Why Human Wellbeing Must Become an Educational Priority

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Throughout the academic world there is a conversation unfolding around the application of our individual disciplines to a world we see as increasingly self-interested - if not openly unethical. How do our moral obligations to the future affect the ways in which we define those very disciplines and our professional and personal relationships to them?

In so-called neo-liberal settings (those that place what was once state-supported welfare high on the shoulders of the private sector), responsibility when "things go wrong" is often redirected from the political to the private sphere. Indeed, as recent studies of collective trauma have shown (e.g., the research of Fassin and Rechtman [*The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*]), public servants may themselves feel enough victimized by circumstances that they find solace in claiming to be as much traumatized by unanticipated public misfortune as responsible for it.

Setting aside the impolite question of why we should empower such people to advance our collective wellbeing, some elected officials may even go so far as to redefine the "social contract" against Locke, or Rousseau, shifting the focus from a dynamic reshaping of our skills around new and emerging social challenges, to Adam Smith's self-interested formula in which the reciprocity of mercantilism is itself meant to build socially binding contracts.

However, regardless of where we stand on the issue of state responsibility, we generally agree that social exchange will not happen unless we overcome the obstacles that keep us from interacting as humans in the face of new and emerging social challenges. In my multicultural and very urban university, for instance, these challenges now coalesce around the areas of *intercultural interactions, sustainable cities, global health,* and *human wellbeing*—each reflecting, as it were, both a "grand challenge" to our skill sets, as well as an ethical obligation to make things better.

Of these four broad areas, it is surely the last—human wellbeing--that is the most difficult to define and to locate in any given field of expertise. What, we may ask, is being measured when the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan promotes a policy of Gross National Happiness? And what may be understood in the claim that the citizens of Denmark are Europe's happiest people? A "gross national" anything is

a thing thought to be measurable; and an expression of happiness may only be that.

Why is human wellbeing so difficult to define?

Because unlike health, survival, or sustainability, wellbeing is largely a perceived state of goodness, a sense that one's efforts, even one's suffering, can have or fail to have an instrumental and beneficial impact beyond one's individual perception of need. Human wellbeing is a social construct. It is (regardless of how we try to assess it) about perceived trust, and about the welfare that emerges out of collective investment. Wellbeing is, finally, an empathic sensibility that each of us cultivates - or fails to cultivate - in the particular social place—public or private--we inhabit.

Human wellbeing, however, is as fragile as it is perceived: a healthy nation or globe can be measured by the decline, for instance, in the impact of a devastating disease; but even a quite healthy population may feel very unwell. Americans can gauge themselves, for instance, against various measures of mortality and morbidity; but the highest of scores on any given measure of physical health will not abate a culture of complaint in which a sense of unhappiness and a divisive mistrust prevail.

Indeed, a nation may be wholly equipped to solve a threat to public health while still being quite convinced that things are not well at all; and those working to tackle a critical problem may get more meaning from scaring us about the future than from doing something about it.

In some cases, it is clear that assessing wellbeing does not lead where it should—namely, to an acceptance of the social dimensions of perceived goodness. We may ask people is they trust or mistrust government—we may use this as a quantitative "indicator" of perceived wellness—but the effects of disliking government can be minimized overnight by, say, the experience of falling in love, and the die-hard cynic can find humor in his own disposition amidst pleasant company.

In spite of how exquisite a psychologically controlled measure may appear, welfare is resistant to quantification or measurement because it is so profoundly social and experientially negotiated. The point is easily demonstrated: imagine we are in the controlled environment of a hospital ward. Like a lab experiment we have exacting conditions: two patients (perhaps even genetically comparable twins) lying side by side with precisely the same bone fracture, the same level of clinical care, and the same expression of concern and empathy from caregivers. What might be the social conditions that could give rise to a divergent manifestation of perceived wellbeing?

Think basic concepts here; for the issue is about the simple perception of wellness. One of our twin patients broke his leg pushing a child out of the way of an oncoming car; the other experienced the same fracture after sliding down an icy staircase left unattended to by a greedy landlord. What we see before us are identical fractures, modes of treatment, and (hopefully) clinical outcomes; how wellbeing is understood at the level of perception, however, diverges sharply.

