



In Pursuit : Of Happiness and Good Government

Charles Murray , Robert B. Hawkins (Foreword by)

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A modern classic--back in print and available again. Originally published in 1988, this book draws on advances in psychology and sociology to explore the fundamental questions of what is meant by "success." Rich in fascinating case studies. Line drawings, graphs and tables.

In Pursuit : Of Happiness and Good Government Details

Date : Published May 1st 1994 by ICS Press (first published 1988)

ISBN : 9781558152977

Author : Charles Murray , Robert B. Hawkins (Foreword by)

Format : Paperback 300 pages

Genre : Politics, Philosophy, Nonfiction, Economics, Education

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From Reader Review In Pursuit : Of Happiness and Good Government for online ebook

Emily S. says

This was the third book I had to read to review for Tony Litherland's Into to Poli Sci class. See my seven page book review for my thoughts,

Curtis Edmonds says

* A Parallel Review of "In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Good Government" by Charles Murray and "Scientific Progress Goes 'Boink!': A Calvin and Hobbes Collection" by Bill Watterson

Calvin: "Why should I go to school?! Why can't I stay home? Why do I have to learn? Why can't I stay the way I am? What's the point of this? Why do things have to be this way? Why can't things be different?"

Calvin's Mom (throwing Calvin out the door): Life is full of mysteries, isn't it? See you this afternoon.

Calvin (at the bus stop): "At 7:00 AM. Mom's not very philosophical."

Whether Calvin's mom agrees or not, the pursuit of happiness is a valid philosophical inquiry. Libertarian sociologist Charles Murray argues that it is perhaps the most important philosophical inquiry, at least from an American perspective. "For the Founders," Murray writes, "'happiness' was the obvious word to use because it was obvious to them that the pursuit of happiness is at the center of man's existence and that to permit man to pursue happiness is the central justification of government -- 'the object of government', as James Madison wrote in The Federalist No. 62." (Happiness must have a moral foundation; the happiness that comes from skipping school doesn't count.)

Murray argues that although we pursue happiness in different ways, all of us are pursuing the same end, the "good one seeks for an end to itself and for no other reason." Bill Watterson, the author of the long-running (alas, not long-running enough) Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, knows this intuitively. He has Calvin the brat and Hobbes the tiger go outside on a winter's day, playing in the snow, and then running back to the fireplace, and then repeating the cycle again and again. The only words in the strip come at the end, when Calvin tells Hobbes, "If there's more to life than this, I don't know what it is." (Calvin and Hobbes, of course, are named after dour Swiss preacher John Calvin and gloomy English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, hardly anyone's apostles of happiness.) Calvin and Hobbes aren't playing in the snow to seek social acceptance or popularity or any other goal except the central goal of happiness. (Calvin does imagine at one point that he can become a TV superstar through sledding -- "So, with some strong visuals, our sled ride could conceivably make us cultural icons!" -- but he's looking for happiness.)

Murray begins (after a long period of noodling about definitions of happiness) with the theory that happiness cannot exist until certain material needs are met. One cannot pursue happiness if one is starving, or physically unsafe, and part of the legitimate role of government is to guarantee certain levels of nutrition (say, through Department of Agriculture crop subsidies or food stamps) and protection (through military and criminal justice spending).

Watterson illustrates this by putting Calvin in an unsafe world. He faces a number of threats, not the least of which is Moe the bully. Moe -- not usually a prime source of irony -- explains to Calvin that he's not taking

Calvin's toy truck; "You're giving it to me, because we'll both be happier that way." Calvin must also confront the playful nature of Hobbes the tiger. Hobbes greets Calvin at the door on schooldays, plowing him into the front yard at times. "A house with a tiger is never a home," Calvin grouses. When Calvin tries to outwit Hobbes by fashioning a dummy and placing it by the door, Hobbes welcomes the dummy with open arms. "May I read all your comic books? May I draw mustaches on all the superheroes? I may! Oh joy!" Calvin sits on the stoop, head in hands, growling, "I'll get him for this if it takes my whole life."

