

## The well-being agenda in education: A philosophical exploration

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There has been an interesting development in the UK recently. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, expressed an intention to measure the happiness of the nation, as a basis for public policy. He wants to find out how happy we are, and towards this end he appointed Jil Matheson, a leading statistician, to devise questions that would become part of a household survey. This is particularly important, he said, in the current economic crisis that has brought drastic cuts to almost every area of our lives. We are in an age of austerity, but economists and psychologists have been telling us for a long time that, beyond a certain level, wealth is not correlated with happiness. Cameron wants to find out what *is* correlated with happiness, in order, he says, to put “joy in our hearts”.

In addition to the household survey, there will be a public consultation, inviting members of the public to answer the question ‘what is happiness?’ We don’t know exactly what form this will take, but people are likely to be invited to place a mark alongside:

- Pleasure?
- Wealth?
- Health?
- Social status?
- Family life?

One politician described ‘what is happiness?’ as a ‘candy floss question’, and many people are uneasy with Cameron’s new idea. Others are more positive, and one journalist expressed the hope that the British public would finally answer a question with which philosophers have struggled unsuccessfully for millennia.

At the very least, an interesting debate is likely to take place about who we are and what we value in life. Is the British public likely to ‘solve’ the age-old problem of happiness? With due respect to the British public, I think not. It’s not that I think Cameron should turn to philosophers rather than the public for a checklist answer. Rather, the point is that the nature of happiness *is not discovered in this way*. It is not a checklist question, and it is not a question that is properly determined by consensus. The idea that it *can* be determined this way embeds many assumptions, and while philosophers may or may not have final answers to the happiness question, they should at least be able to identify these assumptions.

Two assumptions interest me in particular:

- 1) the assumption that, because we live in a democracy, questions of meaning can be resolved democratically. It is certainly true, as Wittgenstein showed, that our interest in meaning should be

fundamentally *ordinary*, based in the way we live our lives. It does not follow from this that happiness has an 'ordinary meaning' that can be discovered by conducting a poll.

- 2) the assumption that happiness can be a) measured and b) enhanced on a national level. The idea seems to be that, when we know what happiness is, social scientists can measure it, educationists and policy makers can enhance it, and Britons will lead better lives.

In this paper I will focus on the second set of assumptions: the idea that happiness/well-being can be reliably measured and enhanced on a nationwide scale. I see this idea as highly dubious philosophically. However, well-being is an important concept, and there is no doubt that people want this in their own and their children's lives, and would do much to achieve it. Despite the British media's scorn of philosophers, I think there are some important and useful ideas to be plucked from some philosophical writings. In this paper I will draw mainly on three philosophers: Aristotle, Wittgenstein and Martin Buber. Their ideas encourage us, not to seek a checklist answer to the question 'what is happiness?' but to seek answers to some very different questions:

- 1) What is it to pursue, and help others to pursue, happiness?
- 2) How do we find out how happy a person is?
- 3) What are the relationships between the concepts of happiness, well-being, pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, a good life?

But first, a brief introduction to the recent background of the happiness debate in Britain.

## *2. Background to the happiness debate*

When New Labour came to power in 1997, disaffection was rife in schools. A headmaster had recently been stabbed to death by a pupil at the school gates, and there was a national outcry. Tony Blair came in on the slogan 'education, education, education' and promised to raise standards in schools. The Education Secretary David Blunkett famously staked his reputation on meeting certain numeracy and literacy targets.

Raise standards, produce a better educated population, and people will work harder, keep off the dole, avoid crime... But was this idea right?

The standards agenda involves a trap. To raise standards is to discriminate between those who succeed and those who fail. The social consequences of educational failure include disaffection, delinquency, violence and so on: the very problems that the standards agenda set out to address. Such an agenda may help some children, but for others, arguably, it makes matters worse by drawing attention to their failures and making them feel unworthy and excluded.

