us more unhappy. They can be divided into two groups.

First, there are those who say that the pursuit of happiness has turned out to be the pursuit of riches—that our success has corrupted us as individuals and as a society. Second, there are those who say that the pursuit of happiness, or riches, is a treadmill—a foolish waste of time and effort at best. John Adams, in a letter written in retirement to his friend Thomas Jefferson, exemplifies the first view: "Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? And will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice, and folly?"

Tocqueville was another eminent exponent of this view. Adams and Jefferson were hardly in their graves when Tocqueville began to bewail, in *Democracy in America*, the passions of Americans for physical gratification. In his view it appeared that our main preoccupation was satisfying the body with the conveniences of life. This was not a vicious materialism that we had fallen into, he allowed, but it distracted us from our political duties and enervated the soul, noiselessly unbending its springs of action.

And finally, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his commencement address at Harvard, told us pretty much what Tocqueville had told us—that happiness in America has come to mean wanting things, and the competition for things has dominated our thoughts. Despite our success in getting things, he said, Americans are dissatisfied with themselves and their society. Indeed, he says, they despise it.

This is not the America that I see. Wealth has not prevented America and Americans from being at least as humane and protective of human rights and peace as any society. Indeed, the great calamities that Tocqueville, Solzhenitsyn, and others have spoken of have not eventuated, and what has eventuated has had nothing to do with American wealth. Nazism, Communism, and Muslim

fundamentalism were not the results of an excess of material things.

The second criticism—that we are on a treadmill demanding things that we don't really want—is a plausible but much less serious charge. If we're guilty, it's a misdemeanor rather than a felony. Thorstein Veblen, John Kenneth Galbraith—there's one in every generation to tell us that our consumption satisfies our wants rather than our needs. Perhaps it's silly to want a car as a toy rather than as a means of transportation. I am not persuaded of that. I remember the wife of the minister of the church that I was taken to as a child telling my mother that she liked her car because it was the one thing she could control. [Laughter.] It seemed to me the poor woman deserved to have at least one thing that she could control.

On the other hand, if we examine the Founders' understanding of the pursuit of happiness, it is arguable that our pursuit of it has not gotten us very far. Their view was derived from, among others, the philosophy of John Locke.

Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin had read and understood Locke's argument that nature or nature's God created man intending him to be happy. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness depended on this.

It being God's intention that all men be happy, the individual has not only to promote his own happiness, but also to take account of the happiness of others. He has an obligation, in Locke's words, to do good. By the light of nature, he writes, we know that we ought to do good to others because it is an obligation of *man*, and we ought to do as much as we can to preserve the rest of mankind, although not at the cost of oneself.

Locke thinks that men should obtain comforts and conveniences by industry. He favors pastimes, but as recreation—that is, interruption of serious work or industry.

Well, how can rationality—the thing that pleasure turns upon—be increased? Children, Locke observed, can be taught to distinguish good from bad, and more important, perhaps, they can be taught self-denial and self-discipline. Indulgent parents are mainly to blame for the miseducation of children, he says, and it will

take a tutor of rare qualities to educate a child properly. That certainly amounts to saying that mass education is impossible. Locke would have been amused at the idea that somebody would criticize Harvard and Cornell and Chicago and others for not educating their elite. He would never have expected them to.

Public Opinion

In Locke's view, public opinion is of crucial importance. Locke says that not one man in 10,000 is indifferent to—or dares act in the face of—public opinion. Although grotesquely, bizarrely wrong in many societies, public opinion offers some hope in a good society. Public opinion, Locke thinks, is a source of secondhand virtue or rationality because the applause of other people's reason will guide one.

So, the question I come to and, alas, end my remarks without answering properly is: What is the case of public opinion today? Locke's view was that men of high reputation ought to be very careful in their use of high reputation so as not to undermine or undercut the substitute for reasonable judgment that most people will have to rely upon.

This is an appropriate place for me to stop because Allan Bloom is a specialist on the subject of how public opinion forms and deforms America and on our potential for happiness today.

Allan Bloom: It's remarkable to come to Washington and find so many people preoccupied with happiness. Happiness is a philosophic issue. Both of our speakers have turned to philosophy for dealing with the comprehensive good. None of the more scientific of the social sciences seems to.

