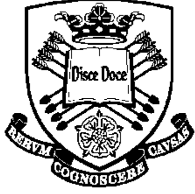

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THE END OF HISTORY AND THE INVENTION OF HAPPINESS

Jules Evans

School of History, Queen Mary University of London

j.evans@qmul.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper explores how the contemporary politics of wellbeing moves beyond classical liberal ideas of the state as protector of 'negative liberty' and back to Ancient Greek ideas of the state as the promoter of flourishing or eudaimonia. It looks at the influence of Aristotle and the Stoics on UK mental health and education policy, particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and wellbeing classes. It ends by discussing whether government schemes for wellbeing promotion are illiberal, concludes that they potentially are, and suggests a way to make interventions more pluralistic and democratic.

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A new politics has appeared in the last two decades: the politics of wellbeing. At its heart is the idea that governments can increase their citizens' flourishing using the science of wellbeing. Nothing better indicates some policymakers' evangelical faith in this politics than the Christmas gift sent out by the former president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, in 2012. As the Eurozone crumbled, Van Rompuy sent out *The World Book of Happiness* (Bormans, 2011) to 200 world leaders, urging them to 'make well-being our priority'. He declared: 'Positive thinking is no longer something for drifters, dreamers and the perpetually naive. Positive Psychology concerns itself in a scientific way with the quality of life. It is time to make this knowledge available to the man and woman in the street' (Casert, 2011).

I have been writing about the politics of wellbeing since 2007, initially as a journalist and now a research fellow at the Centre for the History of Emotions, at Queen Mary, University of London. What excited me about the movement was that it revived classical Greek ideas and techniques for flourishing and brought them to millions of people through public policy. I am particularly excited by government funding for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, a type of therapy inspired by Stoicism, which helped me recover from social anxiety in my early 20s. Yet I also worried about the potentially illiberal aspects of the movement: are technocrats imposing their own definition of the good life onto 'the man and woman in the street'? In this paper I sketch a brief history of the politics of wellbeing in the UK over the last two decades. I explore how the movement has influenced policies in two areas - mental health and education. I also point out how the movement can be potentially illiberal and scientistic, before suggesting how wellbeing education could be made more pluralist and democratic.

Beyond Liberalism

In 1992, the philosopher Francis Fukuyama declared 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992). The Soviet Union had collapsed, and history had apparently arrived at the end-point of liberal, capitalist democracy. Ends are exciting to aim for, but boring once you reach them. Policy-makers grew

restless. What to aim for next? There were various possible new avenues for activity - western governments could try and export free market democracy abroad, as the EU, US, IMF and NATO attempted to do in the Nineties and Noughties. Or perhaps liberalism at home was still an unfinished project. Although western citizens have become materially better off since the 1960s, our levels of happiness have apparently not gone up. In the next phase of liberalism, governments would discover the science of happiness and use it to liberate us from our misery (Christie and Nash, 1998, p. 3-15). Just as Nietzsche predicted in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* at the end of history, the last men discovered happiness (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 16).

This grand ambition took policy-makers beyond the limits of classical liberalism, which is based on the idea that a citizen's religious, spiritual or ethical beliefs are their own private business. This central liberal idea goes back to John Locke's Letter Concerning Toleration of 1689, where Locke insisted 'the care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate' (Locke, 2016, p.129). John Stuart Mill likewise insisted individuals should be free to follow their own 'experiments in living' rather than being forced to conform to government-approved schemes for happiness. Mill had initially been attracted to the Positivist project of Auguste Comte, in which a country would be ruled by a scientific elite, who would create a secular, evidence-based 'Positive Philosophy' for the masses to follow. But Mill ultimately decided that a Positivist state would be 'a despotism of society over the individual, surpassing anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among the ancient philosophers' (Mill, 2015, p. 8).