Gradually another sort of agenda emerged, aiming to address the problems of educational disaffection in a more fundamental way. This was based on the idea that the effort to raise standards is doomed to fail if children are unable to learn. There are *necessary conditions* for learning: for example, a decent breakfast. Society must ensure that every child has food in her stomach before she comes to school, plus whatever else is required for her health and safety.

In 2000 the death of eight year-old Victoria Climbié hit the headlines. It was described by the pathologist in the case as the ‘worst case of child abuse I’ve ever encountered’. Attention was drawn to the huge inequalities between children’s living conditions in the UK, and the fact that the ‘necessary conditions’ for learning are simply not satisfied for many. A report into Climbié’s tragic death led to an important initiative called Every Child Matters, which was incorporated into the Children Act, 2004. It stated:

Every Child Matters is a new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The Government’s aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being.

This was a key moment in UK educational history. Well-being is a nebulous concept, but Every Child Matters gave prominence to it nonetheless. In so doing, it gave rise to an abundance of research and initiatives the aims of which were to operationalise the concept of well-being, enhance well-being among children, and determine statistically whether this had been achieved.

One element of Every Child Matters was the Primary Behaviour and Attendance Pilot. This pilot had several branches, including a branch that aimed to enhance well-being by developing what were called the five social and emotional aspects of learning. These were described as

1. self-awareness
2. managing feelings
3. motivation
4. empathy
5. social skills

Known as the SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning) programme, this provided detailed curriculum materials for use at different levels of learning. SEAL is now in use in 60% of primary schools in Britain and around 15% of secondary schools. Susan Hallam, author of a major evaluation of the programme, says that the programme has been ‘relatively successful’ and reports:

All responding headteachers, 87% of teachers and 96% of non-teaching staff agreed that the programme promoted the emotional wellbeing of children, while 82% of teachers agreed that it increased pupils' ability to control emotions such as anger.

There is no doubt that many teachers welcome SEAL. They welcome the government's shift of emphasis from traditional educational skills towards so-called social and emotional skills. Most children seem to enjoy SEAL too; the programme has materials that are fun to use in the classroom. Statistics like those quoted above are supposed to contribute to the measurement of well-being, as promoted by SEAL. Well-being is seen as grounded in apparently 'measurable skills', including the skill of controlling one's anger. If you can manage your anger and other emotions, you will feel better, relate better to others, and crucially, you will learn better. Learning is seen as the key to well-being in life, having the power to bring success and prosperity. Conversely, emotional/social well-being is thought to contribute in significant ways to learning.

In all these ideas there is more than a grain of truth. Although I have grave doubts about the idea of measurability, there are respects in which SEAL provides, or may provide, a kind of Aristotelian moral education. I turn to this now.

### *3. Aristotle and SEAL*

What are the grains of truth in the SEAL programme? It must be said at the outset that, although policy makers are nervous about admitting this, SEAL is a form of moral education. This idea makes policy makers nervous because the concept of moral education has connotations of indoctrination. 'Morality' is associated in the collective 21<sup>st</sup> century mind with *moralising*: the idea that there are absolute truths that some of us know and are entitled to impose on others. Concerns have been expressed that SEAL is like this: anti-liberal and doctrinaire. Some educationalists have complained that it intrudes into children's lives by telling them what they should value and, more intimately, what they should feel.

However teachers and parents have always moralised, if by this is meant *guiding* children towards particular values. They have done this by trying to regulate, cultivate or refine children's feelings, and this is precisely what SEAL does. SEAL offers a form of emotional education, in the belief that emotions not only can be but *must* be regulated if a person is to achieve happiness or well-being. In this sense SEAL is grounded in an everyday experience with which everyone is familiar: that of judging that a person (ourselves or another) is *too* emotional in some way, too frightened, too angry, too confident, too mired in feelings of guilt etc. By 'too emotional' we mean emotional in a way that is neither reasonable nor conducive to her (or possibly others') happiness or well-being.

