

Happiness Lessons in Schools¹

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Recent media reports about new programmes for ‘happiness lessons’ in schools signal a welcome concern with children’s well-being. However, as I shall argue, the presuppositions of the discourse in which many of these proposals are framed, and their orientation towards particular strands of positive psychology, involve ideas about human life that are, in an important sense, anti-educational.

The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us ... (Wittgenstein, 1968, Part II, Section xiv).

The idea of teaching happiness has received considerable attention recently in Britain. Press reports draw attention to several reportedly successful attempts to introduce ‘happiness lessons’ in schools, such as those at Wellington College or South Tyneside (see for example *The Guardian*, 2008; *The Times*, 2008). Reference is often made, in the context of these pieces, to Richard Layard’s influential report to the government in 2002 where, pointing out that the Government spent more money on incapacity benefits for the mentally ill than it did on unemployment benefits, and declaring mental illness to be ‘the major social problem facing our country today’, he speaks enthusiastically about the new ‘science of happiness’ that ostensibly holds the secrets to solving these problems.

The term ‘the science of happiness’ is often used interchangeably with ‘positive psychology’ as an umbrella term to refer to the techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), measurements of well-being, and research in social-science and economics based on such measurements. Those involved in the movement to teach happiness in education are quite explicit about the fact that their intellectual roots lie in this approach. Prominent members of the positive psychology movement, for example Nick Baylis, are behind programmes such as the one adopted by Wellington College. Britain’s leading institute for positive psychology, the University of Cambridge Well-Being Institute, has initiated and collaborated with several educational programmes, and makes prominent mention of education and children on its website.²

Martin Seligman, generally regarded as the founding father of positive psychology, remarked in a recent interview in the *Times* that ‘nowhere else in the world have [my] ideas been so taken up by public policy as in the UK. There’s a real buzz here about the politics of well-being’ (*The Times*, 2008).

Attention to pupils’ well-being is, surely, an uncontroversially good thing. Many of the most vocal defenders of this approach, such as Anthony Seldon, the first headteacher in Britain to timetable happiness lessons, point out that the obsession with testing and assessing children has had detrimental effects on children’s

emotional and mental health and that we need to pay greater attention to their emotional well-being. This is a welcome and timely critique of our current education system. Likewise, research in the 'science of happiness' has yielded insights such as that 'extra income increases happiness less and less as people get richer' (Layard, 2005, p. 230), prompting influential theorists and advisors such as Layard to call for measures such as more equitable wealth-distribution through taxation, more flexible employment patterns, and a greater allocation of the budgets of developed countries to international aid. Layard's critique of the drive, in Western capitalist states, for ever-increasing wealth and consumption, alongside the emphasis on the importance of emotional well-being seems on the face of it, politically and morally laudable.

Yet there are serious problems involved with the 'science of happiness' and the educational programmes developed from it. I shall discuss these through an examination not of the experimental methods used in this research programme, but of the language in which this research is couched, what is implied by it, and what it leaves out.

MEASURING HAPPINESS

It has to be acknowledged that there are obvious questions one can ask about what exactly it is that positive psychologists are measuring when they report findings such as 'some 45% of the richest quarter of Americans are very happy, compared with only 33% of the poorest quarter' (Layard, 2005, p. 30). Layard defines happiness as simply 'feeling good', and is enthusiastic about neurological advances which measure activity in the brain that correspond to 'the feelings that people report'. Positive psychologists such as Seligman have devised various scales on which they map self-reported answers to various questions designed to elicit information about respondents' level of happiness or contentment. Of course the questions concerning the relationship between mental states, neurological functioning and ascriptions of moods or stable character traits are at the heart of the philosophical enquiry into the human mind, and I do not intend to revisit these debates. Yet it would be too easy to dismiss what is clearly an important body of empirical literature by simply accusing the authors of reductionism, or pointing out that one cannot offer a useful measurement of a phenomenon without an adequate understanding of what it is one is measuring. Most philosophers who have attempted to offer an account of happiness have acknowledged that individual levels of well-being, or contentment, have at least some role to play in our understanding of what we mean when we call someone 'happy'. Even bearing in mind the obvious problems involved in any experimental method which uses self-reporting as a measure, it would be odd to try to reach an understanding of people's happiness without taking their feelings or mental states into account.

The problem, in an educational context, is not so much that it is not clear what devices such as 'well-being indicators' are measuring or whether and in what way it constitutes 'happiness', but that the discourse around this research makes it impossible for us to talk of the things that cannot be measured. The founders of positive psychology are not unaware of the apparent oddness in claiming to measure happiness. As Peterson says, 'one cannot study happiness per se but only particular manifestations of it defined in specific ways and measured accordingly'. (Peterson, 2006, p. 80) Yet having acknowledged this, researchers like Peterson then go on to

devise measurements of something which they subsequently insist on referring to as 'happiness'. Furthermore, there are other serious problems with the implications of this statement. Firstly, it is only true if by 'study' we mean *empirically* study. One theme in my argument is that any rigorous understanding of happiness necessarily involves not just empirical study but conceptual philosophical enquiry. Connected to this point is the problem of assuming that whatever is being measured can be unproblematically described as a 'manifestation' of happiness. What does it mean to say that a neurologically identifiable phenomenon or a reported mood is a *manifestation* of happiness? To construe the relationship between particular measurable states and the concept of happiness as being one of 'manifestation' is itself to imply a particular picture of the meaning of happiness, of the mind, and of human life. To ignore the conceptual aspects of these questions and to approach the idea of happiness and its role in education solely on the basis of empirical research is thus inadequate. What is more, as I shall argue below, it promotes a view which undermines central educational values.

It would be unfair to accuse positive psychologists of ignoring the philosophical tradition of work on happiness. Seligman, Baylis and other theorists often refer to the work of philosophers such as Aristotle. Yet while they acknowledge this work, they seem to simply side-step its significance in a way which has damaging educational implications. Thus Peterson notes, after surveying the philosophical tradition of work of happiness, starting from the time of the Ancient Greeks, that

happiness is a scientifically unwieldy term and that its serious study involves dissolving the term into at least three distinct and better-defined routes to happiness: a) positive emotion and pleasure, b) engagement (the engaged life) c) meaning (the meaningful life) (Peterson, 2006, p. 413).

This short passage in a sense encapsulates the serious problems at the heart of the project of 'teaching happiness' and the theoretical framework on which it is based.

Firstly, the author could be accused of confusing two logically distinct questions: the question of what happiness is and the question of how individuals can achieve it. For a discussion of this point, see Barrow (1980), although I shall suggest some problems with this distinction later.

Secondly, he makes the bizarre assumption that the phrase 'a meaningful life' is somehow 'better defined' and less 'scientifically unwieldy' than the term 'happiness'. But most worrying of all, especially from an educational point of view, is the implication that we should aspire, when talking about and evaluating human experience, to eliminate from our vocabulary terms which are 'scientifically unwieldy' and to render our conceptual language as neat and scientifically tidy as possible.

While Peterson talks of 'the meaningful life', the sense in which this is used in this literature and the educational programmes that have developed from it is deeply problematic because of its failure to fully appreciate the role of normativity and questions of value in this area. Seligman, Peterson and other positive psychologists are well aware, as the above quote indicates, of the philosophical tradition of enquiry into happiness. Peterson, indeed, goes as far as to remark that the philosophers of ancient Greece were asking 'the same questions posed by contemporary positive psychologists'—What is the good life? Is virtue its own reward? What does it mean to

be happy? And so on. Yet what Peterson seems to fail to realize is that the ancient Greeks were asking these questions as philosophical questions, not as empirical ones, and that this distinction is crucial.

THE ETHICAL LIFE

In asking what constituted a good or flourishing human life, Aristotle, for example, was not just looking for a descriptive, causal account of what made people happy, but was conducting a conceptual and normative enquiry into human life and values. In fact, if anything, Aristotle's form of enquiry and the line of thinking it inspired, rather than illustrating—as Barrow claims—a confusion between the logically distinct question of what happiness is and how people reach it, demonstrates the impossibility of separating out these logically distinct strands in the context of a human life. For as Kenny and Kenny (2006) note, the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* is probably more appropriately translated as 'worthwhile life'—thus capturing the normative and broader aspects of the term, alongside the insights that it always applies to the context of a human life. It is, indeed, by reading the term this way that one can make proper sense of the Aristotelian point that happiness is always sought for its own sake and never as a means to something else. The fact that people make life choices that do not, on a narrow understanding of happiness as contentment or satisfaction, seem very conducive to their personal happiness—sacrificing personal comfort or endangering their lives, for example, for another person or out of a commitment to an ideal—can only be made sense of if one grasps the point that they are happy, in the broad sense of 'flourishing', because they have a coherent sense of what makes their life worthwhile.

