

Pursuit of Happiness

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Some of you might recall my theme of several months ago, when I thanked the group for helping me become and remain a fervent and happy non-theist, free thinker, secular humanist, or unbeliever, or—no—I won't use the dirty word. Even my loving kids refuse to accept this title within our family—even though it's true—Hush! There you go again! Anyway, I am proud to report—to myself, anyway—that there has been no backsliding (recidivism?) to the safety net of “agnosticism” since I last spoke to you.

At that time, you might recall, I did sort of a hatchet job on the sanctity of the Decalogue, aka The Ten Commandments, or, in UU parlance, The Ten Suggestions. The first four were the “Shalts” that Moses allegedly hauled down from the mountaintop so many years ago. One slate pertained to Yahweh matters—no other gods before me, no graven images, please, nor mention of “my” name in Sheboygan, and nobody works on Sunday. The last five were the “shalt nots”—no killing, stealing, sleeping around, or coveting what's not yours. I referred to these as the “It depends...” category, and mentioned circumstances whereby violation of these statutes might warrant understanding and lessened punishment.

The only Suggestion permitted—by me—to survive the “Pogrom” was the “Honor thy Parents” dictum. This made excellent sense to me if one wished to survive until he or she was big enough to go off on his/her own and begin to panhandle for a living. Also, it almost seemed to be a biblical acknowledgement of the millions of generations that preceded our own brief sojourn in the “here and now”.

Which brings me to the question—where am I now?

When Dr. Rose first visited us several months ago, I explained that I was having a problem with professing to be an Atheist. The term was accurate but not socially acceptable—especially within my own immediate family. It also seemed a bit show-offie. One might get away with secular humanist, un- or non-believer, but they seemed to be more camouflage than honest. Dr. Rose suggested “Monist” as a possibility. I had to admit that this title seemed to fall into the religious catchall of Theist, Deist, Pantheist, Fideist, and of course, Atheist. Later, when I looked it up, the definition turned out to be, “The doctrine that there is only one kind of substance or ultimate reality, as mind or matter. (b) The doctrine that reality is one unitary, organic whole, with no independent parts. CF dualism, pluralism”.

The word “dualism” caught my eye and mind, and I realized how much I disliked it. It seems to combine Reason/Fact plus Faith/Revelation.

Additional moseying around brought me to Naturalism versus Supernaturalism. I felt comfortable with this concept and now think I've found my home. It took me a while to accept the idea that mind and brain are one, or, my body and “me” are one. I first would have to give up the idea—like agnosticism—that my mind and brain combined somehow to form a separate entity—the soul. This was going to be a problem, since I've always viewed my “self” as sort of a separate pilot or driver controlling and directing the action of my body or merely observing what the hell it was going to do next. I now believe that both consciousness and behavior can be explained without recourse to this inner supervising agent—homunculus, little guy, dwarf—upstairs with special non-physical powers. In other words, the Naturalist believes that an individual's behavior is determined by Genetics plus Environment, both Nature and Nurture combined. 'Nuff for now, I'm still working on it.

I decided to start my re-education from the beginning. I, in turn, began when the genes of my eight grandparents merged, thanks to an intimate moment enjoyed—I trust—between my parents. I did not exist in any form or spirit before then. My purpose in life—as within any living creature—was twofold: survive and replicate. We are, I believe, the only living creature that knows we are all eventually going to die. This through community communication over countless generations.

Therefore, our instinctive fear of death resulted in a solution. The body is mortal and will perish. The soul, however, is immortal and will survive. Now we have hope—heaven, eternal life, and, of course, added consequences—Rewards and Punishments.

Thanks to the protection and nurturing by my parents and community, my body and brain replicated “me” into maturity. At some point—much earlier than was wise or socially permissible—Mother Nature determined the time had come to replicate myself. Luckily for all concerned, such urges were thwarted by chaperones and societal restraints.

Over the past century, thanks largely to science, some forty years have been added to the average life expectancy. Last week, RTD carried an AARP study, which determined that if you are fifty years old today, you can expect another thirty years.

Great! So what are you going to do with it? You have managed to survive well beyond the years customarily devoted to procreation. Now you merely wait for your physical breakdown from ailments and disabilities previously unknown and not yet treatable. Science has demonstrated that it can overcome most senility problems—perhaps another couple of decades can be added to the life span of us old geezers.

But, hey!! There comes a time when even you must plead for someone—including yourself—to pull the plug. The AARP study, cited earlier, contained the statistic that white men of 85 years had the highest suicide rate of all age, gender, and ethnic groups. The tentative diagnosis—mental health condition, e.g., depression.

So, what happens now?

