

True Happiness by Moreau le Jeune

BY ROBERT DARNTON

*Most Americans take it for granted as a natural extension of “life” and “liberty.”
But as the author shows, the pursuit of happiness is an idea that has long
been debated—and whose meaning is still up for grabs.*

The idea of happiness has become so deeply embedded in American culture that it sometimes disappears from sight. It is everywhere and nowhere, an implicit assumption that colors a world view, hardly an idea at all. But an idea it very much is, and, if seen from the perspective of the history of ideas, it has a long and impressive pedigree.

It appears among the ancients in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and especially in the thought of the Epicureans and Stoics. The Epicureans incorporated the concept of happiness into a general philosophy of pleasure and pain, which led to an ethics of rational self-interest. The Stoics linked it to withdrawal from the dangerous hurly-burly of civic life and contentment in the minimal pleasures of life in Arcadian retreats. "Happy is he who, far away from business, like the race of men of old, tills his ancestral fields with his own oxen, unbound by any interest to pay," said Horace in the first century B.C. One could find similar sentiments scattered throughout the Augustan poetry and Ciceronian rhetoric of the Romans.

Not, however, among the early Christians. Before his death in 604 A.D., Saint Augustine characterized life on this side of the City of God as the pursuit of vanity through a vale of tears. His message corresponded to the human condition as it was experienced by most people for the next thousand years, when men and women worked the fields in a state of semislavery, ate little more than bread and broth, and died young. Theirs was an existence best summed up by Thomas Hobbes's description of life in the state of nature: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

By the 15th century, however, philosophers were facing a revived notion of pleasure—earthly as in Boccaccio and refined as in the court of the Medici. To be sure, the classical revival was snuffed out in Florence by Savonarola's bonfire of vanities in 1497

and in Rome by the troops of Charles V during the sack of 1527. The reformations and religious wars made happiness as a consummation to be desired this side of the grave look more unlikely than ever.

But in the Age of Enlightenment the idea of happiness revived once again, attached to other notions such as progress and prosperity. The Enlightenment philosophers took happiness to be the end of man's life as an individual and of society's existence as a collectivity. The most radical of them, Diderot, Rousseau, Helvétius, and d'Holbach, built the concept of happiness into a modernized Epicureanism, reinforced with a strong civic consciousness.

Having reached this point, philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries could not turn back, despite the countercurrents of pessimism stirred up by figures such as Nietzsche and Freud. Jeremy Bentham's rallying cry, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," actually was formulated by two philosophes of the Enlightenment, Francis Hutcheson in Scotland and Cesare Beccaria in Italy. Bentham worked it into a philosophy of enlightened self-interest derived from Epicurus and Lucretius and adapted to the reform politics of Britain. For Karl Marx, the prophet of socialist happiness, liberal reforms could never reconcile individual and collective interests, because class interests stood in the way. Instead, Marx imagined happiness as a historical state to be reached at the end of a dialectical process by society as a whole.

Such, in a snapshot, is how a history of the idea of happiness might look if seen at a very great distance, like the earth photographed from the moon. But from such a perspective, everything blurs into everything else. What would notions of happiness look like if seen up close? I would like to examine two such views located at what I have identified as the great turning point in the history of happiness, the Age of En-

lightenment. More precisely, I want to explore two famous phrases: "We must cultivate our garden," offered by Voltaire as the conclusion to *Candide* (1759), and the right to "the pursuit of Happiness" proclaimed by Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence. The effort, I hope, will shed light on that curiously quicksilver phenomenon known as "the American way of life."

The last line of *Candide*, "We must cultivate our garden," is the final remark in a philosophical discourse that accompanies a fast-moving, picaresque plot. Spoken by the chastened protagonist, it is meant to answer a question. But what was that question? None of the characters in the final chapter of the book ask *Candide* anything. They chatter past one another as they have done throughout the entire story. The question is provided by the story itself. In pursuing his true love, Cunegonde, from one adventure to another, *Candide* is pursuing happiness. How can happiness be found? That is the question posed by the novel, as by the entire French Enlightenment, and the answer can be reformulated as "Happiness lies in the cultivation of our garden."