However, by adopting the language of positive psychology, Layard and other writers who have enthusiastically seized on this work as yielding important insights for education are ruling this broad normative dimension out of the discussion and relying on a far narrower—measurable—definition of human contentment. Indeed, as Schoch points out, this is almost true by definition: 'Though the happiness scientists wisely promote "meaning and engagement" as the pinnacle of the good life, they consistently fall back upon a much weaker version of happiness—positive feelings, good moods—because that's the only kind they can measure. (How do you measure meaning?) And positive psychology is all about measuring happiness' (Schoch, 2008).

Yet one cannot rule the realm of meaning out of education. Any notion of education must involve meaning and values at all levels. Thus to espouse teaching happiness as an educational aim without acknowledging this is, in an important sense, anti-educational.

Let me give a concrete example of this point:

The first item on the '10 point programme for developing well-being' developed at Wellington College by headteacher Anthony Seldon, in collaboration with Nick Baylis, lecturer in Positive Psychology at Cambridge, is 'Relationships'. 'Productive relationships with other people', the programme sensibly advises on its website, 'are utterly central to maintaining well-being. ... It is important that any partnership is constructive. Relationships that cause conflict should be resolved or avoided' (Wellington College).

How would this pan out in practice? Well, Anna Karenina, for one, would have been well-advised to keep away from Count Vronsky. Yet anyone reading Tolstoy's novel may ask herself whether she could have really done so, and what this would have meant. The point of this thought-experiment is not to demonstrate the importance of thinking clearly about the consequences of one's actions, assessing the potential damage and weighing up the costs, but to illustrate how one cannot engage in such exercises without an appreciation of the values and meaning of particular events and experiences in the life of an individual. Of course, there are moral choices to be made here, and moral judgments one can make as a reader—or, indeed as Anna's peers in 19th century Russian aristocratic society—about Anna and Vronsky's choices. But the point is that one comes to make these choices as a moral agent through an appreciation of the texture of one's life, not through being given pre-packaged recipes like 'avoid conflict'. There are very many different types of conflict. Some people seem to thrive on conflict; others will do anything to avoid it. There are many ways in which relationships can be damaging to the individuals involved in them and many senses in which this may or may not cause apparent conflict. In order to fully understand what these different senses mean, what aspects of them have moral salience for particular individuals, and why, it is important to understand their meaning within the context of a human life. Neither the important empirical finding (although one can't help wondering whether we really needed this research) that people in stable, loving relationships are generally happier than others (Layard, 2005, p. 66), nor indeed the insight that conflict is generally damaging in relationships, is of any use whatsoever to me in assessing the significance of a particular kind of conflict in my relationship, how to resolve it, what cost this would entail, and whether I am willing to pay it.

Likewise, the advice under point 10, 'Take Control': 'Don't live accidentally, live deliberately. Avoid being the kind of person who blames their misfortune on everything around them: take charge of the direction of your life and actively shape it by making positive choices...' raises similar questions. And this is not only because it may be somewhat easier for privileged children attending Wellington College to 'take charge' of their lives than for children struggling with the objective restrictions and lack of personal choice that result from socio-economic deprivation.

At the end of the novel, Anna Karenina, resolved to end once and for all her tortuous relationship with Vronsky and her inability to control the situation, reaches a clear-sighted conclusion: 'No, I will not let you torture me,' she thought, addressing her threat not to him or to herself but to that which forced her to suffer ...' (Tolstoy, 1999, p. 757), as she heads towards the terrible resolution of her conflict. Can we understand her choice? Can we dismiss it as irrational, or as the inevitable result of a series of bad luck and bad choices? In what sense can Anna be said, in this awful act, to have taken charge of her life? I do not intend this as a glib rhetorical device, but as an illustration of how ethical judgment runs through this discussion at every level, and a warning against any recipes or one-size fits all formulae that seem to write this out of the picture. For education has a normative dimension built into it—not just in the sense that, as R. S. Peters famously argued, for something to coherently be described as 'educational', it must involve some notion of the good, but in the sense that a concern with values is at the heart of any educational process. As Graham Haydon puts it, drawing on Blackburn's notion of the ethical environment, this goes beyond the realm of 'values education' in that education is inherently connected to our ethical environment in two interactive ways: 'education inescapably influences the ethical environment' at the same time as 'the ethical environment has an important bearing

on the nature and quality of education at a given time and place' (Haydon, 2006, p. 25).

CORRELATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

As my discussion of the above example suggests, it is highly problematic to draw normative educational conclusions from research findings in the field of positive psychology. Leaving aside the issues to do with what they are measuring and how accurate their measurements are, what the 'scientists of happiness' have done is to look for and establish patterns of correlations between these measurement scores, across a broad population sample, and the presence of some other measurable factors (such as average income or patterns of divorce). This has thrown up some interesting and important insights such as, for example, that general reported levels of happiness have not increased in line with the increase in economic prosperity in the West.

Yet it is one thing to establish a correlation between certain external factors and whatever reported internal state happiness surveys are purportedly measuring; quite another to import this into educational processes and curricula as a normative goal for the individual. A correlation cannot lead to normative conclusions for individuals, and education is not only about meaning and values, as described above, but, crucially, about individuals. As such, it must address the meaning and role of values within the life of an individual. This involves grasping the significance of morally salient factors within the richly textured context of a particular human life.

Richard Layard, in enthusiastically reporting on the findings of neurologists and other scientists of happiness, states that 'we are programmed to seek happiness'. It may be that we are in some sense 'programmed' to seek pleasure or well-being, but to interpret the related observation that 'most if not all moral behaviour makes a person feel better' as somehow offering a reason to encourage children to 'do good deeds' is to completely sidestep the normative question about morality. As Korsgaard points out, the existence of a convincing account of the evolutionary role of morality, or, in Layard's case, its feel-good role, is not any use in answering the question, at the individual level, of 'why I should do this rather than that?'. Yet surely, for something to constitute education rather than mere conditioning or training, we want children to appreciate the normative force of certain types of moral behaviour, not just to accept that there may be sound evolutionary reasons for it. The moral agent, even for a thinker like Aristotle who put great emphasis on habituation as an essential early stage of moral education, is, crucially, someone who, as Korsgaard puts it, 'asks about ethical value from an ethical point of view' (Korsgard, 1996, p. 77). In light of this point, the remark that 'most moral behaviour makes a person feel better' (Layard, 2005, p. 224), and the advice on the Wellington College programme that 'caring for others can be a valuable antidote to depression' seems not only misconceived but downright depressing.

Social policy may be able to make greater moral progress by looking at correlations to do with reported levels of individual well-being and investing in policies likely to maximise them. Layard's important suggestions, based on a wealth of social science research into human well-being, should indeed be seriously taken on board by policy makers. Indeed the very focus on personal well-being as a research agenda is a welcome shift from crude economic measures such as GDP, and from an assumption that the goal of economic policy is increasing wealth through growth. Yet

while such critiques of economic policy are to be welcomed, they cannot serve as a normative guide for individuals and thus have nothing, really, to do with education.

In a sense, these problems with Layard's approach are the very same problems that lie at the heart of the political and moral doctrine that he so enthusiastically espouses: the 18th Century utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. Layard, like other social theorists so impressed by this approach, seems oblivious to the point that, as Kenny notes, 'in introducing his Greatest Happiness principle, Bentham was less concerned to provide a criterion for individual moral choices than to offer guidance for rulers and legislators on the management of communities' (Kenny, 2006, p. 29). Yet while the kind of social policy initiatives and economic reforms admirably proposed by Layard are to do with 'the management of communities', education, if it is to be something other than a form of social engineering, must be concerned with individuals and their ability to become agents capable of making moral choices. And addressing this concern must take into account not just descriptive, empirical findings, but conceptual and normative enquiry.

Our ethical thinking, in education as elsewhere, must be, as Richard Smith puts it, 'concerned with the shape of a life and its component parts' (Smith, 2005, p. 211). An appreciation of the idea of 'the shape of a life' and its meaning for ourselves and others cannot be reached through a pre-packaged list of techniques. Yet the well-being programmes adopted so enthusiastically by educationalists drawing on insights from positive psychology not only have the appearance of skills and techniques, but are explicitly defined as such. Wellington College's '10 Point Plan' is introduced in the following way: 'Well-being involves living skillfully as human and it can be learnt. Here are 10 guidelines, or skills, that help to improve well-being dramatically' (Wellington College). It may well be, as Layard and others discuss, that the techniques of meditation, or getting a good night's sleep (both of which also feature on the 10 Point Plan) can help us to achieve greater well-being or to deal with depressing or difficult situations. Yet in what sense can forming and sustaining 'productive relationships' or 'caring for others' be described as 'skills'? If happiness or well-being means something like 'living a worthwhile life'—or even 'living skillfully as a human'—then to achieve this, surely, one has to have some understanding of what it means to be human; what makes one's life worthwhile; what values one cherishes, and why. As the above examples demonstrate, such understanding is perhaps better achieved through the kind of rigorous and reflective engagement with the thick descriptions of 'the shape of a life' reflected in works of literature. It may thus be better served by good teaching of literature and history, for example, than by 'happiness lessons' time-tabled onto the curriculum once every two weeks. Such a view is eloquently defended by moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum but also, I suspect, is something that many teachers have known for a long time.

The central question for Aristotle is 'how should a human being live?' and, as Nussbaum says, 'the general answer to this question suggested by Aristotle himself is "in accordance with all the forms of good functioning that make up a complete human life"'. In acting as moral agents in a variety of different situations, on this conception, part of our being and becoming fully moral means that we 'cannot get away with doing anything by rote; [we] must be actively aware and responsive at every moment, ready for surprises' (Nussbaum, 1990, pp. 94-95).

Such a rich ethical approach seems to be shut down by an education that offers lists of techniques. Crucially, what we bring to an educational encounter, as to other forms of ethical human interaction, is our 'evolving picture of the good and complete

human life' (*ibid.*). Education should enable this picture to evolve, and offer children the range of possibilities with which to develop and inform it; not present them with a pre-packaged picture.

WHAT GOES RIGHT

I do not wish to sound overly cynical about the undoubtedly well-intentioned aims behind the project of positive psychology. Of course we would all rather have healthy relationships, and we should be open to learning from studying how people resolve conflicts and improve various aspects of their lives. This, indeed, is the motive behind the quite revolutionary shift in psychology heralded by the advent of positive psychology. As the founders of the movement put it, their aspiration, after decades of an overwhelming focus on psychopathology and the diagnosis, classification and treatment of various disorders, was to emphasise that 'human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder and distress' and to focus on 'what goes right with peoples' lives' (Peterson, 2006, p. 5). This aspiration is evident in the almost evangelical statements of writers like Peterson, who describes positive psychology as 'a newly christened approach within psychology that takes seriously as a subject matter those things that make life most worth living' (*ibid.*).

Yet this shift in perspective does not resolve, but merely displaces the same normative and evaluative questions that have always lurked in the background of all psychological theory.

As an illustration of the kind of shift in thinking that signalled the birth of the approach described as 'the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death, and at all the steps in between', (p. 4), Peterson cites an important study into the reported mental states of women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The authors of the study found that a significant proportion of women in this situation 'did not seem depressed, and dealt with their diagnosis by downward social comparison'—in other words, by drawing comparisons between their own state and that of 'people who are inferior or less fortunate' (Taylor, 1985, p. 1169).

Commenting on these findings, Peterson remarks: 'A previous generation of psychologists might have concluded that these women were in denial, but they were clearly open-eyed, lucid, and sober. The only thing they denied was despair, and Taylor foreshadowed the premises of positive psychology concluding that this was an important aspect of human nature' (Peterson, 2006, p. 13).

But whether we describe the reported mental state of the women in question as 'denial' or 'hope' is a choice, not a straightforward description to be read off empirical facts (as illustrated by the story itself). A full account of this issue must confront questions such as what traits are adaptive and why; what values we cherish, socially and personally—precisely, in other words, the philosophical questions which Aristotle and others were concerned to answer in their enquiry into the idea of a worthwhile life.

The task of positive psychology, its proponents claim, is 'to provide the most objective facts possible about the phenomena it studies so that every day people and society as a whole can make an informed decision about what goods to pursue in what circumstances' (p. 16). Yet the story we tell about the 'objective facts' is part of our ongoing attempt to live as moral agents. Understanding the way certain psychological strategies, for example, have an adaptive role in allowing people to flourish in adverse

circumstances cannot tell an individual what to do in similar circumstances. Such matters involve both individual choice and values. Thus if one wants to preserve the broad meaning of 'happiness' as 'the worthwhile life', it simply cannot be the case that 'the routes to the good life are an empirical matter' (p. 15).

Educationalists who have embraced positive psychology insist, however, on side-stepping this point, and thus offer an impoverished and distorted idea of education when they confidently declare that 'since the development of the positive psychology movement under Martin Seligman and developments in neuroscience, we now know how to teach wellbeing, and have empirical evidence of its effectiveness' (Anthony Seldon, quoted in *The Guardian*, 2008).