Wellbeing, in other words, is exceedingly difficult to quantify, and statements about feeling well or not well cannot in themselves be taken as conclusive proof that all is well. Cultures vary significantly in what is considered to be appropriate expressions of wellness or its absence. Saying one is fine can even indicate its opposite, as so many allusions to stiff upper lips make clear.

We know that social wellbeing is difficult to measure, moreover, not just because it is individually perceived, subject to constant variation, and not amenable to quantification (in spite of what statisticians may claim); but we also know how tricky it is to measure by the very proliferation of research tools that exist to measure it: if one looks at indicators of so-called “social capital”—that is, measures of a society’s willingness to contribute to social wellbeing--one sees that there are literally dozens of definitions out there, each offering an alternate view of what are or are not appropriate collective-wellbeing indicators.

This proliferation exists not because we need so many instruments, but because social empathy, like wellbeing, is one of those impossible things to measure; for human wellbeing has less to do with understanding “health” in the strict sense, than in understanding the impact of a set of values on our ability to trust one another <u>over time</u>.

How do we know that social continuity—how feelings register over time--is more important to human wellbeing than trying to specify or quantify it around a stimulus and a particular response?

Because, while it may be noble to refine our indicators of human happiness, the fact remains that perceiving wellbeing—that is, sensing its existence--is a cumulative endeavor: wellbeing can be expressed in single events, but only authenticated through repetition. We cannot describe a society as being “well” if its sense of wellbeing is put repeatedly in doubt. David Cameron, for instance, may now try to anchor the measurement of British wellbeing in his proposed ”Happiness Index” (which will be rolled out through the Office for National Statistics); he may even succeed in surpassing Tony Blair’s earlier failure to quantify “life quality”. But Cameron must, of course, recall that Labour gave up on measuring perceived wellbeing precisely because nobody could agree on what it was.

Wellbeing, we must accept, will always remain resistant to measurement if only because it has less to do with particular expressions of fidelity—of what we claim

in specific statements about what is supposedly good for us--than it does with the belief that sociality is sustainable and durable; for the base assertion that something is good for us is the stuff of political grandstanding, a game of Chinese whispers in which a statement becomes increasingly corrupted as it gets passed around from messenger to messenger. Making wellbeing is hard work, and simple proclamations about what it is or how “we” are going to enhance it will only deepen public mistrust when deeds do no precede words.

We know that wellbeing’s reality is undoubtedly social because its durability is known when witnessed diversely. As Aristotle once said of what we feel deeply, it is one’s many memories of the same sensation that “produce the effect of a single experience”. And indeed, it was also Aristotle who said that “we are what we repeatedly do”--that “excellence is not an act but a habit”—that is, a thing done repeatedly even if at times it seems redundant. We need durability and reliability, not rhetoric, to feel well. Wellbeing cannot, to summarize, be quantified because it exists diversely, is realized multiply, and thrives on consistency.

While any government, then, can claim to work in the interest of its citizens, only those governments that faithfully support the implementation and expression of “social capital” may be said to embrace policies that enhance social wellbeing and the belief that consistency is nourished by social commitment. The connection is so direct, in fact, that when governments fail in this obligation it is usually churches or families that are expected to take up the task, to the extent that a state’s failure to promote wellbeing may be in direct proportion to the degree to which it projects, as so many frugal governments do, such obligations into the religious and private spheres. Here Mrs. Thatcher’s “bringing back the family” may now (in retrospect) mean something rather different than we once thought.

So much for politics and its ability to enhance wellbeing in fits and starts; for human wellbeing, in the end, is all about sustainability, reinforcement, and repetition--that is, its being evidenced repeatedly and in various settings long before and after a politician’s special public moment. If a government wishes to enhance wellbeing it must think about long-term public good; it must initiate policies that stay faithful to public need when other institutions fail to do so; and it must then, and only then, make bold claims about what it can and will do to make a public feel well. Anything short of this sequence will only enhance public mistrust, feed an ongoing doubt about social wellness, and, in the worst cases, provoke the very reactionary belief that government is bad for us.