Of the many glosses on the text, four stand out: Stoic withdrawal (by shutting themselves up in the garden, *Candide* and his companions turn their backs on politics); pastoral utopianism (the little society supports itself by farming, cutting itself off from commercial capitalism); secular salvation through work (everyone in the group labors hard, thereby staving off poverty, boredom and vice); and cultural *engagement* (cultivation means commitment to the cause of civi-

lization). There is something to be said for each of these interpretations. Each fits the context of Voltaire's concerns in 1758 as he composed *Candide*: his quarrel with Frederick II; the horrors of the Seven Years War; the even more horrible disaster of the Lisbon earthquake; Voltaire's debate over the problem of evil with the followers of Leibniz and Wolff; and his recent decision to retire as a country gentleman to Les Délices, where he worked hard at creating a garden of his own.

The garden motif also summons up the Christian utopia of Eden, a favorite target of Voltaire in his youth. As a freethinking man about town in Regency Paris, he celebrated the pleasures of high society or "le monde" and derided Christian asceticism. Thus, in his youthful credo, "Le Mondain," he mocked the barbarity of our mythical ancestors in a weedy, unkempt Garden. He pictured Adam as an ape-man dragging his knuckles on the ground and Eve as a foul-smelling slut with dirt under her fingernails. Instead of Eden, Voltaire celebrated the world of wit and beauty enjoyed by the rich and the well-born in "le monde." Happiness was not to be found in paradise but in Paris, not in the afterlife but in the here and now. "Terrestrial paradise is where I am," concluded "Le Mondain." It was an Epicurean credo, flung in the face of the church, and it captured the spirit of salon society in the early 18th century. But it had nothing to say to most of humanity, which lived in misery outside the salons.

By 1758, Voltaire had seen more of the world. But he did not cease to delight in the good things of life. The last chapter of *Candide* includes a description of the hospi-

Robert Darnton is Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of European History at Princeton University. He is the author of, among other books, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (1982) and *The Forbidden Best Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995). This essay is adapted from a lecture given in Tokyo on October 6, 1993, to celebrate the opening of the Japanese Institute for Advanced Study, and draws heavily from the following works: Robert Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle* (1979); Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1953); Ursula M. von Eckardt, *The Pursuit of Happiness in the Democratic Creed* (1959); and Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (1982).

tality offered by a philosophic Turk, whose little farm provides a model for Candide's: exquisite sorbet, a fine selection of fruits and nuts, "mocca coffee which was not mixed with the bad coffee of Batavia" (Voltaire was a coffee addict), courteous service by the two daughters of the host, and intelligent conversation. Candide had received the same kind of hospitality, though on a grander scale, from the philosopher-king of Eldorado, the utopian society described in the middle of the novel. Voltaire himself offered it to visitors at Les Délices and later at Ferney. What distinguished this kind of good life from the Epicureanism advocated by the young Voltaire in "Le Mondain"?

The setting, for one thing. Candide settled his community at the eastern edge of European civilization, just as Voltaire established his estate at the eastern boundary of France, far from Paris and far from politics. "I never inform myself about what is going on in Constantinople," the philosophic Turk tells Candide. Of course, Voltaire worked hard to keep himself informed about intrigues in the French capital, but he had cut himself off from court life. He had withdrawn from "le monde," and he had changed his tone. A new note of anger and darkness crept into all his writing after he fled from Frederick II and Berlin. He found himself increasingly confronted with unhappiness—and, worse, evil.

Consider one of the unhappiest moments in Voltaire's life. It occurred in 1730. His beloved mistress, the great actress Adrienne Lecouvreur, suddenly died after playing the lead in his tragedy, *Oedipe*. Voltaire had sat by her bed in her last agony, and he may well have witnessed the unceremonious disposal of her corpse. Death struck Adrienne Lecouvreur before she had time to renounce her profession and receive Extreme Unction. As actors and actresses were excluded from the rites of the church, her body could not be buried

in hallowed ground. Therefore, it was dumped in a ditch and covered with quicklime to speed its decomposition.

This obscene act obsessed Voltaire right up to the moment of his own death, when he feared that his body would receive the same treatment. It appears in some of his most impassioned poetry, in the *Lettres philosophiques*, and even in *Candide*. In chapter 22, Candide visits Paris and is told the story in all its horror. He then remarks: "That [was] very impolite." Not what we would expect by way of a comment on a barbarism that had set a lover's blood to boil.