HEADLESS FREEFALLS?

I am not suggesting that love and happiness are, as Peterson puts it, 'headless freefalls that just happen when gravity is on our side' (Peterson, 2006, p. 30), nor do I want to imply that we should abandon all attempts to understand what happiness is or to help individuals achieve it.

It may be helpful here to consider Kenny's suggestion, in his attempt to integrate the insights of accounts of happiness from philosophical, psychological and economic work, that the notion involves three distinct elements: contentment—i.e. 'what is expressed by self-ascription of happiness; not so much a feeling or a sensation, but an attitude or state of mind'; welfare, construed basically as the satisfaction of needs; and 'psychological welfare', or what Kenny describes as dignity, in the sense of 'the ability to live a life of one's choice'. As Kenny notes, although there may be correlations between these three elements, they act independently of each other and 'may vary independently' (Kenny, 2006, p. 42). Thus we can make sense, for example, of the idea of someone being happy who has contentment and dignity, but not welfare—such as the undernourished, ascetic hermit living a life of religious devotion. The idea behind Kenny's analysis is that the goal of achieving well-being or happiness is a complex one that cannot be measured by a single metric.

If we accept, however, that even part of what it means to be happy involves an 'attitude or state of mind', it must surely be true that this is at least to some degree within our control.

Some of the points on the 10-point programme indeed reflect fairly common sense ideas about controllable aspects of our lives that generally contribute to a sense of well-being. Likewise, I would not dispute the evidence that many individuals have been helped by 'techniques of mental self-discipline' like cognitive behavioural therapy, that Layard and others enthusiastically cite as 'remarkably effective in treating major and minor depression' (Layard, 2005, p. 196). But the really important prior questions here are what depression is, and why, when and whether it is appropriate to treat it. Anecdotal experience of people suffering the debilitating depression that can often follow the loss of a loved one suggests that they do not want to be offered a form of therapy that will enable them to 'move on', and we can surely make sense of the idea that to do so would be, in an important sense, to fail to appreciate the enormity of their grief or to accord it its proper place in their lives.

'If happiness', Layard tells us (p. 197) 'depends on the gap between your perceived reality and your prior aspiration, cognitive therapy deals mainly with the perception of reality.' This is all very well, but it is precisely our 'perception of

reality' that is at the core of who we are as moral agents. To desire to change this, or to try to adapt our aspirations, may be a legitimate matter for individual choice, but to translate it into a general educational goal is not only to risk conflating education with therapy, but to undermine the value of autonomy that is regarded as a central educational aim by so many educators, including Seldon himself (see *The Guardian*, 2008).

While the techniques developed by positive psychologists may have a value, it is not just their role in educational programmes that is questionable, but their relative weight and significance in any programme designed to increase general levels of well-being. What, for example, if Layard's suggestions as to how to increase levels of well-being through progressive economic reforms such as higher taxation and limits to economic consumption are not heeded, and the distribution of scores on the happiness scale across the population remains more or less the same. Would we then want to argue that we should invest *more* money and effort in CBT programmes? Get children to do *more* meditation in school? Layard and the positive psychologists whose work he cites seem incapable of asking these questions, let alone of answering them. In the absence of any serious thought about these complex conceptual issues and the way they interact with moral values, it is hard to see how such an approach can constitute a coherent educational aim. However, phrasing these questions in this way should alert us to the possibility not that we have failed to offer any convincing answers to them; but, rather, that perhaps they are not the right questions to ask.

THE SEARCH FOR A SIMPLE FORMULA

While Kenny and Kenny's conceptual mapping of happiness as involving three separate strands goes some way towards untangling some strands of the debate, it is also, in my view, potentially dangerous as it obscures the point that although these strands may be conceptually separate, how they interconnect in practice is messy and unpredictable. What, for instance, are we to make of the following description from Tolstoy:

... though he was a happy and healthy family man, Levin was several times so near to suicide that he hid a cord he had lest he should hang himself, and he feared to carry a gun lest he should shoot himself.

But he did not hang or shoot himself and went on living.

When Levin thought about what he was and why he lived, he could find no answer and was driven to despair; but when he left off asking himself those questions he seems to know what he was and why he lived, so he acted unflinching and definitely—recently even more unflinching than before' (Tolstoy, 1999, p. 778).