Thus, when we eliminate a social institution because it seems “superfluous” or “expendable” we must be very careful about the knock-on effects of such actions at the level of wellbeing. Pooling resources, creating so-called “centres of excellence” as a seemingly appropriate strategy for limiting redundancy, and closing local services because they seem inefficient, all have wellbeing impacts. This reality was dramatically demonstrated some years ago in a study of rural

wellbeing in Scotland. Asked to define the essential ingredients of community, villagers listed their wellbeing indicators in order: local doctor, local school, place of congregation (community centre), and accessible post office—all, ironically, the very targets of neo-liberal "streamlining".

Yet, for some reason these simple observations about sustained continuity have all but escaped that neo-liberal imagination which now looks around asking what has happened to perceived welfare. But which Florence Nightingale wants to volunteer at the local care home now run in a self-serving manner by a "clever" city investor, let alone an investor suspected of having an inside track on the latest national auction? It takes no genius to imagine the circumstance.

By contrast, any culture or state that supports high levels of social capital, as Wilkinson and Picket argue in their recent and influential book (*The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*), is at least attempting to provide the opportunity—the space--for nourishing collective wellbeing and the belief that a better future is an important social and collective aspiration. This is not "socialism" in a political or Marxian sense, but socialism as a basic understanding—namely, that empathy cannot be verified outside of social spaces. When states or religions (or even families) fail in this obligation, other institutions must take up the task—hence today the increasing importance of our grammar schools and universities, which now, as a final target, are blamed for not instilling confidence in the future.

But why, we may ask, should our universities, as places of higher learning, be today especially singled out for this task? There are many reasons, but four that are especially important.

i. First Reason

The first reason is that we need sustained reflective environments (i.e., academic settings) in order to rethink how perceived wellbeing can be regenerated; for without perceived wellbeing we have no choice but to attend to personal survival, retreating into what simple things we believe can allow us to persevere. Hardship can require new forms of collaboration and even on occasion enhance creativity (as the lives of so many artists amply demonstrate). But when people are made accountable to neo-liberal values (impacts, benchmarks, and deliverables) they retreat into their core disciplinary and professional strengths as a survival strategy. They react. They stop reflecting; and their reactions become wholly focused on adaptation as a form of basic survival.

Increased accountability means that funders now demand in advance and up front an assessment of outcomes before the insecure investor becomes capable of showing any kind of trust or generosity. In business models, it is the spontaneous and explicit "elevator pitch" (the ability to covey a message to a

superior between floors while riding in a lift) that is held up as desirable, admirable, and efficient. There is little time here for the expression of anything other than what one can say with complete certainty, making saying “no” to new things, the basic power position. Employees are punished for risks gone wrong, but never punished for not taking risks.

Under such extreme conditions, there can be no patience for uncertainty and absolutely no use whatsoever for redundancy or repetition--that is, trying out some version of an idea more than once. But redundancy is precisely the stuff of creativity. Indeed, Thomas Edison once famously said that “to invent you need a good imagination and a pile of junk”. What he understood intimately was that true inventiveness requires multiple failures, many experiments on and around that otherwise useless “pile of junk”. Edison had little respect for innovation—the reverse engineering, the rebuilding and refining, of an existing thing. Innovation, however, is very responsive to “benchmarks” and “deliverables”: is this new thing a better mousetrap? That is surely a thing readily measured.

Invention, though, is a wholly different matter. Influential minds of the 19th-century all thought that our most pressing public problem in the 20th-century would involve the disposal of horse manure in the face of exponential population growth. Nobody could imagine a fossil-fuel-breathing motorcar, let alone a light bulb, a phone, or a computer. For the innovatively obsessed neo-liberal, the pile of junk is only “wasteful”, “useless”, and “redundant”; not “potential”, “creative” and “possible”.

The point here—and it must be emphasized—is that real change is the outcome of trial and error--lots of error in fact. Creativity (understood as the process of finding something new) is, like Edison’s pile of junk, a very messy activity. Any inventor will tell you this. Edison could not invent under efficient conditions. Indeed, our obsession with efficiency may itself contribute to the fact that we have so few inventors compared to the past; for invention requires the imaginative superimposing of unlikely things—a real meditation on what the pile of junk might become—making, as the great Baroque artist, Bernini, once said, a new art form out of a flaw.

True invention does not, cannot, never did, and never will respond to benchmarks, deliverables, and immediate returns on investment; for the effects of creation cannot be anticipated. Creativity resided in reshaping the flaw, as Bernini believed--in fact, so much so that the apparent aberration becomes the centerpiece of the new work, which now cannot exist without it.

The post-it-note, the humble glue that does not really stick, is a perfect case in point. In alters habits in entirely new and unexpected ways. What business plan could ever have predicted its utility? In fact, initially it was put down as just another bad idea, not worth anyone’s time and surely not real money. Innovation, conversely, is a process driven by efficiency and a refinement of what is already

known. As a process it is in fact maniacally efficient—partaking neither in spontaneous giving, nor in being at all generous about how we use our precious time.

By contrast, a healthy society is one that is confident about giving, secure in its wellbeing. Where it is hierarchical, it gives; and where it is egalitarian, it also gives. It is by definition socially generous, or at least builds upon a social environment in which people believe in a common good. This is a lived fact that anyone focused on the short term (be they politicians or investors) could never appreciate. Alas, even neo-liberalism itself fails to see how much its own growth depended on having had welfare resources to sell; for it did not arise in a vacuum. In fact, it would not have been allowed to grow in any other than a welfare state, being as it were the welfare state's prodigal son who copiously deposits hard-earned collective resources in his own private account.

If a society refuses to be generous at the level of welfare, we all individually suffer as we retreat into whatever strategy of survival fits our personal need: we drop our expectations and hopes for a better world and replace those hopes with simple greed. Bankers are best at this: in the aftermath of the financial collapse already Barclay's top executive is being paid some £1,000,000 per month (being elevated symbolically as an icon of self-interest), and London's top 1000 employees this year alone awarded themselves on average £70,000 in bonuses while so many of their faithful clients and colleagues of only a year ago stand by in financial ruin.

We are all, in other words, infected when wellbeing is openly so undermined by a dragon's den now occupied by self-centered achievers. Today, it seems, no one is called to task for self-interest; in fact, in the UK such achievers are on occasion knighted for it.

ii. Second Reason

Friedrich Nietzsche once said: "in times of peace, the war-like man attacks himself". There is more than a strong argument here for the claim that neo-liberalism is built on an ignorance of what is possible (hence, its limiting of imagination), a subsequent fear of the unknown (hence its mistrusting of anything new), and an "autoimmune" (self-destructive) starvation of the social self (hence, its attacking of some useful, beneficial, and welfare-enhancing things it might have otherwise nourished).

But setting aside broad speculation, there is a second basic reason why universities must be adventuresome about generating wellbeing; and this second reason is simple: if they don't, who will?

In a recent *Financial Times* article on the present financial crisis ("Keynes: The Return of the Master") Lord Skidelsky, emeritus professor of political economy at the University of Warwick, argues that the political clamoring about the need for financial cuts emphasizes the degree to which government (as an instrument of the people) has been replaced by financial markets (as an instrument of business). Citing Chicago economists who claim that austerity fails to restore public trust in markets, Skidelsky reminds us of Keynes's famous view.

What Keynes argued strongly (and in our financial panic, or submission to bean counting, we have forgotten), is that when the economy slows and demand falls short of supply governments (and now in their neo-liberal absence, universities) should increase, not reduce, their deficits (their investments in "welfare") to make up for the lack of investment from the private sector. It is what Keynes called the "paradox of thrift" in which we destroy our opportunities for social reciprocity, for exchange, for invention, and, finally, for growth itself. This knowledge formed the basis of the Marshall Plan: invest in infrastructure at home and abroad and you will create a market for what you produce. It is also why the Marshall Plan supported, and yet supports, academic and information exchanges. I wonder how many politicians are even aware of this fact?