Several weeks ago, several of us were discussing Descartes’ “Cogito, Ergo, Sum”—I think, therefore, I am. I believe Bob was one of the group. Rudy Gelsey joined us and announced, “I fell, therefore I am!” I was quite surprised—this coming from Rudy—but I had also been toying with this concept as a possible ingredient in the “pursuit of happiness” theme. I was always intrigued by Thomas Jefferson NOT stipulating life, liberty, and happiness as inalienable rights, but the “pursuit of happiness” was.

The ability to think one’s way through life’s problems came long after one used feelings to determine positive versus negative values. From the moment of birth, we can tell the difference between being hungry and isolated versus being fed and held. We can experience various degrees of pleasure or happiness, and we can experience degrees of pain or unhappiness. Without this ability, nothing would have any value or importance. Humans do not really care about anything that does not affect their feelings. I admit that’s a presumptuous statement, but so is “The value of any rule, action or thing is determined by its effect on feelings.”

It is natural and right that we seek to increase positive feelings—read happiness—and decrease negative feelings—unhappiness. The ultimate goal of each person is to maximize his or her happiness.

I guess I was surprised by Rudy's exclamation, "I feel, therefore I am."—and equated it with the 60s and 70s rallying cry, "If it feels good, do it!" Actually, we want to move beyond mere hedonistic pleasure to a broad, general sense of all positive feelings. I still remember how Cliff's loss and recovery of the new camera made me feel great. Cynics might argue that such acts of apparent honesty, generosity and self-sacrifice are connected—directly or indirectly—to some positive reward or expectation of a reward.

That same suspicion might be aroused by the lifesaving ring I tossed to you all after my blaspheming dismissal of nine of the ten so-called commandments several months ago. The lifesaving ring being the various universal versions of the Golden Rule. "Do unto others...", "Do not do unto others", and the current Near East version, "Do unto others before they do unto you."

Nevertheless, sometimes a selfless act comes automatically as a result of training or character development. But such rules of behavior that become one's character were originally adopted for acceptance, praise, or some other reward. If you agree that sane "normal" people strive to maximize their happiness, how do we go about reaching this goal? Happiness comes in many forms from many sources, but it didn't take long for humans to discover they could not accomplish much by themselves. Not only happiness, but survival itself, requires the help of others. So what happens when people gather in a group, and each wants to maximize his or her OWN happiness?

Compromise. Cooperation.

They quickly learn that to receive the help THEY need, they must be willing to give the help OTHERS need. Rules are formed and enforced by society. The goal is to offer each member the opportunity to increase one's happiness. This is right. Things which decrease one's happiness are wrong. Needless to say, this assumes that the society has been created to serve its membership—not the other way around.

So, there we have it—society's goal being the greatest amount of happiness for the most people. Some of you may hear a tinkle of memory from Philosophy 101. Remember Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarians — that's with a "t", not an "n", which was in vogue back in the 1700s and may well have had an influence on Jefferson and our Founding Fathers.

I recently came upon an update of the "pursuit of happiness" formula—a third ingredient had been added to the goal of society. The greatest happiness, for the most people, for the longest period of time.

This, of course, assumes that people would like their happiness spread out over their lifetime rather than one single day of total ecstasy. This Utilitarian update can be reduced to an "x" and "y" bar graph with HPT (happiness, people, time).

In your own pursuit of happiness, you might wish to refer to this quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."

Thank you for joining me on this ramble as I try to determine if we can be good without God, and if we can have spirituality without spirits. Authentic spirituality involves Emotional Response. This spiritual response, in turn, results in those feelings of significance—unity, awe, joy, acceptance, and consolation; and also how to deal with death, loss, and disappointment. As Richard Dawkins put it in "Unweaving the Rainbow", "We have an appetite for wonder".

Finally, in concluding this presentation on the importance of happiness in the here and now of existence, I have to admit to strong feelings. Yes, feelings, about whether this was an appropriate, or even permissible, topic for discussion at this time.

As I speak, it is anticipated that some four countries in southern Africa are getting ready to step off into a famine that will cost some ten to twelve million lives.

The HIV/AIDS virus will continue to decimate the populations of Central Africa, and Africa's sub-Saharan region has developed a highly effective lethal population control method—Muslims and Christians will continue to wipe each other out.

Today, Sunday, June 2, 2002, finds the world holding its collective breath as to whether the Pakistanis or the Indians will lose the Big One. If one, the other, or both, lost it, the resultant slaughter will range up to 17,000,000—that's 17 with six zeroes. And that's just starters as far as subsequent fall-out for the rest of the world is concerned.

I hope Eric Hoffer's twist (back in 1954) on Hawthorne's "Butterfly" quote does not win out: "The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness."