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Building a Free Scalable Online Character Course - What the Founders Meant by 'Happiness': A Journey Through Virtue and Character

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Building a Free, Scalable, Online Character Course - What the Founders Meant by "Happiness": A Journey Through Virtue and Character

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Abstract

This paper introduces a scalable, open-access course created by Arizona State University and the National Constitution Center. Based on Jeffrey Rosen's *The Pursuit of Happiness*, the course explores how classical virtue shaped the American founders' vision of civic duty and human flourishing. Grounded in Principled Innovation, the course focuses on the Jubilee Centre's notion of character taught. The course provides a framework to cultivate civic identity and character at scale. Designed for broad access, it provides a pathway from free form learning to a certificate of completion, modeling how institutions can democratize character education while reinforcing civic flourishing.

Introduction

This paper introduces a new, scalable, open-access course created in collaboration between the National Constitution Center and Arizona State University. Based on Jeffrey Rosen's *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*, the course explores how classical virtue shaped the Founders' understanding of happiness, character, and civic duty. Grounded in Arizona State University's Principled Innovation framework (Crow & Cross, 2024; ASU, 2024) and aligned with the Jubilee Centre's concept of *character taught*, the course provides a structure to cultivate civic identity and moral purpose at scale (Jubilee, 2022).

To frame this effort, we begin not with curriculum but with story. The two vignettes that follow, one from Cross and one from Rosen, illustrate the shared problem that animates both the book and the course: the modern mis-definition of happiness. The first, a contemporary reflection, captures the dissonance of a culture that confuses momentary pleasure with meaningful well-being. The second revisits the Founders' moral sources to recover happiness as the pursuit of virtue and self-control. Together, these stories reveal both the need and the opportunity to realign our understanding of happiness with its classical and civic roots… a vision of flourishing that the course seeks to renew for a democratic age.

Rethinking Happiness: From Feeling Good to Being Good - *By Ted Cross*

It was a Wednesday night, about 11:00 PM. My wife and I were sitting on the couch, the television on but muted. Like so many evenings, we were scrolling through our phones… half present, half absent. Then something unexpected happened… Stefanie suddenly set her phone down and said, almost in exasperation, "You know what? Happiness is overrated."

I looked over, surprised. As someone who studies happiness, positive psychology, character, and flourishing, I was momentarily confused. But the simplicity and honesty of what she said stopped my swirling thoughts. As I paused, I realized she might be right. Maybe happiness *isn't* happiness anymore. Maybe something about how we pursue it has changed.

Today, happiness is often equated with comfort, pleasure, or distraction…the dopamine hits of digital life. We scroll, consume, and chase moments that feel good but rarely last. Yet for thousands of years, happiness meant something different. In the classical and moral traditions, happiness was not a fleeting emotion but a form of excellence—a life lived well and directed toward the good (Kristján, 2019; Rosen, 2024).

Philosophers like Aristotle, and later the American Founders, understood happiness as *flourishing*: the fulfillment that comes from living with purpose, virtue, and community (Olson, 2024; Rosen, 2024). It was not about escaping discomfort but about embodying character…doing good as a way of being good.

And modern research quietly reaffirms what ancient wisdom taught. People with strong, meaningful relationships, those who invest in community, and shared purpose, live longer, healthier, and happier lives (Dunbar, 2021; Putnam, 2000). Flourishing, in this sense, is social, moral, and relational.

So perhaps my wife's comment that night was not cynicism but clarity. Maybe she was naming the exhaustion that comes from chasing the wrong kind of happiness, the kind that demands constant stimulation but leaves us emptier over time. To reclaim happiness, we must reconnect it to goodness. The real question is not simply *how do I feel?*, but *how do I live?*

When we understand happiness as both moral and communal, as being good and doing good, we rediscover its original power. Happiness, in its truest form, is not the pursuit of feeling good. It is the practice of living well (Olson, 2024; Kristján, 2019).

Rediscovering the Founders' Meaning of Happiness - *By Jeffrey Rosen*
During the isolation of the COVID era, I began what I thought would be a small side project: a close reading of the Declaration of Independence. I wanted to understand what Thomas Jefferson truly meant by that most famous and mysterious phrase… the "pursuit of happiness." What I discovered changed how I think about being a good person and a good citizen. For Jefferson and the Founders, the pursuit of happiness was not about pleasure or comfort. It was about virtue, the long-term cultivation of moral character and the habits that allow a free people to flourish (Rosen, 2024).

That realization led me deep into the moral world of the eighteenth century. I learned that both Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin drew inspiration from a work by the Roman philosopher Cicero titled *Tusculan Disputations* (Rosen, 2024). Cicero's insight was simple but profound: without virtue, happiness is impossible (Rosen, 2024).