Murray, however, is not making the point that government should take a greater role in providing the necessary preconditions of happiness (i.e., a new Medicare prescription drug program). Murray argues that the extraordinary paradox, "You can't fix poverty by giving people money," has validity. "Money in itself, by itself does not inspire the dispirited homeless, make loving mothers of neglectful mothers, make a cheerful home of a dump. A few days later, even if the money continues to be provided, the dispiritedness and neglectfulness will be back and the home will be a dump with different furniture." Murray argues that although government should intervene to ensure a minimal level of material possessions == somewhere close to subsistence -- anything more than that won't lead to increased happiness.

Calvin wrestles with this issue, of course, given the parsimonious nature of his dad. "Hey Dad," Calvin asks, "would you pay me a dollar to eat a bug?"

"No. You'd have to eat a bucket of bugs before I'd pay you a dollar."

Further attempts aren't any more successful; Calvin devises a scheme where he would get \$50 for each "A" in school, \$10 for each "B", \$5 for each "C", and \$1 for each "D". Calvin's dad, who's obviously read Murray's book, isn't buying it, though; "I'm not going to bribe you, Calvin. You should apply yourself for your own good."

"Rats," says Calvin. "I thought I could make an easy four bucks."

Murray also introduces us to the concept of the "hedonic treadmill", the idea that it is not enough for us to be happy, but for us to be happier than our parents were, and to have an increasing degree of happiness. Watterston captures this perfectly. "I'm happy," says Calvin, "but it's not like I'm ecstatic." He then takes off on a wild ride in his red wagon, declaiming, "Every minute of every day should bring me greater joy than the previous minute! I should always be saying, 'My life is better than I ever imagined it would be, and it's only going to improve! I'm just going to jump from peak to peak! I'm... whoops.'" As the wagon falls off the cliff, Hobbes notes, "At least with flat places, you don't have so far to go down."

Calvin and Hobbes may disdain safety in their pursuit of happiness, but Murray does not. He notes that the poorest rural Thai village is a better place to pursue happiness than the largest American housing project, mainly because the unsafe nature of the latter prohibits the formation of communities. Murray endorses the "broken windows" theory of law enforcement, which says that policing minor crimes like broken windows increases the lawfulness of the neighborhood -- an approach adopted, with great success, by Mayor Giuliani in New York. Calvin, by contrast, being the ultimate libertarian, questions the overall need for law enforcement. *Scientific Progress Goes Boink!* contains two of Calvin's titanic battles against Rosalynn the baby-sitter, the closest thing the strip has to an authority figure. In one instance, Calvin lures Rosalynn outside and locks the door on her (something I tried once, myself) and in another, adopts his secret identity of "Stupendous Man!" to foil the machinations of Baby-Sitter Girl.

Calvin also has the ultimate law enforcement officer to deal with: Santa Claus. "That darn Santa has got me every way I turn," gripes Calvin. One of the books' funniest panels has Hobbes forging a letter to Calvin from "Santa Claws", in which Calvin is told he's a "rotten little kid". "Oh no! Santa called me rotten! I'm DOOMED!" Calvin screeches. (The letter continues, "I'd suggest you start being kind to animals. Perhaps you know an animal who would like a snack soon. Or maybe you could let an animal read your comic books

sometime. Think about it.")

Murray also focuses on some non-material requirements for the pursuit of happiness. One of these is self-esteem, which Murray points out must be justified; self-esteem must rise from individual accomplishments. One cannot have real self-esteem that is based on a fantasy, as Calvin illustrates over and over again. In one strip, Calvin pronounces himself (with no particular justification) as the inevitable end result of history. "All history up to this point has been spent preparing the world for my existence", he brags. Hobbes soon punctures his bubble. "4 1/2 billion years obviously wasn't long enough."