In the post-war era, after the horrors of fascism and totalitarianism, liberal philosophers were even more wary of state-imposed schemes for general happiness. In his famous essay of 1958, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', Sir Isaiah Berlin declared that governments should confine themselves to protecting citizens' 'negative liberty', by protecting rights and ensuring access to basic public services. Berlin warned that governments should never seek to go beyond the boundaries of negative liberty and be tempted to cultivate 'positive liberty', by which he meant a positive conception of freedom involving flourishing, moral freedom or spiritual fulfilment (Berlin, 2002, p. 166-217).

Humans, Berlin insisted, will never agree on what constitutes the good life, so attempts by governments to impose one conception could easily degenerate into the sort of illiberal totalitarianism that plagued Germany, China and Russia in the 20th century. We must resist, Berlin said, the ‘metaphysical chimera’ of believing we can discover a single formula for happiness, and instead content ourselves with a pluralist society in which government tries to maintain some sort of neutrality about how its citizens pursue happiness. The liberal philosopher Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State and Utopia,* also argued that the utopian attempt to impose one philosophy of the good life onto the messy diversity of human temperaments would inevitably be oppressive. Liberal governments should restrict themselves to the 'nightwatchman' role of protecting our negative liberties, leaving us free to pursue our various personal utopias (Nozick, 1974, p. 310 - 312). Berlin and Nozick's warnings held good for as long as the phantoms of Stalin and Mao still loomed in politicians’ memories. But by the end of the century, policy-makers began to look beyond classical liberalism, and back to ancient Greek philosophy for inspiration, particularly the ethical and political philosophy of Aristotle.

The Neo-Aristotelians

Unlike classical liberals, Aristotle argued that the proper goal of government is the flourishing or *eudaimonia* of its citizens. He declared in his *Politics:* 'we call that state best ordered in which the possibilities of happiness are greatest' (Aristotle, Book VII, chapter 13-14; see also Bache and Scott, forthcoming). According to Aristotle, humans share a universal biological nature, and flourishing is the fulfilment of that nature: human nature is rational, social, political and spiritual, although we also have a strong dose of the irrational in our psyches. We become fulfilled or flourishing when we develop the rational part of our psyche and use it to cultivate virtuous habits in our character. Philosophical education has an important role to play in this self-cultivation. It takes human nature in its raw form - irrational, suffering, and morally untrained - and cultivates it into an optimum state - rational, virtuous, happy, and free. Politics and civic society also have central roles in this process:

we are political animals, and become fulfilled through civic engagement with our fellow citizens. Governments should provide an education and a form of society that enable citizens to develop *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, Book VII, chapter 15; see also Book VIII, chapter 2-3). While his teacher, Plato, expressed a pessimistic view of democracies' capacity to foster the good life, Aristotle was more optimistic, arguing in *Politics* that a democratic constitution was the best framework for mass *eudaimonia*. However, he thought this was only possible in small states (Aristotle, Book VII, chapter 4) where the male elite's leisure to seek the good life is supported by a large slave population. Aristotle's virtue ethics, then, marries the 'is' of science with the 'ought' of ethics and politics - the good life is the life that fulfils our biological nature, and the good society is one that enables our natures to reach flourishing.

The post-war Aristotelian revival began in the 1950s and made its way into political philosophy through Alasdair MacIntyre, the Scottish Aristotelian philosopher, who claimed in his 1981 book, *After Virtue,* that liberalism had become morally incoherent (MacIntyre, 1981). MacIntyre argued that Western society had, since the Enlightenment, lost any sense of a common goal or a common moral framework. Moral discourse, including political discourse, had been reduced to an interminable shouting-match of competing slogans: ‘justice’, ‘equality’, and ‘progress’. People fell back on emotivism - there is no right or wrong, it is just whatever feels right. Western governments had embraced a Weberian bureaucratic managerialism that aimed for technocratic goals like low inflation or high GDP, without any sense of whether these goals improved people's actual flourishing. The solution to this moral confusion, MacIntyre argued, was a return to Aristotle’s idea that the common *telos* (or purpose) of man and society is *eudaimonia*. Not all paths to *eudaimonia* are equal: some are better than others, and it is the task of the philosopher and the state to find these paths and guide the masses along them. He was pessimistic, however, about the possibility of introducing Aristotelian politics into the modern multicultural state. Later Neo-Aristotelians - such as Michael Sandel (Sandel, 2009), Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011) and Robert and Edward Skidelsky (Skidelsky & Skidelsky 2012) - followed MacIntyre in suggesting the state should move to a more

positive or Aristotelian conception of its role in encouraging human flourishing. However, unlike Aristotle, modern Neo-Aristotelians believed *all* citizens should be educated in the good life and enabled to participate in democracy, not just the rich, male elite.

