

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The

PURSUIT *of*

HAPPINESS

*How Classical Writers on Virtue
Inspired the Lives of the Founders
and Defined America*

JEFFREY ROSEN

President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Constitution Center

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Benjamin Franklin developed a “spiritual accounting system” to track his adherence to 13 virtues. If you had to develop a list of practices and values that are important to you, which would you select?
2. Using Franklin’s chart on page 22, put an X mark next to each of the 13 virtues you fell short of today. Can you improve by daily self-accounting? Discuss.
3. In adding humility at the end of his list of 13 virtues, Franklin gave the example “Imitate Jesus and Socrates.” What do the Classical and Christian traditions say about humility? Where do the two wisdom traditions agree and disagree?
4. Each of the chapters begins with a sonnet summing up the wisdom of the ancient philosophers who inspired the Founders. From the Classical philosophers to the Bhagavad Gita, all the sonnets explore the importance of self-mastery, emotional temperance, moderation of thought and speech, and tranquility of mind. What do you make of the similarities and differences among the wisdom traditions?
5. The *Spectator* was a London magazine that deeply influenced Benjamin Franklin. Essays in the *Spectator* opened with a quote from a Roman poet or philosopher. Rosen, too, begins each chapter with a verse from the Classical period. What does this editorial decision accomplish? What is the relationship between each verse and its associated chapter?
6. Rosen describes the marriage between John and Abigail Adams as “a true intellectual and romantic friendship.” How did John and Abigail push one another to self-improvement?
7. Cicero wrote *The Tusculan Disputations* following the death of his daughter. Here, Cicero describes moral philosophy as “the medicine of our souls” (p. 92). Does Cicero believe that suffering is necessary for virtue, virtue is necessary to endure suffering, or both?
8. On p. 100, Francis Hutcheson says the rights of conscience are “unalienable” because we can’t command ourselves to think as we or anyone else pleases and because transferring the right to freedom of thought to government would not serve any valuable purpose. Do you agree? Why did he insist that the right to pursue happiness was also an unalienable right?
9. How did Phillis Wheatley’s experience as an enslaved person inform her creative work?
10. In her ode to David Worcester, Phillis Wheatley writes, “*Let virtue reign—And thou accord our prayers / Be victory our’s, and generous freedom theirs*” (p. 130). In this poem, to whom does “our” and “they” refer? What does this tell us about the intended audience for Phillis Wheatley’s poems?

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11. As Commander of the Continental Army, George Washington pacified a brewing mutiny at Newburgh. How did he manage to calm his troops? How would you describe his leadership style?
12. As a teenager, George Washington studied a 1734 poem from the *Gentleman's Magazine* called "True Happiness." The poem advises the reader to pursue "*A merry night without much drinking / A happy thought without much thinking*" (p. 155). What are the risks of "too much" thinking and other "perturbations of the mind"?
13. In 1787, Madison predicted that America's vast geography and large population would prevent passionate mobs from mobilizing. Their dangerous energy would burn out before it could inflame others, he reasoned. What, if anything, did Madison's theory get wrong?
14. Thomas Jefferson created his own version of the Bible by copying selections from the New Testament that he felt represented the pure moral teachings of Jesus. Jefferson omitted all sections that he felt represented the "corruptions" and "mysticisms" of his followers. How did Jefferson believe that faith is compatible with reason?
15. Thomas Jefferson was a slave-owner who, records show, understood that slavery was in direct conflict with the classical virtues he believed in. As you reflect on Jefferson's legacy, do you believe it's possible to separate his ideas from his actions? Explain.
16. On p. 207, Rosen distills the core message of the Bhagavad Gita. Turn to that page, and discuss.
17. John Quincy Adams constantly chastised himself for falling short of his own standards of perfection in mastering his own speech, thoughts, and actions. Was he too hard on himself? When does the quest for moral perfection lead to self-recrimination and anxiety rather than happiness?
18. According to Frederick Douglass, happiness is achieved through "useful work," rather than from simple hedonistic activities. Why is this the case, according to Douglass? Discuss the relationship between industry and happiness.
19. Why, according to Louis Brandeis, is privacy necessary for the pursuit of happiness?
20. The Founders believed that personal self-government is necessary for political self-government. Why? What happens to a Republic when citizens and leaders fail to control themselves?