

HAPPINESS

CAN IT BE FOUND IN FREEMASONRY?

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If something is more exciting, pleasing, or ideal than seems reasonable, we usually hear it called *too good to be true*.

We are told that the design of the Masonic Institution is to make its votaries wiser, better, and consequently happier. Who would not want to be wiser, better, and consequently happier? Is the design of the Masonic Institution too good to be true? Is every man admitted to membership wiser, better, and consequently happier? Hardly.

There is no promise anywhere in Masonic ritual that after being initiated, passed, and raised, each man will morph into a Freemason beyond the title. Any proof that occurs would indeed be too good to be true. That reasoning is as absurd as believing everyone who is issued a driver's license becomes a good driver.

Millions of men can be admitted and made members (and certainly have), but the preponderance of the responsibility to *become* a Freemason belongs to the individual.

The aim of the Craft is to make better men out of good men. The Masonic Institution is designed to do that by emphasizing the individual man, strengthening his character, improving his moral and spiritual outlook, and broadening his intellectual horizons by learning, practicing, and adhering to the timeless principles and tenets of Freemasonry. Is that aim achieved by men who are rushed through degrees, keep their dues paid, and rarely (if ever) involve themselves in the Lodge's work, life, and care or even attend?

If a man genuinely commits to the long journey and what is required to *become* a Freemason, and if his Lodge provides the appropriate emphasis necessary to inspire and instill that commitment, then becoming wiser, better, and consequently happier *is not* too good to be true. In fact, some have achieved that even when their Lodge did not live up to its historically intended design.

RETRACING THE IDEA OF HAPPINESS: THE EXERCISE OF REASON

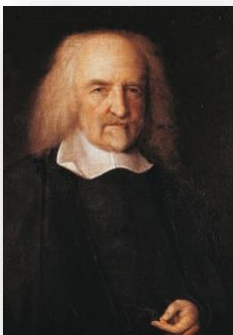
Interestingly, while there are Masonic writings that tell us how we can become wiser and better, fewer writings tell us how we are consequently happier by laboring toward and achieving those first two characteristics.

The basic question whether happiness is possible was being asked well before Freemasonry was organized. It can be said that it was the Enlightenment (around 1680 to about 1790) when, among other things, thinkers, writers, and practical administrators attempted to come to a true understanding of human nature.¹ Answers to that question did not come from one thinker. However, they evolved from the reasoning offered by many philosophies over time.

¹ Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment, The Pursuit of Happiness: 1680-1790*, Harper-Collins, Preface, xv., 2021.

Although retracing the steps of how the idea of what leads to happiness is a winding road through the multiple aspects of Enlightenment thinking, it appears that the design of the Masonic Institution does indeed offer a path to happiness.

The idea that the most people could hope for was *contentment* was the general feeling before the Enlightenment. Furthermore, it was thought that if a person aimed at anything higher, they would meet with grief and disappointment.² Regardless, the idea that happiness was something desirable and that God wanted people to be happy was something promoted by devout Christians and led other thinkers more remote to Christianity to ascribe that intention to nature, which then led to the thinking that it was nature that gave all people the right to be happy.³ That ultimately steered the conversation more toward the question: *What is nature?* We needed a model to answer that question.



René Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist who invented analytical geometry, was one of the earliest pre-Enlightenment philosophers that hoped to attain knowledge of the world that was absolutely certain. Descartes's model was the logical certainty provided by mathematics.⁴ From that principle, a series of convincing arguments could be constructed through geometry. One proposition could be deduced from the one before it, and it was demonstrated to be true through geometry. When such mathematical certainty was unobtainable, as with the study of nature, the precision of mathematics supplied a model of clarity.⁵

Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, another pre-Enlightenment scholar in France who, in 1709, explained how the *"spirit of geometry can be applied to many other subjects."* This corresponds with and affirms the thinking of speculative Masons as they honed the idea of building spiritual temples instead of those made of stone and used geometry as the backdrop. This approach also supported the idea of a Dutch philosopher whose thoughts influenced Enlightenment thinking.



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² IBID, 5.

³ IBID, 5.

⁴ IBID, 23.

⁵ IBID, 24.



Amsterdam philosopher Baruch Spinoza was considered one of the great rationalists of seventeenth-century philosophy. He inspired the idea that God is “the sum of the natural and physical laws of the universe and certainly not an individual entity or creator.” *Therefore, God is just the sum of all the substances of the universe.* God is the only substance in the universe, and everything is a part of God.⁶ Spinoza also explained in a work published after his death in 1677 that men can never be **entirely** free from their passions. However, they can achieve some degree of autonomy and freedom from their turmoil to the extent that they are activated and guided by *reason*.⁷

The question about happiness seemed to shift to: *Could happiness be found in the general scheme of things—in how people lived? What can individuals do to make themselves happy or happier?*



In 1733, English physician George Cheyne attributed depression and a wide range of other illnesses (including over-indulgence in alcohol and food) to the *lack of happiness*. He recommended *temperance and virtue* as a route to happiness.



In the 1740s, French natural philosopher, Emile du Chatelet, put forth the **idea** that one could be happy by satisfying one’s passions (as far as feasible) and that the most rewarding passion was *study*.⁸



In the mid-1700s, Austrian economist, Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi, argued that happiness is always social and connected to the satisfaction one feels when performing one’s duties toward fellow humans. However, to further happiness, *a man must overcome his passions*.⁹

By 1781, Pietro Verri, an Italian philosopher, wrote that unhappiness occurs as a result of our inability to control the excess of our desires over the power to fulfill them, which means what Justi proposed: to be happy, *we must find ways to subdue our passions*,¹⁰ a concept with which all Masons should be familiar.