The philosophical theory that encapsulates these ideas is that of Aristotle. Aristotle believed that we do not aim for happiness directly; rather we aim to be virtuous by cultivating our emotional dispositions in a truthful or reasonable way. He said:

... fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue (Aristotle, 1972, 1106b19).

The implication of this passage is that emotion is not, as Descartes and others believed, a mere 'passion' to which we are vulnerable. It is, at least in part, a judgement about the world, and this judgement may be unreasonable or incorrect. Anger, for example, may be *too much*; it may be based on an inaccurate perception of another person's behaviour and motives, a misunderstanding or exaggeration of an offence. In *Upheavals of Thought: the intelligence of the emotions*, Martha Nussbaum explores this Aristotelian conception of emotion. She describes emotions as:

suffused with intelligence and discernment...[involving] judgements about the salience for our well-being of uncontrolled external objects. (pp. 1 – 2)

SEAL also views emotions as potentially 'intelligent' and 'discerning'. Its intellectual background is Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, and though this derivation has drawn scorn from many critics (Goleman's theory has been widely discredited), SEAL's emphasis on the intelligent regulation of emotions is, I would argue, fundamentally sound.

One of SEAL's five emotional/social aspects of learning is described as 'managing feelings'. In fact, although the curriculum writers do not say as much, the entire programme is about managing feelings. SEAL recognizes that, in order to do this, one *first* has to become 'self-aware'. Children need to *recognize* that what they are feeling is anger, fear or shame, and the ability to do this may need to be developed. Many children come from homes in which such feelings are barely acknowledged. They may hardly know what it means to feel ashamed (which doesn't mean that they don't experience this), and they may never have been encouraged to acknowledge their anger (which their parents may simply describe as 'being naughty'). They may not have been encouraged to persist with their schoolwork when it becomes difficult, or to try to imagine how another person feels. Many children have extremely low self-esteem, and it may never have occurred to them that to think of themselves as valuable human beings.

Disaffection in schools is partly a matter of unruly emotions, and I think it is right for schools to address such matters. I mentioned self-esteem, which is a topic I have written about extensively, arguing against some of my colleagues that this is a crucial concept in education. The drive to boost *all* children's self-esteem

(prevalent in the US a few years ago, and to a lesser extent here) led to a facile tendency to praise children indiscriminately, but the absurdity of this tendency should not distract us from some children's damagingly low self-esteem. This, I have argued, needs to be understood in an Aristotelian way. The child with very low self-esteem experiences *too much* fear and shame, *too little* confidence, and such emotions can be crippling. This kind of child may be seriously hampered from learning, and it is important for teachers to address this matter.

Reasonable (or, as I have called it, situated) self-esteem is an *aspect* of happiness or well-being. One cannot be happy if one is constantly experiencing excesses of fear and shame. Because of the outrageous claims that were made on behalf of self-esteem around a decade ago (it was seen as the vaccine that should be administered universally in schools in order to make children happy), the term 'self-esteem' hardly appears in the SEAL programme. However children are taught develop the 'measurable skill' that is expressed in the following statements:

- I feel that I belong to and am valued in my class, school and community.
- I can be assertive when appropriate.

If sincerely and reasonably believed, these are expressions of good self-esteem, and SEAL rightly identifies such beliefs as a component of well-being.

The *problems* with the SEAL programme, as I argue in the next section, are primarily epistemological. They concern the ways in which social scientists believe they *find out* what children feel, both before and after interventions. They find this out, apparently, by conducting questionnaires with teachers and children, based on self-report. Well-being assessment thus assumes that people are *authorities* on their own experience, and it is statistical rather than personal or intimate. This challenges the philosophies of both Wittgenstein (for whom individuals are not authoritative regarding their own feelings) and Aristotle (for whom moral education was essentially particular or intimate). SEAL is a *universal intervention*, rather than personal or intimate response by an adult to a child or children. Such an intervention is ethically problematic, and out of line with the Aristotelian conception of moral education.