Franklin took this to heart. In his twenties, he resolved to achieve what he called "moral perfection." He designed a system, a kind of moral technology, by which he would focus on one virtue each week. He created a chart with the virtues listed on one axis and the days of the week on the other. Each day he would mark an "X" wherever he had fallen short (Rosen, 2024).

It was, by his own admission, a humbling exercise. Franklin found the constant tallying of his failings discouraging, and yet he persisted for a time, concluding that the effort itself had made him a better man. His experiment was not about achieving perfection but about striving toward it through reflection and self-discipline (Rosen, 2024).

Cicero's words, which Franklin adopted as his own motto, capture the essence of this project: *"Without virtue, happiness cannot be."* The Founders took this idea seriously. Happiness, to them, was the moral flourishing that comes from self-government… governing one's own passions to participate wisely in governing a republic.

When I first encountered these texts, I was struck by how foreign yet necessary they felt. I had studied literature, law, and political philosophy at some of the finest universities, yet I realized that the great works of moral philosophy had quietly vanished from the curriculum by the time I was in college in the 1980s. Those were the years of materialism and self-indulgence… when popular culture celebrated greed as good.

I remember yearning, even then, for an alternative—a framework that could answer the question the classical philosophers once asked so urgently: *How should we live?* The Puritan vision I encountered in English literature, with its emphasis on salvation by grace alone, did not speak to me (Rosen, 2024). I wanted a vision of moral growth grounded in reason, virtue, and civic responsibility. In rediscovering the moral philosophers, the Founders themselves had read—Cicero, Aristotle, Hume—I found that missing framework. Their vision of happiness was not about the pursuit of pleasure but about the pursuit of goodness.

That discovery transformed me. It made me, in a sense, a missionary for recovering the Founders' true meaning of happiness, a vision rooted in virtue, self-command, and the continual effort to live wisely and well.

Synthesis

Put plainly, *happiness* has come to mean the pursuit of pleasure, comfort, and personal satisfaction—a fleeting feeling to be achieved rather than a way of being to be cultivated. Yet this modern definition departs sharply from the deeper tradition that once animated both philosophy and civic life. For the American Founders, as for classical thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero, happiness was inseparable from virtue: the flourishing that arises from living wisely, justly, and in harmony with others (Rosen, 2024). Over time, that moral dimension has eroded, replaced by a culture of immediacy and self-gratification.

In the American context, this disagreement is more than an academic curiosity. The Declaration of Independence enshrines the "pursuit of happiness" as one of our inalienable rights. If we have no consensus about what happiness means, then this cornerstone of our civic identity becomes difficult to uphold or cultivate. Without a basic, common understanding of happiness, the very foundation of our political and social order risks becoming unstable. Civic cohesion, mutual intelligibility, and the common good depend on at least some shared clarity about what we are pursuing together (Putnum, 2000).

This question matters because happiness is not a marginal pursuit…it is the end toward which nearly all our individual and collective actions are directed. Our careers, families, religious communities, and civic institutions are structured around competing visions of what it means to live well. In this sense, happiness is not just a personal matter but a public one. A society without a coherent vision of happiness becomes fragmented, as its citizens chase conflicting ends without a unifying framework. To move toward greater civic unity and individual flourishing, we must recover a deeper, more robust understanding of happiness…one that transcends mere pleasure or material success, and instead emphasizes the cultivation of character, virtue, and the common good. Then we must also focus on teaching virtues that can lead to flourishing via "character taught."

The question, then, becomes why we should ground our common understanding of happiness in virtue and the classical philosophical tradition. The answer is straightforward: this is precisely where the American Founders themselves rooted their understanding of happiness. Their interpretation of these materials was, of course, shaped by their own worldviews, religious backgrounds, and personal upbringings. Yet despite these differences, the Founders consistently drew upon a shared philosophical inheritance that defined happiness as inseparable from virtue (Rosen, 2024). For the Founders, virtue was not a lofty abstraction but a set of excellences to be cultivated through daily practice and habituation. Happiness was not merely a feeling or a private good, but the fruit of disciplined efforts to become a better person, morally, intellectually, and civically (Rosen, 2024). In this way, the pursuit of happiness demanded more than pleasure or prosperity; it required character formation.

Although the specific values of individual Founders did not always align, they were unified in their commitment to personal and collective improvement. Across political factions and social divides, they held that flourishing depended on the steady pursuit of virtue, both in private life and in public service. This shared conviction provided the moral framework for the new republic and gave coherence to the promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

It is precisely this vision of happiness…rooted in virtue, character, and the common good…that our society must recover today. This is why Arizona State University and the National Constitution Center have partnered to create a scalable, free, and inclusive online course. Drawing on Jeffrey Rosen's *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*, the course offers open-access, non-credit learning designed as a foundation for future credit-bearing pathways and stackable credentials. Built within ASU's framework of Principled Innovation, the project seeks to advance civic understanding while fostering character development at scale.