Levin does not appear to the reader as a psychologically imbalanced character, or an implausible caricature on Tolstoy's part. He is, rather, a totally believable, complex individual in whom we recognise subtle and rich reflections of core human experiences. Had he been given Seligman's 20 point happiness scale, how would he have responded? It would probably have depended on what day he was given it. And

what gives Tolstoy the right to decree that Levin is a happy and healthy man? Can someone really be described as happy if he occasionally has thoughts of his own death? Is Levin's dogged insistence to 'go on living' a kind of denial of the genuine problems facing him, or an admirable optimism? And is the fact that Levin's frequent attempts to ask himself probing questions about the meaning of his life end in disaster an indictment of the aims of positive psychology, or an indication that he is not doing it right—that he has not, perhaps, learned the right skills? Perhaps Levin should have done some Cognitive Behavioural Therapy? But what would this have meant for him, for his character, for those around him? Posing such questions only makes sense in the context of an individual life and the values it embodies.

Another way of looking at this issue is to say that while Layard is undoubtedly right in pointing out that 'happiness comes from within and without' (Layard, 2005, p. 184), the inescapable question at the heart of any enquiry into happiness is that of the connection between the 'within' and the 'without'. Conceptual and evaluative issues come into this question at every level: if someone is living in abject poverty and degradation, but claims to be happy, would we find this disturbing or inspiring, and why?

We cannot treat 'external' social reality, any more than we can treat 'internal' mental states or attitudes, as simply a given fact to be measured, nor can we ever devise a formula for calculating the relationship between them.

The relationship between the 'within' and the 'without' in this context may be yet one more example of what Wittgenstein meant when he said: 'here we have two different language-games and a complicated relation between them.—If you try to reduce their relations to a *simple* formula you go wrong' (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 180).

Yet Layard and other social theorists, educationalists and popular writers apparently bewitched by the language of positive psychology, seem quite keen on simple formulae. Indeed, in dismissing the entire body of philosophical work critiquing utilitarianism, Layard declares 'noone has proposed another ultimate principle that could arbitrate when one moral rule (like truth-telling) conflicts with another (like kindness)' (Layard, 2005, p. 225). The search for an 'ultimate' or 'overarching' principle (*ibid.*) is disturbing not just because it is often such aspirations that are behind some of the world's most oppressive and dangerous political regimes, but also because it is profoundly anti-educational. Education, as I argued above, is concerned with individual lives, and any notion of individual flourishing—not least the Aristotelian one to which positive psychologists purport to be indebted—has to acknowledge the sense in which 'the values that are constitutive of a good human life are plural and incommensurable' (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 294).

If, indeed, we could be fully confident that we had exhausted our enquiries into what makes people happy and could provide a foolproof recipe for how to maximize it, there would be little point—or at least little meaning—in education. How would education, in this case, be any different from therapy or social policy? Yet the fact that there cannot ever be such an exhaustive list should alert us not just to the inherent flaws in the attempt to make social science more 'scientific'—but to the fact that, perhaps, there is another way to think about happiness.

Thus Robin Barrow's suggestion that 'happiness would seem to be or to involve seeing the world as one would like it to be' (Barrow, 1980, p. 74), rather than prompting us to think of ways to arrive at a state of happiness by bridging this gap, should, perhaps, be read as a hint that something else is at stake here.

This leads me to the final sense in which the educational programmes inspired by the discourse of positive psychology are anti-educational. I mentioned, above, the

aspiration to expunge 'scientifically unwieldy concepts', and the danger of ruling out of our understanding the aspects of human life that cannot be measured. Yet the fact that something cannot be measured does not mean it cannot be understood, or that it cannot have an important meaning in our lives.

Happiness may be 'a scientifically unwieldy term', yet it makes perfect sense for Tolstoy to write a sentence such as the following: 'that which for Anna had been an impossible, dreadful, but all the more bewitching dream of happiness, had come to pass ... (Tolstoy, 1999, p 146).

To confront children with the idea that a dream of happiness can be at one and the same time dreadful, impossible, and bewitching, and to draw them into the full significance of Anna's predicament, may be unsettling and challenging. To imply that people who sometimes think of killing themselves can be happy, or that one can be both happy and miserable at the same time is, one may think, a fairly risky move. It would be far less unsettling and risky, surely, to simply advise children that 'conflictual relationships do not lead to happiness and should be avoided'. But a powerful and central part of all pictures of education since Plato involves the idea that for something to be truly educational, it must be challenging, unsettling; possibly liberating, but painfully so. To offer children straightforward, comfortable and unchallenging learning experiences is to deny them the excitement—and the risks—of a truly educational experience, and thus to deprive them of the encounter with what Nussbaum describes as 'the messy, unclear stuff of which our humanity is made' (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 260).

