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It's the Weltanschauung, stupid!

Richard Eckersley on the good life

We are often given the impression that we are experiencing such a maelstrom of change – economic, social, cultural, technological, environmental - that the challenge is to 'wing it': adapt as best we can, seize the opportunities and try to dodge the dangers. This is only partly true.

At the most fundamental level, these changes are driven by our *weltanschauung* – the worldview or world philosophy that determines what we believe and what we do. Worldviews are a hard issue to address because they are 'transparent' to those who hold them. They comprise deeply internalised beliefs about what is important, right and good, and so how we should live and for what we should strive. These beliefs become unquestioned assumptions.

The modern Western worldview is dominated by notions of progress - of making life better - that are becoming increasingly global in their influence. Progress is defined in largely material terms – a rising standard of living - and measured as growth in (per capita) Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Economic growth is the driving dynamic of modern societies. Current government policy is underpinned by the belief that wealth creation comes first because it increases our capacity to meet other, social objectives. This is a model of progress as a pipeline: pump more wealth in one end and more welfare or well-being flows out the other.

By this standard, Australia is doing very well. Australians are, on average and in real terms, about five times richer now than at the turn of the last century. If we maintain economic growth at over 4 per cent a year - the Commonwealth Government's stated 'overriding aim' - we will be twice as rich as we are now in about 20 years' time, and so ten times richer than we were 100 years ago.

There are several things deeply wrong with this view of growth as progress. It is, at the global level, ecologically unsustainable and grossly inequitable. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that global consumption pressure, a measure of the impact of people on natural ecosystems based on resource consumption and pollution data, is increasing by about 5 per cent a year; at this rate, it will double in about 15 years. About 200 years ago, the average income in the richest country of the world was about three times that in the poorest; today it more than 70 times greater.

However, I want focus here on another question: is growth actually improving quality of life in countries, like Australia, that are already rich? International comparisons show a close correlation between per capita income and many indicators of quality of life, but the relationship is often non-linear: increasing income confers large benefits at low income levels, but little if any benefit at high income levels. Furthermore the causal relationship between wealth and quality of life is often surprisingly unclear.

William Easterly, at the World Bank, recently analysed 95 quality-of-life indicators covering seven areas – individual rights and democracy, political instability and war, education, health, transport and communication, class and gender inequality, and ‘bads’ such as crime and pollution – over a time period from 1960 to 1990. He wanted to see if, as he expected, ‘life during growth gets better’. Consistent with other research, virtually all the indicators showed quality of life across nations to be positively associated with per capita income.

Easterly then analysed the data further to take account of various ‘country effects’. As he says, ‘we do not want to know if life improves when Togo becomes Denmark; we want to know if life improves when a poor Togo becomes a richer Togo. To his surprise, he found growth had an impact on quality of life that was significant, positive and more important than exogenous shifts for only a few of the 95 indicators (exogenous shifts are the changes in an indicator over time when income is held constant).

While Easterly speculates that the most plausible explanation is that there are long and variable time lags that prevented the detection of the ‘true’ relationship between growth and improvements in life, he admits disappointment: for the large majority of indicators, he was unable to detect a medium-run improvement in life due to growth. Life is getting better, he says, not primarily because of growth, but because of time.

Quality of life is subjective as well as objective; it reflects how people think and feel about their lives as well as the social conditions in which they live. Subjectively, then, a better life is a happier or more satisfying life. The founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, defined a good society as that which delivered the greatest happiness to the greatest number.

Some of the strongest evidence for material progress is that the vast majority of people today say they are happy and satisfied with their lives, and people in rich countries tend to be happier than people in poor countries. However, one of the most surprising findings of research into what psychologists call subjective well-being (which includes life satisfaction and happiness) is the often small correlation with objective resources and conditions. One recent estimate is that external circumstances account for only about 15 per cent of the differences in well-being between people.

Only in the poorest countries is income a good indicator of well-being. In most nations the correlation is small, with even the very rich being only slightly happier than the average person. That people in rich countries are happier than those in poor nations may be due, at least in part, to factors other than wealth, such as literacy, democracy and equality.

Another striking finding is that the proportion of people in developed nations, including Australia, who are happy or satisfied with their lives has remained stable over the past several decades that these things have been measured (about 50 years in the US), even though we have become, on average, much richer.

It appears that increased income matters to subjective well-being when it helps people meet basic needs, but beyond that the relationship becomes more complicated. There is no simple answer to what causes happiness. Instead, there is a complex interplay between genes and environment, between life events and circumstances, culture, personality, goals and various adaptation and coping strategies.

The evidence suggests that people adjust goals and expectations and use illusions and rationalisations to maintain over time a relatively stable, and positive, rating of life satisfaction. In other words, life satisfaction is held under homeostatic control, rather like blood pressure. This does not mean that social, economic and political developments do not affect well-being, but that the relationship between the objective and subjective realms is not clear-cut and linear.

For example, Bob Cummins, professor of psychology at Deakin University, has shown that under normal conditions there is only a very weak relationship between income or health and subjective well-being. However, under adverse conditions such as sustained financial hardship or chronic, serious ill-health, homeostasis breaks down and well-being falls to below-normal levels. The implication is that if we want to improve the happiness of the population as a whole, we should focus on the worst off; making the rich richer won't make them happier.

There is another way to measure people's perceptions of quality of life: ask them, not about their own lives, but about how they think people in general are faring. These questions yield much more negative findings. In a May 1999 poll, despite the long economic boom, only 24 per cent of Australians said 'the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends' was getting better; 36 per cent said it was getting worse and 38 per cent that it was staying about the same.