But Voltaire filled the word "politeness" with a passion that may escape the 20th-century eye. The first characteristic Candide noticed among the inhabitants of the utopian society of Eldorado was their "extreme politeness." He marveled at their good manners, elegant clothing, sumptuous housing, exquisite food, sophisticated conversation, refined taste, and superb wit. The king of Eldorado epitomized those qualities. Like the philosophic Turk at the end of the book, he "received them with all imaginable grace and invited them politely to supper." Utopia is above all a "société polie" or "policée," which amounts to the same thing.

The 18th-century notion of "police" could be translated roughly as rational administration. It belonged (conceptually, not etymologically) to a series of interlocking terms—*poli*, *policé*, *politique*—that extend from culture to politics. For Voltaire, the cultural system of the Old Regime shaded off into a power system, and the code of polite society belonged to the politics of enlightened absolutism.

The interpenetration of culture and politics is the main theme of Voltaire's most ambitious treatise, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751). This was a crucial work for 18th-century writers, a book that defined the literary system of the Old Regime and that created literary history in France. In it, Voltaire

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effectively argued that all history is literary history. Kings, queens, and generals do not count in the long run, although they attract most of the attention of their contemporaries and occupy a good deal of Voltaire's narrative. What matters above all is civilization. So, of the four "happy" ages in the history of mankind, the happiest of all was the age of Louis XIV, when French literature reached its zenith and the politeness ("la politesse et l'esprit de société") of the French court set a standard for all of Europe.

By civilization, Voltaire meant the moving force in history, a combination of aesthetic and social elements, manners and mores ("mœurs"), which pushes society toward the ideal of Eldorado, a state in which men are perfectly "polis" and "poliés." So Voltaire understood politesse as power, and he saw an essential connection between classical French literature and the absolutism of the French state under Louis XIV. This argument underlies the key episodes of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*. Louis mas-

ters the French language by studying the works of Corneille, he controls the court by staging plays, and he dominates the kingdom by turning the court itself into an exemplary theatre. That idea may be a cliché now, but Voltaire invented it. He saw power as performance: the acting out of a cultural code. This code spread from Versailles to Paris, to the provinces, and to the rest of Europe. Voltaire does not deny the importance of armies, but he interprets the supremacy of Louis XIV as ultimately a matter of cultural hegemony. The script for his court tour de force was written by Molière, whom Voltaire describes both as a "philosophe" and as "the legislator of the code of conduct in polite society" ("le législateur des bienséances du monde.")

However anachronistic and inaccurate, this view of history conveys something more than the chase after the good things in life in "Le Mondain." It conveys direction, purpose, power—something akin to the "civilizing process" of Norbert Elias. It also demotes kings and puts philosophes in their place as the true masters of history, and it makes the historical process look progressive—uneven, to be sure, but one in which barbarism retreats before the forces of politeness.

Candide finally joins those forces. He becomes a philosophe—not a false philosopher, like his tutor Pangloss, but a true one, who opts for engagement instead of withdrawal. His pursuit of happiness, in the person of Cunegonde, does not lead to a happy ending. When he finally marries her, she has become ugly and disagreeable. But the pursuit has taught him to commit himself to something more substantial: polite society, or the process of civilization.

The pursuit of Happiness" is even more familiar to Americans than "We must cultivate our garden" is to the French. It is the most memorable phrase in the American Declaration of Independence, the rhetorical climax to Thomas

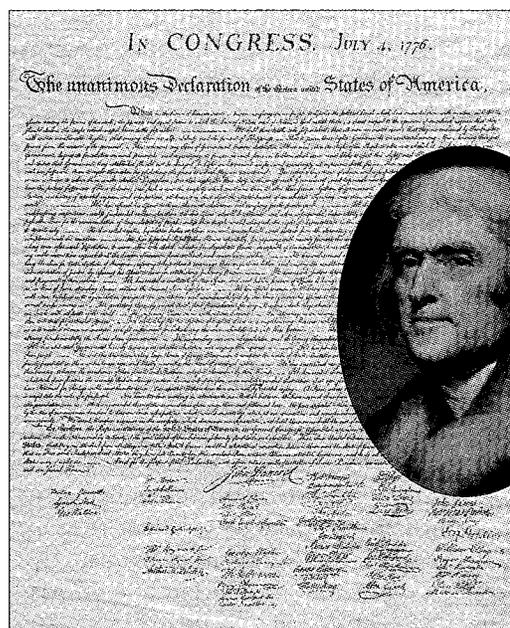
Jefferson's enunciation of natural rights and revolutionary theory: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." What did Jefferson mean by "the pursuit of Happiness?" And what does his meaning have to do with a subject that belongs to the history of mentalities—namely, "the American way of life"?

Analysts of political discourse often determine meaning by showing what is not said as well as what is said. "Life, liberty, and property" was the standard formula in the political debates of the English-speaking world during the 17th and 18th centuries. In substituting "the pursuit of Happiness" for property, the Declaration of Independence deviated significantly from other founding charters—the Petition of Right and the Declaration of Rights connected with the English revolutions of 1640 and 1688, for example, and the declarations of the American Stamp Act Congress of 1765 as well as the First Continental Congress of 1774. If "the pursuit of Happiness" is to be viewed as a speech act, its meaning must consist, at least in part, in an implicit comparison with the right of property. By omitting property from his phrasing, did Jefferson reveal himself to be a secret socialist? Can Americans cite him today in order to legitimate demands for social welfare legislation and to oppose the advocates of minimal, laissez-faire government?

Before tearing Jefferson out of the 18th century and plunging him into the midst of our own ideological quarrels, it would be wise to ask how "happiness" resonated in the context of his time. As a philosophically minded lawyer, he had a thorough knowledge of the natural law tradition, which went back to Plato and Aristotle and was formulated for the law students of his generation by Locke, Pufendorf, Burlamaqui, and Blackstone. The most important of these was Locke. (Jefferson had a personal distaste for Blackstone's *Com-*

mentaries.) In fact, Locke was so important that many scholars have considered him the grandfather of the American Declaration of Independence, which advanced a contractual theory of government that seemed to come straight out of his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1690).

The *Second Treatise* certainly provides grounds for asserting a right to revolution if the government violates its contractual obligations to the citizenry. But a right to happiness? Locke kept to the usual trinity—"life, liberty, and property." In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), however, he stretched "property" into "lives, liberties, and estates," and then went on to talk of "that property which men have in their persons as well as goods." In doing so, he shifted ground from law to psychology. Property in one's person implied the liberty to develop the self, and self-development for Locke was an epistemological process. It took place when men combined and reflected on sensations, the primary signals of pleasure and pain, according to the procedure described in the *Essay*. Thus, the sensationalism of Locke's epistemology could



be combined with the natural rights of his political theory in a way that would open the road to the right to happiness. In short, Locke, too, was a philosopher of happiness. He said so himself: "As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness, so the care of ourselves that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness is the necessary foundation of our liberty."

But Jefferson did not need to combine passages from the two John Lockes, the Locke of the *Second Treatise* and the Locke of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, because the work had already been done for him by his friend George Mason. Mason was the one who did the most to stretch "property" into "happiness" in the philosophical deliberations of Virginia's radical squierarchy. Like Jefferson, Mason had a library packed with the works of philosophers, ancient and modern, in Gunston Hall, his country estate. Having worked through this material while participating in the agitation over the Stamp Act, Mason drafted a series of manifestos about representative government and natural rights. He discussed them with like-minded country gentlemen—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry—around dinner tables and through correspondence. He debated them in free-holder meetings, held in the brick courthouse of Fairfax County, in 1774 and 1775.

Then, in May 1776, the Virginians met at Williamsburg and declared themselves independent of Great Britain. Mason provided the philosophic justification for this revolutionary step by drafting a "Declaration of Rights," which included the phrase: "All men are created equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights . . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." Mason's wording runs exactly parallel to the famous phrase that Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence a month later. It suggests that hap-

piness is not opposed to property but is an extension of it.

Jefferson made no pretense to originality. He described his statement of principles as the mere "common sense of the subject." And a half-century later, when he discussed the Declaration of Independence in a letter to James Madison, he explained further: "Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind."