To understand Levin means precisely to understand the contradictions in his character and the choices he makes, or fails to make; to grasp the full tragedy of Anna's predicament is to grasp precisely why her passion for Vronsky was both terrible and wonderful. Without an appreciation of the complexity and messiness of lived human lives, how can we hope to understand the meaning of emotions and values in our own lives, or to begin to make our own moral choices?

This suggests that part of our understanding of what happiness means and, thus, in what sense it can or should be an aim for us in our own lives, can, perhaps, be best reached through a consideration of such richly-textured examples. There is no need, then, to 'put happiness on the curriculum', for on any meaningful account of education as involving, centrally, challenge, disruption and an ability to appreciate complexity—it is already there. I am not denying that getting children to do some meditation, play outside more and eat healthily would be a welcome addition to schools' objectives, or that paying attention to their emotional state should be part of all educators' concern. But to condense these common sense insights into a curricular programme, package them up for children and call them 'teaching happiness' is both misguided and redundant.

Aristotle's notion of happiness as flourishing is, as Kenny says, more aptly described as 'a worthwhile life'. Towards the end of *Anna Karenina*, Levin eventually finds this—not through therapy, but through a bumpy and vaguely mystical process of his own. Others may find it in CBT. Others may find it through developing a passion for music, or mastering a craft. It is not for economists, ministers of education or teachers to decide what our 'routes to happiness' are, but to allow schools to be the kinds of places that open up the questions and give children tools to answer them for themselves. I fully endorse Layard's recommendations that the government should take mental health far more seriously, and should invest more public funds in it. But education is not therapy and should not be confused with it.

CONCLUSION

I am not siding with those who Layard dismisses as believing that ‘we are as we are and no mental practices can change us’ (Layard, 2005, p. 2020). I would be the first to agree that well-being can be at least partly influenced by factors within our control, and I have nothing against meditation or therapy. More importantly, I certainly think that we should acknowledge that there are objective factors such as having enough to eat, adequate housing, and close relationships with others, that are pretty basic conditions for any meaningful sense of well-being. And there’s no doubt that when you’re feeling miserable, a brisk walk in the fresh air and a nice meal with friends will often do wonders to cheer you up. But often it will not. And sometimes no apparent explanation or useful exercise can help us to make sense of our subjective experiences. Remember David Lodge’s character in the novel *Therapy* who, asked by his therapist to make list of all the bad things and all the good things in his life, comes up with two columns: the ‘good’ column contains about twenty items, such as ‘well-off’, ‘professionally successful’, ‘stable marriage’, ‘good health’, and so on. In the other column, there is just one item: ‘feel unhappy most of the time’ (Lodge, 1995, p. 23).

This example is not just telling us that, if everything on the ‘outside’ seems to be OK and someone nevertheless reports feeling miserable, they are clearly doing something wrong on the ‘inside’ and need some help, such as learning the Buddhist technique of how to ‘eliminate negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones’ (Layard, 2005, p. 188). I think, rather, it is telling us that the relationship between the outside and the inside, between what seems to be going right in our lives and what we feel about our lives, between what we care about and what we think we should care about, between our aspirations and our perception of reality—is neither straightforward nor controllable.

Between the inner and the outer is a realm of interpretation, meaning and value, and it is in this realm that education should operate. Although there may be some correlation between the various strands in human happiness, and some control can be exercised over part of them, we have to resign ourselves to the fact that this will always be imprecise and scientifically unwieldy. Not just because we do not yet understand the complex empirical story as to how one part of our life influences the other, but because this is not just an empirical story. Perhaps, indeed, as Jonathan Lear suggests, ‘it is constitutive of human life—life influenced by fantasy, life in society, ethical life—that there is an experience that there is something more to life, something left out’ (Lear, 2000, p. 163). Acknowledging this, in its full wonder, horror and richness may be more truly educational than trying to overcome it by means of dubiously conceived and simplistic packages of ‘skills’.

Between the pessimistic view that nothing can change us and the view that we can find a formula or an ‘overriding principle’ for positive change is a huge and messy space. It is within this space that education takes place.

NOTES

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper which originally appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* Vol 42, nos. 3-4, 2008.
- 2 See: http://www.cambridgewellbeing.org/action_children.html.

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