Another requirement of happiness is self-actualization, the process of making ones visions a reality. Murray pulls here from the work of Abraham Maslow, who stated that "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be." And the harder the task is, the better the feeling of accomplishment. "People have a deep need for the sense of competence that comes from mastering something that is difficult," argues Murray, and people derive intrinsic benefits from their labors.

Murray notes that for an individual to obtain these intrinsic benefits, he has to have control of the situation. Again, Watterson provides an apt illustration. Calvin goes walking in the snowy woods with his parents, complaining all the way. "I hate these forced marches," he whines. Of course, once he gets home, the first thing he does is grab Hobbes and run out into the woods to have some uncontrolled fun.

Murray's book goes on from there, mostly on a public policy tangent. (One of his arguments is that teachers are underpaid for a reason, an argument that I urge you not to try on any teachers you know.) In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Good Government is a seminal argument for rethinking our public policy outcome measures, combined with a good theoretical discussion of what happiness is and why it's important. However, reading it isn't a happy experience; it can be very technical and dry in places, despite Murray's gift in summarizing the theories of other philosophers.

Scientific Progress Goes Boink! provides apt illustrations of Murray's principles, but unlike the thicker volume, it is much more likely to produce the kind of happiness that we seek. There's a laugh on every page, and wonders in every drawing. Murray's book is about happiness, but Watterson's book is animated by a pervasive happiness that we all get to share. One of Watterson's best pieces is a complete picture of happiness; Calvin's Christmas Eve poem:

*Christmas songs, familiar, slow
Play softly on the radio
Pops and hisses from the fire
Whistle with the bells and choir
My tiger is now fast asleep
On his back and dreaming deep
When the fire makes him hot
He turns to warm whatever's not.
Propped against him on the rug
I give my friend a gentle hug
Tomorrow's what i'm waiting for
But I can wait a little more.*

There's perfect happiness for you, marred only by the fact that Calvin and Hobbes isn't in the daily paper anymore.

David Robins says

By focusing on happiness Murray shows that so many of the social programs that purport to do good actually do harm, by isolating individuals and destroying communities; that income transfer is a net detriment, and that communities of free people unimpeded by government (except to prevent force and fraud) would be far closer to utopia than the failed welfare state.

Gene says

I first read this classic of libertarian thought about 20 years ago, and I'm glad I pulled it back off the shelf and re-read it. I find Murray's analysis to be fascinating because he has not aligned himself with a cause or even with Left or Right positions. He simply goes back to the basics about what government is for and what accomplishes those goals. It's easy to lose sight of these principles in the murky world of day-to-day politics.

Reminding the reader that a legitimate goal of gov't is to allow the individual to pursue happiness seems a weird place for an analysis to begin, but it ends up being central to his understanding. I love the way he takes complicated issues and views them from the perspective of one individual's needs. For a social scientist to move beyond the numbers and look at the individual is refreshing.

The book starts a little dry and abstract, but it becomes increasingly exciting as he moves to thought experiments and applications. I've never read any author who better explained the likelihood of unintended consequences of broad social programs better than he. The free market has its invisible hand, but gov't programs have an invisible foot that constantly frustrates the plans of social engineers.

I go away from the book wondering just how much more fulfilling life would be if we all retained the responsibility of doing those most important (and difficult and satisfying) things in life without the interference of the Generous Outside Agency (GOA). Our policy debates are now so far from this perspective that one feels a bit of despair at the end of the book. But a return to Jeffersonian ideals wouldn't be the strangest thing that ever happened in our society. I recommend the book to anyone on the left or right who has a concern for the general welfare and has an open mind.

Stefani says

For more than just monetary reasons, it's best if the government steps down and communities step up when it comes to solving social problems. The government's job shouldn't be to "(social) engineer" our lives, it should be to remove the impediments to us pursuing our own happiness... with self-esteem/respect, responsibility, effort, etc.

Gerard Barberi says

I had issues with the upside down triangle of opportunity.