Common sense" and "the American mind"—we are entering territory the French call "the history of mentalities," and which I would prefer to describe as anthropological history. The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz has analyzed common sense as a "cultural system"—that is, as an admixture of attitudes, values, and cognitive schemata that ordinary people use to make sense of the world. Ordinary people, not philosophers. True, Jefferson, Madison, Mason, and their crowd look like American-style philosophes. And when compared with today's statesmen, they look like giants. But they were also Virginia farmers who inhabited a common-sense world of tobacco plantations, Georgian manor houses, Episcopal churches, county courts, taverns, horse races, and (let us not forget it) slavery. The plantations kept them separated from one another in semiautonomous units ordered according to patriarchal principles. The churches and courthouses drew them together in settings that reinforced the social hierarchy. The taverns and horse races gave them a chance to vent their passions and strut their status. And the slavery indicated the limitations of statements such as "all men are created equal."

This contradiction did not weigh too heavily with men who thought of themselves as successors to the slave-holding patricians of Augustan Rome. Their librar-

ies confirmed the message of their larders. The classicism of their education echoed the classical architecture of their houses. Cicero and Seneca rang true, because they conformed with the values of order and hierarchy given off by the everyday surroundings in Virginia. So did Locke, the spokesman of a Whig aristocracy aligned against an alien, absolutist monarchy. In short, the philosophizing fit the social environment, not as an ideological afterthought but as the reflective gentleman's way of making sense of what his common sense already proclaimed. "Sense" in this respect belonged to what Max Weber called "Sinnzusammenhang," or "elective affinities": it was a way of ordering reality.

How did the Virginians describe reality in more casual moments, when they were not composing theoretical manifestos? Here is Jefferson again, writing from his country estate in 1810:

I am retired to Monticello, where, in the bosom of my family, and surrounded by my books, I enjoy a repose to which I have been long a stranger. My mornings are devoted to correspondence. From breakfast to dinner, I am in my shops, my garden, or on horseback among my farms; from dinner to dark, I give to society and recreation with my neighbors and friends; and from candle light to early bedtime, I read. My health is perfect; and my strength considerably reinforced by the activity of the course I pursue. . . . I talk of ploughs and harrows, of seeding and harvesting, with my neighbors, and of politics too, if they choose, with as little reserve as the rest of my fellow citizens, and feel, at length, the blessing of being free to say and do what I please.

This is happiness, something embedded in the daily course of life. It is an American way of life—but closer to Horace and Virgil than to the America of Madison Avenue and Wall Street.

Also, it should be added, the Horatian glow dimmed during the next 16 years, a period when Monticello nearly collapsed into bankruptcy and its master felt increasingly alienated from the Jacksonian variety of politics, a speculative surge of capitalism, and an evangelical revival of religion. By cultivating his garden in Monticello, Jefferson withdrew from the world—unlike Voltaire, who used Ferney as a fortress for conquering it.

If Jefferson himself found an increasing disparity between his ideals of the 1770s and the realities of the 1820s, how did Americans see any continuity at all between his way of life and theirs during the next century-and-a-half? Horatian Jeffersonianism and industrial capitalism seem so far apart that one would think they have nothing in common. Yet they are bound together by a common thread: the pursuit of happiness.

As the intellectual historian Howard Mumford Jones has shown, that theme provides one of the leitmotifs of American jurisprudence. If, as the Declaration of Independence proclaims, I have a right to happiness, shouldn't the courts enforce it? Unfortunately, the Declaration of Independence did not become part of constitutional law, except as it was rewritten in the form of the Bill of Rights, and the Bill of Rights does not mention happiness. The state constitutions, however, do. Two-thirds of them have adopted some variant of Jefferson's phrase. So for more than a century Americans have gone to court, suing their authorities and one another over a right they believe belongs to them by fundamental law. They have claimed the right to happiness in order to set up massage parlors, sell contraceptives, and smoke opium. They have rarely succeeded, but their attempts indicate the prevalence of a general attitude—that the pursuit of happiness is a basic ingredient of the American way of life.