⁶ Joseph Ratner, Shawn Connors, (editors), *The Philosophy of Spinoza - Special Edition: On God, On Man, and On Man's Well Being*, El Paso Norte Press, 2010.

⁷ Steven B. Smith, *Commentary on Spinoza's Ethics are derived Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics*, Yale University Press, 2003.

⁸ Ian Davidson, *Voltaire: A Life*, revised edition, London, 2012, 12.

⁹ *IBID*, 7.

¹⁰ Pietro Verri, *Discorsi Del Conte Pietro Verri Sull'indole Del Piacere E Del Dolore, Sulla Felicità` E Sulla Economia Politica*, (Political Harmony), Milan, 1781, Nabu Press, 2011 (Veri argues, in particular, that the excess of desires over and above possibilities or “power” is a measure of unhappiness. Lombard Enlightenment and Classical Political Economy, Pier Luigi Porta, University of Milano-Bicocca, Wolfson College, Cambridge, 14)



Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher and one of the most influential figures in modern Western philosophy.¹¹ His work in 1785 set forth a standard that we continue to ponder about the pursuit of happiness. For centuries, we have understood that it is part of our duty to seek happiness. If we are unhappy, we will be tempted to violate the demands of morality. Kant maintained that the *exercise of reason* could lead to happiness.

Interestingly, Kant's view was connected to Spinoza's earlier philosophy, which noted that liberating ourselves from the bondage of emotion can only be done by *reason*. And if we trace far enough back, we find that nearly 2,000 years before Spinoza, philosophers believed man's reason enabled him to lead a life of virtue by understanding the universe's rational order (nature).

Now, these ten preceding paragraphs offer a thread—a way to connect dots—to get the idea across that becoming consequently happier in pursuing Freemasonry involves a committed effort to not only learn the principles of the Craft but also develop the self-discipline to practice them. That requires a man to cultivate knowledge and the necessity of having the capacity to make use of it. That is known as *wisdom*. The becoming *better* part is largely contingent on a man becoming wiser and, yes, using the knowledge he gained to achieve wisdom.

In the mid-1700s, Austrian economist, Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi, argued that happiness is always social and connected to the satisfaction one feels when performing one's duties toward one's fellow-human, but to further the happiness a man must first have overcome his own passions.

Sound complicated? It is. Perhaps that is one reason so many are made members of the Fraternity, but few *become* Freemasons. Doing so requires more than merely being rushed through degrees and believing that is all there is to this Freemason stuff.

As the thinkers of the Enlightenment tell us, *study* can lead to happiness. *Subduing* our passions can lead us to happiness, as does exercising *reason*. Understanding the sum of the natural and physical laws of the universe helps us find paths toward happiness because doing so requires study, subduing our passions, exercising, and honing reason.

For decades, psychology has largely focused on addressing the negative—investigating what was "wrong" with us or relieving suffering from depression, trauma, and addictions. But over the last decade, we have seen a significant shift: scientists are focusing on what makes people thrive.

¹¹ Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant", in Edward N. Zalta, (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2020.

What thoughts, actions, and behaviors make us more productive at work, happier in our relationships, and more fulfilled at the end of the day? That is the focus of positive psychology, often referred to as the science of happiness. Its goal? To investigate what makes us flourish.

Today, we find books, college courses, seminars, and the typical array of experts and media pundits referring to the “science of happiness.” Many recent studies have shown that when people have a prosocial focus, doing kind acts for others (not necessarily financial charity) increases their happiness. Psychologists refer to such behavior as prosocial behavior.¹²

There is more depth to Freemasonry than the average member seems willing to pursue, which may be yet another explanation of why few seem to commit to the long road required to *become* Freemasons: either their Lodge does not provide the depth, or they are not motivated for other reasons to seek it.

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A WORD ABOUT PASSION

The word *passion* comes from the Latin root, *patior*, meaning to suffer. The modern use of the word is disconnected from the original meaning and no longer conveys the idea of suffering.

The word is used only once in the first degree of Masonry. When asked, “What came you here to do?” the answer is, “To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry.”

In reading that sentence, it appears all one thought. When we add a couple of commas, we see what is more likely the true, three-part answer: To learn, to subdue my passions, and improve myself in Masonry.”¹³

The passions referred to in the answer are not a reference to lust, greed, anger, or hate. Hopefully, as good men, Masons learned to control such base passions long before they first knocked on the door of Freemasonry. In context, *subdue* means to calm, vanquish, tame, overcome, quieten, or bring under control. In the context of Freemasonry, *passions* are irrational beliefs that imprison the minds of men and prevent them from living lives of virtue in harmony with their fellow men.¹⁴

We do admire men with passion. But passions that are detrimental to us and others can hardly be said to be good, and as good men, we should wish to avoid them. That is what Freemasonry advocates. Masonry does not seek to subdue desires of a positive and constructive nature. That kind of passion is called *enthusiasm*.

¹² C.D. Ryff, B.H. Singer, “Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudemonic Approach To Psychological Well-Being,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9, 13 -39, 2006, J. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. Sachs, *World Happiness Report 2013*, United Nations. Retrieved from United Nations, 2013.

¹³ Cameron C. Poe, *How a Comma Can Change Your Mind*, a paper presented at Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Ky, May 2014, Richard A. Graeter, *Two Infinitives: One Lesson, No Commas*, an education presentation at Caliburn Lodge No. 785, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2016,

¹⁴ Graeter.

If Lodges find ways to make men wiser and better through study, reason, and encouraging passionate enthusiasm, their members should consequently find themselves happier men. That *is not* too good to be true. It is just not commonplace for all Lodges to find ways to ensure that such a transformation occurs with every man they agree to admit.

