

[Eckersley, R. Old ways of finding happiness still work, The Canberra Times, 6 March 2003, p. 17.]

Old ways of finding happiness still work

Richard Eckersley looks at notions of vice and virtue, and compares some efforts to measure how much attitudes affect wellbeing.

In a presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1975, Donald Campbell rebuked behavioural and social scientists for their ‘epistemic arrogance’ towards religious teachings and their ‘excessive and unjustified iconoclasm’ in preaching self-gratification over traditional restraint and recommending we ‘seek pleasure rather than enchain ourselves with duty’.

Campbell argued that scientific reasons existed for believing that there can be profound wisdom in the belief systems our social tradition had provided us with. He qualified this by noting that this wisdom was about past worlds, not ours, and aspects of those worlds might have changed in ways that made the traditional moral norms wrong. Still, he recommended that as an initial approach ‘we assume an underlying wisdom in the recipes for living which tradition has supplied’.

Campbell was right. Psychological research into happiness and wellbeing, which has grown over the past few decades, tends to confirm the legitimacy of traditional – or universal – values.

Values provide the framework for deciding what is important, true, right and good, and so have a central role in defining relationships and meanings. Most societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. ‘We define virtue almost exclusively as pro-social behaviour, and vice as anti-social behaviour’, science writer Matt Ridley observes in his analysis of human nature and society, *The Origins of Virtue*.

Social virtues serve to maintain a balance – always dynamic, always shifting - between individual needs and freedom, and social stability and order. The thirteenth century theologian St Thomas Aquinas listed the seven deadly sins as pride (self-centredness), envy, avarice (greed), wrath (anger, violence), gluttony, sloth (laziness, apathy) and lust; the seven cardinal virtues as faith, hope, charity (compassion), prudence (good sense), temperance (moderation), fortitude (courage, perseverance) and religion (spirituality). Other values widely regarded as virtues include humility, honesty, fidelity, generosity, simplicity and tolerance.

Virtues, then, are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. Vices, on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires, or the capitulation to human weaknesses. Modern Western culture undermines, even reverses, universal values.

Take materialism – attaching importance to money and possessions – which underpins our consumption-based economy. Psychologists have shown that it is bad news for wellbeing. Materialism breeds, not happiness, but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation. A recent Australian study showed that more materialistic people tended to be less satisfied with their lives as a whole, and less satisfied with several ‘life domains’ including family life, standard of living, amount of fun and enjoyment, their place of residence, accomplishments in life, and health and physical condition.

American researchers have found that people for whom ‘extrinsic goals’ such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall wellbeing than people oriented towards ‘intrinsic goals’ of close relationships, self-acceptance and contributing to the community. People with extrinsic goals tend to have shorter relationships with friends and lovers, and relationships characterised more by jealousy and less by trust and caring.

Individualism – placing the individual at the centre of a framework of norms and beliefs - is another cultural quality with profound significance for wellbeing, but here the evidence is contradictory. Wellbeing is associated with several qualities that individualistic societies encourage, including personal control, self-esteem and optimism. On the other hand, individualism has adverse impacts on other qualities that enhance wellbeing, including intimacy, belonging, self-restraint and meaning in life.

A key issue may be that, over time, individualism has come to mean something different and that, increasingly, we are confusing autonomy, which is good for wellbeing, with independence, or separateness, which is bad. Autonomy is a matter of volition, the ability to act according to our internalised values and desires. Its opposite is not dependence, but heteronomy, where we feel our actions are controlled by external forces and regardless of our own values and interests.

Confusing autonomy with independence would affect other needs such as relatedness and competence and, ultimately, autonomy itself. It could lead to greater heteronomy because there is less perceived congruence or connection between the self and others, between our values and theirs. The more narrowly and separately the self is defined, the greater the likelihood that the social forces acting on us are experienced as external and alien.

Broadly speaking, it would seem that cultural trends like individualism and materialism promote the creation of an ‘empty’ or ‘inadequate’ self: socially and historically disconnected, discontented, insecure; pursuing constant gratification and external affirmation; prone to addiction and self-absorption. The picture emerging from recent psychological research is consistent with much contemporary social commentary about the ‘culture of complaint’ that marks our times, our ‘victim’ mentality, our ‘self-watchfulness’, and our desire to regain some sense of equilibrium in our lives. It is also remarkably consistent with public perceptions of modern life.

Public attitude surveys suggest a deep tension between people's professed values and the lifestyle promoted by modern Western societies. Many people are concerned about the greed, excess and materialism they believe drive society today, underlie social ills, and threaten their children's future. We yearn for a better balance in their lives, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, we don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

The recent instances of chief executive salaries and payouts, accounting fraud and corporate collapses are a case in point. These things are highly probable, even inevitable, consequences of making money and self the dominant values of our society. They reveal astonishing hubris and avarice, which those involved appear to see as quite moral and socially acceptable. That these people are often pillars of society compounds the social damage their behaviour causes, contributing to an image of society as a mire of selfishness, sleaze and greed that ordinary, decent people feel they have to struggle to escape, or are naïve to resist.

Given the subtleties and complexities of these issues, it may well be that science will never give us clear-cut recipes for how we should live. And neither science nor religion has the moral authority they once had. But both are now telling a similar story about living a good life. Both have an important role in guiding us in our choices about what matters most.

Richard Eckersley is a fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU. He will be one of the speakers at the Weekend of Ideas at Manning Clark House this weekend. The theme is science and ethics.

Note: The published version contained some minor editorial changes.