#### 4. *The problems of self-reportage*

There's a philosophical joke about two behaviourists who meet on the street. 'You're fine,' says one to the other. 'How am I?'

I like this joke because it reminds us of things we may need to be reminded of from time to time. First, there's the absurdity of the idea – which psychologists like BF Skinner promoted – that the mind is reducible to the body. All that messy consciousness-stuff that you take so seriously is nothing but folklore. If things were so simple, we might indeed approach people in the street to find out how we were.

Crazy as this idea is, it reminds us of something that Wittgenstein drew attention to: that we aren't always the best judges of 'how we are' or what we are thinking or feeling. We can sometimes learn about ourselves – important things – from people who know us, watch us, listen to what we say.

To measure something is to aim to *know* something rather precise about that thing. It is questionable, however, whether the self-reports on which well-being or emotional skills measurement are based report genuine knowledge. Aristotelian philosopher Kristjan Kristjansson writes candidly:

[the problem] endemic to all self-report instruments, is that people may misjudge their personal characteristics, whether deliberately or self-deceptively. (I have received a high score... [on an emotional intelligence questionnaire] myself; yet realized in hindsight that many of my self-ascriptions were less than realistic!)

I have made a similar point in relation to self-esteem questionnaires. In the passage below, I discuss the idea of emotional fakery or fraud. No-one likes feeling bad about him/herself, and there is a human tendency—we are all prone to this—to respond to feelings of unworthiness or inferiority by 'pumping ourselves up', i.e. clutching at opportunities to make ourselves feel better. A self-esteem questionnaire can provide this:

Self-esteem questionnaires provide a golden opportunity for emotional fakers. Asked whether one strongly agrees, agrees, disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities', an individual who doubts himself may think as follows: 'I'm not very nice . . . but I'm not as bad as all that! I gave my brother some of my chocolate—so what if he had the smaller bit? I phoned my Gran last month, or was it the month before . . . In fact, the more I think about it, I'm a pretty good guy. Of course I have a number of good qualities!'

Self-esteem questionnaires invite people to 'appropriate' good feelings about themselves... One can imagine people feeling buoyed up by the experience of filling in such a questionnaire, as they take the opportunity to dwell positively on themselves without challenge.

The problem with self-report measures is that they do not distinguish between truthful and untruthful responses. Setting aside deliberate deception, the possibility of using questionnaires to report what one *wants* to believe about oneself, as opposed to what one actually believes, is ever-present. Kristjansson's realization "in hindsight that many of my self-ascriptions were less than realistic" tells us something that we may never find out in most cases.

Cameron's anticipated household survey will include questions about subjective well-being that will be used to "gauge [i.e. measure] the national mood". Is this really measurement? I think not. Apart from the epistemological issues that I have discussed, there are surely cultural reasons why self-report about subjective well-being is untrustworthy. Some cultures are strongly opposed to

the communication of negative feelings. In England, we have the tradition of the 'stiff upper lip', meaning that we are supposed to put a 'brave face' on things and not complain. Though this tradition is much weaker today than it was fifty years ago, many people still think this way. Others may feel (in a more modern spirit) 'entitled' to their negative feelings, and find it comforting to communicate, or even exaggerate, them. These cultural tendencies are likely to influence people's responses to questions about their well-being.

Wittgenstein has a telling remark about the concept of measurement:

Imagine someone saying: "But I know how tall I am!" and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it' (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 279).

In a published article, I described this remark as:

...funny precisely because a knowledge claim is being made that cannot be tested in any shape or form. I do not 'know' how tall I am when I place my hand on top of my head, because I have done nothing to suggest that I have measured the spatial dimension that we call 'height'. I am (perhaps) going through some of the routine of measuring height, but I am crucially missing out the rest.