It's an enormous pleasure to talk about philosophic questions with people one respects. And in some sense, that should be the end of my talk, because I would say that's happiness.

Both of the previous speakers seemed to say happiness was the fulfillment of man's nature. When one starts speaking about human nature, what one means is a kind of perfection; something that not everybody can attain but the approximations of which fulfill our humanity. There's a very short list of what the highest

human lives are: prophet, saint, legislator, political founder, philosopher, poet. The list has never changed.

The peacock's fan of human nature opens when you study the arguments made for each. When we read about Moses or Jesus, when we see the lives of Socrates or the great rulers—whether it's in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, or Thucydides, or Shakespeare's real or imagined kings—we explore the limits of humanity.

One of the greatest public policy uses of a discussion of happiness, or perhaps the only one, is for a statesman to think about what the human possibilities are, and at the same time to see what his nation is. He has before him the task of governing: to encourage the tendencies toward the greatest fulfillments of natural humanity and to discourage the trivial, the wasting of human capacity.

Political regimes always tend to have one dominant principle. Aristocracy's is honor, for example; oligarchy's is money. And each of those has a tendency to distort. A fully educated, thoughtful statesman would, therefore, oppose those tendencies.

Obviously, the great American tendency is equality. Equality always inclines people to say that everybody's achievement is as estimable as every other person's achievement; not to have to envy. And there's a school of public policy now—John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin—that wants to take away envy, not by giving people the virtue of controlling it, but by taking away what's enviable—that is, inequality of talents as well as of money.

Aristotle said that the legislator deals with the comprehensive good. His primary function is to make the citizens good and the doers of noble deeds. The modern legislature, stemming from Locke, tries to provide the *conditions* of happiness or the pursuit of happiness, a much more modest scheme. The question is whether something fundamental has been lost in adopting a more modest scheme.

What we are left with is empty formulas rather than anything substantial or anything to admire. Our only contemporary philosophy is a certain kind of relativism.

At a moment when America most needs to think about both its political unity and the unity of the human

beings within it, the only thing the presidents of universities can talk about is diversity: diverse societies, diverse students, and so on. This is perhaps their way of moving away from uncomfortable reflections on what man's perfections might be.

Assaults on classic texts are part of this; because the classic texts encourage discoveries of what is more than mediocre, they give birth to aspirations, and they urge us to develop a capacity for self-contempt.

We would all do well to cut through this ideological assault that attempts to take away all that is uncomfortable; all that would give us aspirations beyond our immediate concept of self.

Questions

Robert Goldwin: James Madison, in a passage quoted by Charles Murray in his forthcoming book, spoke of "the happiness of the people" as "the object of government." Political leaders would not use such words today. What's the significance of the change in vocabulary? Why has the term "happiness" fallen into disuse?

Banfield: In political matters one has to start from where one is. Only a group like this might be patient enough to hear what somebody thinks Locke thought happiness meant.

But to suppose that the public, or people who form public opinion, can be persuaded to turn back to John Locke, or better yet, to Aristotle, is a pipedream.

Murray: The current hostility toward the concept of happiness is fascinating. It is somehow improper for people who are engaged in the public business to toss around words like that.

One quick answer is that to the extent you use the word happiness as a meaningful concept, you are discarding others—the momentary or the ephemeral pleasures. If you do that and you're engaged in a policy discussion, people can see where you're going to end up.

If you say it's important that people have things besides enough food, shelter, and clothing in their lives, you introduce notions that will be interpreted as saying the state doesn't have an obligation to provide those

things, and maybe it shouldn't.

Bloom: There are two tendencies at work. One is the notion that any attempt to say what is good necessarily excludes people who are judged to be not good. Everybody is intimidated by this because ours is supposed to be an inclusive society.

These days the only people we are allowed to call bad are privileged people who don't spend all their time, energies, and money taking care of the disadvantaged. Today, social responsibility consists of making everyone *feel* good.

Parents are generally more sensible. Parents think about what kind of people they want their children to be. And they like to think that their kids are going to *be* good. They have some fairly clear ideas of what good means, and those ideas are very traditional.