If the state, for whatever reason, refuses to support the life of the creative mind, what will do so? Certainly not the private sector; for it no longer possesses the extra capital to make risky investments. A brief look, too, at the miserable record of philanthropists, private charities, and foundations for supporting true creativity allows us readily to see that they neither can be held accountable. Few Nobel laureates became creative through charity--not because they needed to suffer, but because research charities have also fallen prey to holding back on speculative, unattached giving. They may talk about supporting "blue sky" thinking, but the concept becomes empty when they evaluate outcomes using those same neo-liberal measures.

This being the case, academic institutions must now play an essential role in shaping the future. If we don't take risks against the odds, risks will not be taken; for universities are made up of real people who have accepted the charge to believe that change can happen and that it is within our grasp. If families, religions, and political institutions are driven principally by a sense of their own inadequacy, there can be no alternative than for those who profess to think than to think about common good.

iii. Third Reason

Thus, the third reason that it is now the university's task to promote social welfare is that when states (following families, churches, and businesses) fail in their welfare responsibilities (as they clearly have, for instance, in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States) creativity dissolves along with the belief that the

future can be bettered. In hard times, not only do individuals panic about protecting their terrain, but because creativity has a very low conversion rate, even businesses that once funded research for selfish purposes (either through intellectual property cartels or through now-vanishing indirect costs on funded research) come to see no obvious profit margin in very high-risk climates. We know this for many reasons, but one compelling example has to do with the hard facts around invention.

Awarded patents are a telling place to look at the most applied configurations of human creativity. To be awarded a patent, any individual or individual corporation (as a legal "person") must demonstrate to an experienced examiner (like the once-employed Albert Einstein) that the idea under consideration is new, useful, and non-obvious to any user of the craft in question. No patent in other words can be granted unless the idea presented is unique, has a potential application, and would not have been thought up by a practitioner of a given art in the normal course of his or her work.

Yet despite the clear emphasis of this process on the encouragement of producing things that appear to an experienced examiner to meet these criteria, only 3% of all patents actually get enough taken up by society to produce a profit for the inventor. It must be emphasized here that we are not referring to the vast reserve of ideas that are simply bad. We are referring to ideas that experienced people find new and useful, even if the so-called "market" fails to help realize the potential benefits of the remaining 97%.

Governments, therefore, that only unimaginatively emulate the business world and its practices will also fail to advance human wellbeing because they too fail to see creativity when it stands before them.

With only 3% of all "new and useful" things producing profit, few bonus driven companies would rightly today take the risk of supporting invention. Businesses cannot be expected under such terms to step forward. If neo-liberal governments that worship business models also by definition will not, universities must.

iv. Fourth Reason

The fourth reason why it is now the university's obligation to promote social welfare is that retreating from the social contract (i.e., cutting back at the level of government) erodes and eventually destroys our confidence, our willingness to accept that new problems require new ways of engaging one another socially. When we cut back, the social environments that sustain our collective sense of common good disappear, especially wherever there no longer remain familial or religious incentives to believe in the future.

How do we know willingness dissolves? How do we know that leaving the infant idea at the doorstep to fend for itself makes for an unhealthy start at building social confidence? After all, Nietzsche also argued that inequality produced anxiety and anxiety new thinking. Being tough on others, this argument goes, makes them that much more resilient.

Part of the answer is regrettably political; the other squarely biological. At the political level it is worth asking, for example, why more often than not the Democratic and Republican voting patterns in the United States so closely mirror social capital indicators—that high social capital states traditionally support Democratic candidates; low ones Republicans. Though so-called “swing states” in the United States oscillate in any given election (and therefore become locations for intense campaigning), the haunting predictive value of social capital for voting cannot be ignored.

High social capital states, as Robert Putnam famously argued (*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*) are also high welfare states; for welfare states embrace the idea that wellbeing is as much if not more social than personal in nature. High welfare states are founded on the belief that once basic needs are met, human variation can proliferate—if not perhaps in the draconian manner Nietzsche imagined.