The same is true, I suggest, about the use of questionnaires as a form of measurement.

The well-being agenda involves a three-stage process, which may be summarised as follows:

1. We measure the well-being of a certain population of children.
2. We want to enhance this so we offer an intervention—a set of curriculum materials to be delivered by teachers—to that population.
3. We then measure well-being again, and find out whether the intervention was successful.

I have expressed scepticism about stages 1 and 3, and I now want to look at stage 2, which may be described as a *general intervention*. The first thing to notice is how far this takes us from the Aristotelian position with which we started. An Aristotelian moral education, like a Rousseauian, Dewey-an or indeed parental one, involves intimate or personal relationships. There is a teacher and at least one pupil, whom the teacher knows and guides in accordance with what she believes to be the pupil's needs and abilities.

The shift from an 'intimate response' to a 'general intervention' is crucially important. To illustrate this, I want to consider a SEAL material that is downloadable on the internet. It is a film called *Emotions in Motion*, and it features Key Stage 2 children (ages 7 – 11). Taking the lead are some children playing an ambiguous role between chat-show host and teacher. In sing-song voices, they say things like:

With the help of my assistants here, I'll be helping more of you understand and work with some of those tricky feeling situations that we all find ourselves in.

Other children come to them with their problems and we are struck by the ways in which 'teacher/host children' and 'pupil/guest children' are vulnerable to, and articulate about, painful emotions. They share problems and suggest solutions. They acknowledge guilt, frustration, jealousy and anger, and praise each other for being brave and honest.

A boy called Zac confesses that he can't deal with numbers. 'When I look at a page,' he says, 'it's as if there are just numbers everywhere, swimming up and down.'

The others help out.

'Just try taking some deep breaths,' says one.

'Clear your head and forget about everything else,' says another.

'You know, Zac, you're not stupid and you *can* do numeracy,' says another.

This last remark is interesting. How do the children know that Zac *can* do numeracy? Why are they being encouraged to say this sort of thing to each other?

The answer is that the SEAL materials are directed towards (measurable) outcomes, many of which are expressed as 'I can' statements. For example:

- I can take responsibility for my actions and learning.
- I can identify, recognize and express a range of feelings.
- I can stop and think before acting.
- I can calm myself down when I choose to.

Of course, it is desirable for children to be able to do these things, but two things worry me about such outcomes. The first is that we are setting children up for failure, rather as the standards agenda sets children up for failure. Consider a child who has agreed that he can 'calm himself down when he chooses to'. Perhaps he sincerely feels that this is true. One day another child makes a remark that he takes to be an insult, and he gets into a rage that he cannot control. Because he is committed to being able to calm himself down when he chooses to, he now sees himself as a failure.

There is nothing wrong with failure as such. Failure is the other side of the coin of success or achievement, and it must be accepted as a component of education. (I have written about the 'confidence to fail', which I see as an important aspect of learning.) The problem with failure is that it can hurt terribly, and it is often associated with a sense of shame. My concern about the general inventions embodied in the well-being agenda is that they neglect the importance of an

*intimate* response to painful feelings.

This is an issue about the use of the word 'you' in the classroom. When the children in the film say to Zac "you *can* do numeracy", they are implicitly drawing on empirical evidence showing that it is beneficial to encourage children who lack confidence. Of course we know that encouragement can be beneficial, but teachers need to judge whether reassurance in the form of the words "you can" is useful for *particular* children in *particular* situations. If they fail to consider this, they are failing to engage with children in the way that Martin Buber has explored in his writings about the ethical primacy of the I-thou (I-you singular) relationship.

Teachers must engage with children personally. In many cases, it may be the case that children who say 'I can't' will benefit from the rejoinder 'you can'. If a child hesitates before a vault and says 'I can't jump over it', it may be a wise teacher who says, 'Of course you can'. But this cannot be a general rule. First, the child may have a phobia that needs to be taken seriously. Second, there may be a 'special need' of some sort; going back to the film, Zac might be dyslexic. The swimming numbers that he reports might swim even more vigorously when the anxiety of being misunderstood compounds his dyslexia.