Of course, a great deal besides constitutional law went into this cultural pattern. The

open frontier, the availability of land, the gold rush, the seemingly endless opportunities for getting rich and getting ahead—all oriented values around the notion of happiness in the 19th century. In each case, happiness appeared as something to be pursued, not something showered down from heaven; and the pursuit often led westward. In this respect, the Jeffersonian ideal also provided a jumping-off point, because the agrarian, yeoman democracy favored by Jefferson provided the ideological impulse for the conquest of the frontier. In the Northwest Territory Act and the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson himself tried to shape the settlement of the West in a way that would perpetuate the society of farmer-philosophes he had known in Virginia. Horace Greeley and other publicists echoed this idea when they proclaimed, "Go West, young man!"

The real impulse, however, was money, money and land, the chance to get rich quick. The gold rush precipitated a general *Drang nach Westen*. Ever since 1848, it has seemed that the whole country has tried to move to California. I am exaggerating, of course, because the great waves of immigrants who were carried across the Atlantic during the late 19th and early 20th centuries generally washed onto the East Coast and emptied themselves in the slums between Boston and Baltimore. Many of the poor from Kiev and Naples never got farther west than the East Side of Manhattan, although their descendants usually crossed the Hudson and settled in the suburbs of New Jersey—not exactly in Jeffersonian freeholds but on their own plots of land, in houses with gardens and white picket fences, which turned into the new version of the American dream. To such people, America really was the land of opportunity, even if it took two generations to extricate themselves from the slums, even if suburbia was a far cry from the Oregon Trail.

Thus did the Jeffersonian vision become transformed into the American dream, a

vision that was basically materialistic but that inflamed imaginations throughout the Old World, where millions struggled to get out and to get ahead. The dream is still alive today, although the immigrants generally come from Latin America and settle in Miami, Houston, and Los Angeles. But its realization remains an elusive goal to many African Americans, whose ancestors—who did the work on Jefferson's plantation—were legally excluded from its pursuit and who provided a living witness to the tragic flaw in the American dream.

That did not prevent the dream from gathering more force in the second half of the 20th century. Technology seemed to bring happiness within the reach of nearly everyone, because it provided the means of controlling the environment, of enjoying pleasure and mitigating pain. The point may be so obvious that we cannot see it, because we have become insulated from the pains of everyday life that existed in the age of Jefferson. If I may provide a homely example, I would cite George Washington's teeth. Washington had terrible teeth. He lost them, one by one, and finally acquired a full set of false teeth, made of bone, lead, and gold. The "Father of Our Country" and the toothache—it seems incongruous, but having read thousands of letters from the 18th century, I often think of the dread of rotting teeth, the horror of the itinerant tooth puller, the sheer pain in jaws everywhere in the early modern world. Dentistry may not look like a particularly noble calling, but it has weighed heavier than many professions in the hedonistic calculus we have inherited from Epicurus and Jeremy Bentham.

To dentistry, add medicine in general, vaccination, public hygiene, contraception, insurance, retirement benefits, unemployment compensation, lightning rods, central heating, air conditioning . . . the list could

go on forever, because it leads through the endless array of goods we associate with the so-called consumer society and the services we expect of the "welfare state." I know that these are hard times for millions of Americans and that my remarks may sound hollow. But I have spent so much time in the 18th century that I cannot fail to be impressed with how much control man has gained over his environment in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The pursuit of happiness in America has spilled over from science and technology into popular culture, a favorite subject for historians of mentality. The most exotic varieties bloom in southern California: hot tubs, "perfect" waves, "deep" massage, fat farms, love clinics, and therapy of every conceivable kind, not to mention the happy endings that still prevail in Hollywood. This kind of popular culture can easily be caricatured, but it cannot be dismissed easily, because it has spread throughout the country and now the world. One encounters the face of "Joe Happy"—a circle with a smile in it—everywhere: pasted on windows, pinned in buttonholes, even, I have found, dotting the i's in students' papers. Along with the current greeting—"have a nice day"—it expresses the thumbs-up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed form of public behavior that can be so annoying to Europeans, who prefer the limp handshake, the down-at-the-mouth Gauloise, and the café slouch as a style of self-presentation.

Of course, many other strains run through the patterns of culture in everyday America, and many run counter to the pursuit of happiness. In order to situate the motif of happiness within the pattern as a whole, it is important to keep three considerations in mind. First, America has always contained a vocal minority of cockeyed pessimists. The American jeremiad arrived on the *Mayflower*,

along with sermonizing about the "City on a Hill," or colony of saints. While Thomas Jefferson expanded on Locke, Jonathan Edwards defined happiness as follows:

The sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever. It will not only make them more sensible of the greatness and freeness of the grace of God in their happiness; but it will really make their happiness the greater, as it will make them more sensible of their own happiness; it will give them a more lively relish of it.