Argue as we may over the beneficial impact of anxiety and inequality on creativity, the fact remains that as wellbeing becomes less social our ability to see our morals and ethics as social in nature is also seriously eroded, especially in an era characterized by a decline in other participatory forms of social engagement. If you don’t engage others in empathic encounters you are unlikely to see what can be gained by so doing.

The argument here may hinge on ethical aspirations, but it is also relies on a biological fact: every time we nod affirmatively to one another in a genuine manner we promote human wellbeing; for our welfare is confirmed redundantly in the hundreds of times a day we look at one another and agree. It is biology’s way of promoting basic human contract.

Neurobiology has shown this to be the case: social agreement affirms collective wellbeing, and the mirror neurons I make when I see you happy or unhappy induce similar biological growth in my own body. The genetic code we each carry is a vocabulary, but the language of creating wellness is wholly social. This fact alone brings a new and powerful dimension to my Scandinavian friends’ common assertion that it is impolite not to look others in the eye when speaking to them. Even public exercise programs--like the post-war initiative to produce a healthier population in Sweden, or John F. Kennedy’s 50-mile public hikes in the 1960s—can create the opportunity for health-promoting social encounters to flourish.

Because of this simple biological fact, when we limit—for political or financial reasons—the making of meaning socially, we both limit our ability to believe in collective wellbeing and also enhance our fear that betrayal can flourish; for betrayal is that opposite kind of nodding where perceived agreement is false. The experience that most damages social wellbeing, one might even argue, is the kind of deceptive nodding that suggests social concordance but hides personal advantage. Today, for instance, I cannot read a single tabloid on my way to work in London that does not contain at least one article about corruption--about the political betrayal of voters by their elected officials; for betrayal is quite literally a misreading of that affirmative nodding, a moment when our perception that our elected officials can transcend private gain is repeatedly proven by direct evidence not to be the case.

To say one has been betrayed by another is to say that one misread what one took for trust. Betrayal dislodges us socially; it makes us shy about making social investments because we not only mistrust another, but also our own ability to make accurate judgments. This is where Adam Smith's version of neo-liberal self-interest fails miserably; for the capital incentive model of social progress falls flat in any other than a flush economy precisely because self-interest and financial success are by definition advanced through an unequal reciprocity cultivated in one's own favor. It is what we call a profit.

When we profit over our neighbours in a healthy economy there is room for everyone; but when we do so in trying times a profit is an unfairly taken advantage, a form of betrayal. Without a dominant concept of an afterlife in which a fair god rewards the virtuous, profiteering in times of duress will always seem unfair in the absence of common welfare. This is why so many people today mistrust neo-liberal politics; for they feel their wellbeing (unless they have personally benefited) has been betrayed. And let us not forget that perceived betrayal, wrong though it was, is what caused everyday Germans to be so suspicious of Jews in the 1930s; and it is that same perceived betrayal that makes those who question state welfare so suspicious of immigrants today.

When we limit, undermine, or destroy our ability to meet eye to eye in welfare-enhancing social engagements, we undermine also the very skills through which such forms of trust have been cultivated and nurtured over time. This is why trust is so hard to build and so easy to destroy. If we as educators do not build it, who today will? Certainly not short-term outcome-obsessed institutions, be they business-focused, governmental, or (alas) now also educational.

For each and every time we fail to see our morals and ethics as fundamentally social in nature, we not only voluntarily limit our own welfare, but also limit our capacity to recognize what can be gained eye-to-eye. Devote a few days to a space where face-to-face agreement matters and you will readily see what I am talking about. In short, we lose faith in the social contract. We settle for lesser

meaning. We become morally weak, accepting, as history has shown, bad meaning rather than no meaning where human wellbeing has been undone.

Why, then, are open expressions of welfare so important? Because without showing how social welfare enhances our opportunities to believe in one another, there can be no argument for investing so heavily in our collective wellbeing, especially at the level of government. But if states, religions, and now even families are too weak to remain consistent, we at least as educators must promise to remain focused on the task of promoting human wellbeing; for if we now also fail in this charge, what people, and which of their institutions, will step in?