There is a real danger that SEAL's general, empirically based interventions could de-personalise classroom relationships. The relationship that Buber calls I-thou must lie at the heart of education; its absence represents a serious abnegation of responsibility towards children.

##### 5. *What, finally, is happiness?*

In this final section I want to take a brief look at the language of happiness and well-being. Consider, first, this passage:

I rose with the sun and I was happy; I went walking and I was happy; I saw Maman and I was happy; I left her and I was happy: I went through the woods and over the hillsides, I wandered in the valleys, I read and loafed; I worked in the garden, I picked fruit, I helped with the housework, and happiness followed me everywhere.

Thus writes Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* (1992, p. 206). We all recognize the feelings described here, even if we feel that they are sadly lacking in our lives. Are such feelings what Cameron wants for the nation when he says he wants to put "joy in our hearts"?

The problem, of course, is that although rising with the sun made Rousseau happy, it makes some people cross and bad-tempered. Different things make different people happy, and we can imagine a similar but also alarmingly dissimilar scenario that looks like this:

I rose with the sun and I was happy; I went walking and I was happy; I saw Maman and I was happy; I left her and I was happy: I went through the woods and over the hillsides, I wandered in the valleys, I read and loafed; I worked in the garden, I tortured a few squirrels, I killed a man who tried to stop me, and happiness followed me everywhere.

Happiness is a highly desirable condition, but it cannot be viewed independently of its causes. If Cameron's household survey reveals that most Britons identify happiness with three big Macs and chips every day, should he try to provide this? Of course not, and this is one of the problems with the happiness agenda; people can pursue happiness unethically, or be mistaken about what will make them happy.

The concept of happiness does not have ethical implications; in this respect it resembles concepts with which it is often associated: pleasure, contentment, satisfaction. The object of our concern should be not happiness but well-being, understood in the Aristotelian sense of *eudaimonia* (the fulfillment of our distinctively human nature). I believe that well-being, in this sense, should be at the heart of education, a practice that is *essentially* human. We train rather than educate cats and dogs; our aim as educators should be to help children to realise the best aspects of their humanity. One of these is their capacity to regulate their emotions in accordance with what is reasonable or true, but we should not assume that this is easily achieved.

Most human lives involve a combination of good and ill fortune, and one of our peculiarly human capacities is that of navigating a path, creatively and virtuously, through these. We need to learn neither to over-react nor under-react to situations in which things are going badly for us. We need to learn to defer pleasure for the sake of important long-term goals, and to enjoy good fortune without provoking envy in others. We need to learn to deal with conflicts between values, and to distinguish between cases in which these can and cannot be resolved.

For all this, children need something that education may provide: the capacity to think well ethically. I see this as the heart of education for well-being. By 'think well ethically' I do not mean 'reason well'; I mean think *and* feel appropriately and well. (I explored this concept in 'Ethical confidence in education', Cigman 2000.) For this the SEAL objective of helping children to 'manage their feelings' is a basic start. But teachers need to go further, and in a more intimate manner, than the SEAL programme recognizes. They need to help children to think/feel well ethically by responding to their particular tendencies to feel ashamed when they fail, triumphant when they succeed, excessively angry, excessively frightened, and so on.

A useful phrase that has a bearing on these ideas comes from Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations* (para.123) he says: 'A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."' The acknowledgement of a sense of *disorientation* is a crucial aspect of what Wittgenstein sees as good philosophizing, and I want to suggest that such acknowledgement is an aspect

not only of good philosophising, but also of good living. To live well is inevitably to experience, from time to time, a sense of not knowing one's way about. Teachers can help children to acknowledge this, and in so doing, help them to 'find their way'. This, I suggest, is the proper goal of a well-being agenda in education.

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