I discovered education is a hot issue—not in universities, but among parents. [Laughter.] It's a great force to be tapped. Parents make up a large part of the electorate.

With the Reagan majority, it is assumed that the only thing all parents want their children to do is to be skilled technicians who make money. That parents want children to mint their educations. That has not been my experience. Parents want to convey things to their children that they might lack themselves—aspirations connected with books and learning.

So, discussions about happiness could most easily be part of discussions about education and the concern for the young. How successful that will be, given the fact that the intellectual class is so resolutely know-nothing and is not very accountable now, I don't know. But it's certainly worth trying to tap.

This is a year when we've watched the Senate having no standard other than public opinion. Obviously, statesmen have always given in to their constituencies. But they frequently did it with a tug at their hearts; with a notion that there was something else that could affect them. That has simply disappeared.

Happiness and Inequality

Goldwin: Allan, did you say that one problem with happiness is that there's something undemocratic about it, that

there's inequality in it?

If I understood you correctly, then a real paradox exists, because the assertion that every one of us has an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness, and that governments exist to secure that right, is in the Declaration of Independence, which is the foundation of our democracy.

If the Declaration of Independence is itself democratic, do you mean that a democratic principle—the pursuit of happiness—is inherently undemocratic because of an implication of inequality?

Bloom: Democracy is problematic, and it shouldn't be a sin to say that. If one chooses democracy, it ought to be on the basis of its advantages and disadvantages.

Again, I would turn to parents. This is something peculiarly American. One of the reasons that socialism has not taken root in this country is because parents don't insist that they themselves attain the heights if their children might. The guarantee to the *pursuit* of happiness is obviously not the guarantee of the *attainment* of happiness. Money, birth, race, and so on do not stand in the way of unequal achievement in our society. That is part of democracy.

Murray: There is something that is odd about the anti-democratic aspect of happiness you were talking about. Among people who are most antagonistic toward applying some of these thoughts to real policy, there is an implicit assumption that only a few can pursue meaningful happiness.

There are a lot of folks out there who say, well, it's okay for you and me who have advantages, and who have gone to college, to think in terms of structuring society so that we have access to these higher goals; but the poor working stiff out there, Joe Six Pack, can't be expected to participate in this. And God forbid that you should expect people in the inner city who are on welfare or who are otherwise disadvantaged to participate.

Bloom: One is always hearing, what about the kid in the inner city, what does Plato have to do with him? There is a beautiful passage from W.E.B. DuBois that says something like "I look at Shakespeare, and he does not wince." And it goes on that way. "I walk and I talk with Plato."

There are problematic aspects to our common culture. The question is whether equality has to be an abstract equality that denies nature, or whether it can take account of natural differences.

One has to keep going back to Aristophanes' beautiful play where everyone is declared equal, and you find the ugly old hags insisting upon the favors of young men. If democracy has to be that, it's not trustworthy.

Murray: One of the most interesting questions is to take someone who is not beautiful or brilliant, who is below average in intelligence—as indeed 50 percent of the population are—and who is below average in industriousness. How can he reach the age of seventy and be satisfied with who he is and what he has done?

The test of a society is that someone can reach the age of seventy and be able to look back and say, I have lived a life that I can be pleased with.

Bloom: The question is whether we should be envious of the peak talents. Of course, everyone wants to have had the level of satisfaction that he can attain. All profit from a society that produces the peaks of human capacity. We should aim for a society in which individuals who are inferior to Shakespeare admire him but recognize that their own humanity is reflected in Shakespeare and is enhanced by it.

It would have been a very poor education indeed that didn't teach us about our own modest talents, and therefore point us higher.

Murray: I am not arguing for a cheapening of the concept of happiness. On the contrary, I am saying that one of the arrogances of our time is that we think that it is something reserved to a relatively small segment of the population, and what we have to do is make sure the rest of society just exists.

To not be too cryptic about this, I would say, for example, that if you are the fellow I was talking about a few minutes ago—the one who doesn't have any special talents, is not going to be famous, is never going to be rich, then if he reaches the age of seventy and can look back and say, I was a good parent to my children, I was a good neighbor, these are important and significant things to have done. ☑