Americans have been avid consumers of anti-utopian literature: 1984, *Animal Farm*, *Brave New World*, and dark varieties of science fiction. They also have produced a vast amount of pessimistic literature, from Hawthorne and Melville to T. S. Eliot, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Updike. The Civil War, the closing of the frontier, the Great Depression, the Beat generation, and the antiwar activists of the 1960s represented so many stages of disillusionment with the American dream. Most young people today feel they live in a world of limited resources rather than unlimited opportunity. Public opinion polls indicate that they do not expect to do better than their parents. If they no longer worry about a nuclear catastrophe and the Cold War, they sense economic contraction and ecological disaster everywhere. In the face of the AIDS epidemic, many of them feel angry—at the government and at the world in general, for AIDS represents the ultimate denial of the pursuit of happiness as a way of life.

Second, those who continue to believe in happiness as an end often pursue it with an earnestness that looks self-contradictory. They take up extreme forms of asceticism. They diet, they jog, they lift weights, they deprive themselves of tobacco, meat, butter, and all the pleasures that Falstaff categorized under the rubric "cakes and ale." To what end? To live forever? Aging has now become a major industry in America, and the American way of life has evolved into the American way

of death—that is, the subculture of funeral “homes” and pastoral cemeteries that dress death up so prettily as to deny it. But most of America’s worldly ascetics have transformed the old Protestant ethic into a new cult of the self. *Self* magazine, the “me generation,” and the appeals to building a better body and developing a more assertive or better-balanced personality all express a general egoism that looks like the opposite of the Stoical and Puritanical varieties of self-discipline practiced by the Founding Fathers.

Egocentric asceticism brings us to the third point, John Kenneth Galbraith’s characterization of the American way of life as “private wealth and public squalor.” Despite food stamps and Social Security, the welfare state never made much headway in the United States. True, the national parks and some of the state systems of higher education opened the door to happiness for many millions. But the consumer culture (we do not have a national sales tax) and the cult of rugged individualism (we do not stand in line at bus stops) stood in the way of state-sponsored projects to assure a minimal degree of happiness for the entire population.

Roosevelt’s New Deal, launched to the tune of “Happy Days Are Here Again,” provided no answer to the problems of poverty and racism. Those problems continue to fester at the center of our cities, while individuals pursue their personal welfare in the private enclosures of our suburbs. It is, I believe, a national disgrace, but it is also a general problem—one that goes back to the opposition between the private and the public varieties of happiness that were incarnated in Voltaire and Rousseau, and back even further to the Epicureans and the traditions of antiquity. While remaining rooted in the Jeffersonian tradition, the American pursuit of happiness shares promises and problems that have characterized Western

civilization in general.

What to make of it all? The leitmotifs in patterns of culture do not lead to bottom lines, so I will not try to end with a firm conclusion. Instead, let me cite two examples of the pursuit of happiness I recently came upon. The first expresses the technical, commercial, and individualistic strain. Dr. Raymond West announced a couple of years ago that “happiness is a warm stethoscope,” and offered a new invention to an astonished world: a stethoscope warmer, which would make health checkups more pleasurable and abolish forever the unpleasurable sensation of “ice-cubes on the back.”

The second example is less trivial. It expresses the collective end of the American republic as it was originally defined by Thomas Jefferson, and it comes from the inaugural address President Clinton delivered in January 1993:

When our founders boldly declared America’s independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change. Not change for change’s sake, but change to preserve America’s ideals—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

Noble words. But Clinton would do well to think of Washington as well as Jefferson—Washington the statesman and Washington the victim of tooth decay. Imagine Washington sitting down to a banquet in Candide’s garden. If we are ever to bring together the two ways of pursuing happiness, the individual and the social, we should follow Washington’s example, set our jaws firmly, grit our teeth, tuck in, and dedicate ourselves to the public welfare. Such, at least, is the view of one American at a moment when the welfare state looks as beleaguered as Monticello.