People were also asked 'in about what decade do you think overall quality of life in Australia has been at its highest'. Only 24 per cent said the 1990s; a similar proportion chose the 1980s and 1970s, with the 'vote' then declining through the 1960s, 1950s, and before the 1950s. There was a good fit between how people answered the two questions: most of those who chose the 1990s as the best decade thought life was getting better; those who picked the 1980s were most likely to say it was staying the same; and most of those who chose the 1970s or earlier believed life was getting worse.

While personal quality of life measures are positively biased, those of social quality of life may be biased towards the negative - by, for example, the media's focus on bad news. Still, there is evidence the social perceptions are grounded in real changes in modern life. They appear to be fundamentally about values, priorities and goals - both personal and national - and the degree of congruence or conflict between them. The research suggests a deep tension between our professed values and the lifestyle promoted by our *weltanschauung*. This tension could be a key dynamic of life in Australia and other developed nations over the next few decades.

Surveys show many of us are concerned about the greed, excess and materialism that we believe drive society today, underlie many social ills, and threaten our children's future. We are yearning for a better balance in our 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'.

Beyond the abstract moral issues, surveys also reveal more tangible dimensions to our concerns about 'progress' and its impact on quality of life. We feel that: we are under more stress, with less time for families and friends; families are more isolated and under more pressure; a sense of community is being lost; work has become more demanding and insecure;

and the gap between rich and poor is growing. All these concerns are linked, directly or indirectly, to the 'growth priority'.

It seems, then, that measures of social quality of life reflect social conditions and trends that measures of personal well-being tend to mask. Our social perceptions may be distorted by media and other influences, and vary over the short term as personal circumstances change and the national mood shifts. Subjective measures are just that – subjective. However, the evidence suggests the perceptions are not distant and detached, but reflect deeply felt concerns about modern life.

There are other streams of research that also raise, although more indirectly, questions about contemporary social developments and whether they represent real 'progress'. For example, US researchers have shown 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 well-being than people oriented towards 'intrinsic goals' of close relationships, self-acceptance and contributing to the community. Referring to 'a dark side of the American dream', the researchers say that the culture in some ways seems to be built on precisely what turns out to be detrimental to mental health.

Similarly, research by psychologists Shaun Saunders and Don Munro at the University of Newcastle has found consumerist and materialist values are positively correlated with depression, anxiety and anger; materialism is also negatively correlated with life satisfaction. While these findings do not prove that materialism and related values cause a deterioration in well-being, they do suggest their cultural promotion is not conducive to it. The cause-effect relationship is likely to be complex and two-way. In any event, these findings are hard to reconcile with the belief that continuing material progress in rich nations is improving quality of life.

In essence, then, a fundamental problem with growth, as it is currently measured and derived, is that it is failing in its core objective of making life better and people happier, at least in nations that are already wealthy. This should not be interpreted as an attack on economic and technological development as such, but as a critique of the ends towards which it is being directed, and the manner in which it is being pursued.

A key issue here is the narrow focus on the rate of growth, rather than its content. At present, government policies give priority to the rate, but leave the content largely to the market and consumer choice. Most economic growth is derived from increased personal consumption, despite the evidence of its personal, social and environmental costs. We need, individually and collectively, to be more discerning about what economic activities we encourage and discourage. While such suggestions are often dismissed as 'social engineering', this criticism ignores the extent to which our lifestyle is already being 'engineered' by marketing and advertising.

These issues need to be incorporated into a new *weltanschauung*, a new view of the world and our place in it, a new framework of ideas within which to make choices and decisions, personally and politically, as citizens and consumers, parents and professionals. My sense is that if we removed growth – becoming ever richer, regardless of where and how - as the centrepiece of our worldview, things would fall into place, the tensions would be resolved, a sense of coherence and balance would be restored.

This sounds much simpler than it is. There is a huge social inertia that resists this change. As I said, worldviews tend to be ‘transparent’ or ‘invisible’ to those who hold them because of the deeply internalised assumptions on which they are based. And if individuals find change difficult, institutions find it even harder, running along grooves cut deep by past ways of doing things.

Both the necessity and ability to change become clearer if we look at other times of social upheaval. The great social and political movements of the 19th century shattered many assumptions of what was ‘normal’ at that time: recurrent epidemics of typhus and cholera, child labour, the buying and selling of human life, the appalling working conditions in ‘dark, Satanic mills’. For much of the 20th century some GDP growth was traded off for a shorter working week and a shorter working life; higher quality of life meant lower growth.

If all of this is hard to see within a ‘go for growth’ worldview, think of it this way: given what you know about the state of the world, current social conditions and trends, what you feel about your own life and what is important to your well-being, would becoming twice as rich in about 20 years in order to consume twice as much be your number one priority, your highest goal? No? Well, for our governments, which we elect, it is. This gives us an idea of the tensions being created by an increasingly outdated and dysfunctional *weltanschauung*. It’s time for new one.

This article is based on a longer journal paper, which includes full references. Copies can be obtained from the author:

Eckersley, R. (2000). The mixed blessings of material progress: diminishing returns in the pursuit of happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies* (in press, invited paper for special issue on progress).

Richard Eckersley is at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, Canberra. He can be contacted at NCEPH, ANU, ACT 0200; ph 02 6249 0681; fax 02 6249 0740; email richard.eckersley@anu.edu.au.