The Course

The course sequence reflects a deliberate design aligned with the Jubilee Centre's framework of character taught, caught, and sought (Jubilee, 2022). Foundational content teaches core character and virtue concepts, many of which are presented through the triumphs and failures of the Founders. Exposure to historical struggles and civic debates fosters an ethos where

character can be caught through context and reflection. Learners are invited to seek personal meaning through engagement with contemporary issues, developing their own moral reasoning and civic identity. In other words, character sought.

This initiative is grounded in the belief that access to character education should not be limited to those pursuing degrees. By beginning with a noncredit, open access course, the partnership opens the door to thousands who may never have seen themselves as part of the academic or civic conversation. As learners progress, they can opt into earning a non-credit bearing certificate of completion. The course will serve as a jumping off point for future exploration of credit bearing courses and even programs centered in character and Principled Innovation.

The National Constitution Center's leadership ensures that character education in this model is not abstract or technical, but living and moral. The course materials challenge learners to wrestle with pluralism, dissent, and the responsibilities of personal self-government as the key to political self-government. Rosen and others in the course materials bridge the gap between civic knowledge and civic identity, reinforcing the idea that understanding the founding of the United States was contingent on shaping one's personal character and that today personal self-governance is just as important for political self-governance as it was at the Founding.

The project intentionally merges content and character, with Arizona State University providing scalable infrastructure and the National Constitution Center grounding the work in constitutional relevance. It honors the lived realities of today's learners while offering a high-integrity pathway to academic, civic, and personal growth.

This model demonstrates how academic institutions, and civic partners can work together to lift the many, not just the few. By reimagining access, delivery, and purpose, it offers a bold example of character formation rooted in the classical virtues aimed at the common good.

The ASU Open Free Course is structured around Jeffrey Rosen's book *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America* and will follow the pattern of twelve virtues drawn from the lives and practices of the Founding generation. The course is called "**What the Founders Meant by 'Happiness': A Journey Through Virtue and Character."** Each module will guide learners through these themes:

1. Order: Twelve Virtues and the Pursuit of Happiness
2. Temperance: Ben Franklin's Quest for Moral Perfection
3. Humility: John and Abigail Adams's Self-Accounting
4. Silence: George Washington's Rules of Civility
5. Frugality: Jefferson's Balance of Reason and Desire
6. Industry: Alexander Hamilton's Work Ethic
7. Sincerity: James Madison's Search for Truth
8. Justice: John Jay's Commitment to Law
9. Moderation: Gouverneur Morris's Practical Wisdom
10. Cleanliness: The Moral Hygiene of the Founders

11. Tranquility: The Stoic Calm of George Mason
12. Chastity: Mercy Otis Warren's Civic Virtue
13. The Unity of Virtue and the Pursuit of Happiness

The purpose of this structure is to bring learners on a journey of self-reflection and discovery while engaging deeply with the virtues that were central to the Founders' moral and civic vision. For the Founders, character improvement was nearly synonymous with happiness (Rosen, 2024). They understood the goal of daily habits…practicing virtues of action and mind… not simply as moral discipline but as the very pathway to flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, as the Greeks called it (Olson, 2024). In this way, the course is designed not only to teach history, but also to invite participants into the same pursuit of virtue that shaped both individual character and the civic fabric of the early republic.

Conclusion

Today, we often treat happiness as a matter of fleeting pleasure or personal satisfaction, separating it from the deeper moral grounding that the Founders and the ancients associated with the term. In classical thought, and in the civic philosophy that shaped the American Founding, happiness was not simply about feeling good but about living well, cultivating character, exercising reason, and fulfilling one's duties to others. For the ancients, and for thinkers like Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams, to be happy was inseparable from being good; the pursuit of happiness meant striving for excellence in both private conduct and public life. By equating happiness with momentary pleasure, we have lost sight of the richer vision that links true happiness to virtue.

At its core, the Founders saw the pursuit of happiness as a continual endeavor to build and refine character, sustained by the steady practice of habits that nurture self-discipline, emotional insight, human flourishing, and personal growth. From this perspective, happiness is not something to be possessed but something to be pursued—a quest rather than a destination.

In sum, this project demonstrates how a university can translate scholarship on virtue, flourishing, and civic duty into a scalable educational model. By grounding the course in *The Pursuit of Happiness* and anchoring it in Principled Innovation and the Jubilee Centre's framework, ASU and the National Constitution Center offer more than an online learning experience, but rather an approach to cultivating civic identity and moral formation at scale. Through open access, the course illustrates how institutions can democratize character education while strengthening constitutional values and promoting a culture of civic flourishing.

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