The new politics of wellbeing

In the late 1990s, under Tony Blair's Labour government, Neo-Aristotelian political philosophy started to impact British policy-making. In 1998, a collection of essays published by the British think-tank Demos called *The Good Life* (Christie and Nash, 1998) called for a new politics of virtue and flourishing. The collection referred to Aristotle in its opening essay, writing: 'A fulfilled life is one that has, in modern parlance, some 'project' or, as the ancient Greeks put it, a goal or end. But not [just] anything counts as a life project of a kind whose achievement brings real fulfilment' (Christie and Nash, 1998, p.10). Perhaps the most interesting contribution was by Geoff Mulgan, the founder and director of Demos and later Director of Tony Blair's strategy unit. Mulgan wrote that governments should not be afraid of moving beyond the traditional moral neutrality of the liberal state in order to actively promote a communitarian idea of the good life. He stated:

> A famous philosopher [Robert Nozick] once asked how the same good life could ever be right for a human race composed of people as different as Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgeinstein and Louis Armstrong. Any single view of the good life, he argued, must inevitably be oppressive. The best that we can hope for is a society in which everyone is given as much freedom as possible to define the good life for themselves. This view is undeniably attractive. It accords with the 'non-judgemental' common sense of most Western societies today. Yet it is as profoundly wrong as any belief could be…because human beings have much in common. We share our biology, and many of the same drives and needs, however different we may appear on the surface. Moreover, it is wrong because it ignores the evidence that there have been remarkably constant features of the good life across very different times

and very different places - some things are timeless and universal.

(Christie and Nash, 1998, p. 127)

Mulgan signalled a move beyond neoliberalism and back to the Aristotelian idea that man has a core biological nature - rational, social, political, and spiritual - and the good life is the fulfilment of this nature. Politics should promote the good life, because it is right, it fits our nature, and leads to the flowering of that nature. The 'evidence' proves it.

In the early Noughties, Neo-Aristotelianism seemed to be becoming a cross-party policy consensus. Richard Reeves, advisor to then-Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, wrote in 2009: 'In political and policy circles, the Aristotelian idea of a good life informs contemporary concerns…[and policy-makers are pursuing] the goal of creating a society in which individuals reach their potential - in a Neo-Aristotelian sense' (Reeves and Lexmond, 2009). A network of figures across the British political spectrum embraced the Neo-Aristotelian politics of the good life. Supporters of Neo-Aristotelianism on the Left included Lord Maurice Glassman, Lord Robert Skidelsky, Jon Cruddas, Geoff Mulgan and Tristram Hunt; Neo-Aristotelians on the right included James O'Shaughnessy, Steve Hilton, David Willetts, Nicky Morgan, David Cameron and Oliver Letwin - the latter actually did his PhD on Aristotle (Letwin, 2010). Key civil service support came from Sir Gus O'Donnell and David Halpern of the Behavioural Insights Team (Halpern, 2016). Think-tank support came from Demos, Respublica and the New Economics Foundation, which published *A Well-Being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society* in 2004, confidently declaring: 'one of the key aims of a democratic government is to promote the good life: a flourishing society where citizens are happy, healthy, capable and engaged - in other words with high levels of wellbeing.' Neo-Aristotelianism seemed, briefly, to be the UK's ruling political philosophy - 'all our leaders are Aristotelian now', declared Telegraph columnist Mary Riddell in 2011 (Riddell, 2011).

How did British policy-makers become so confident that they had suddenly discovered the meaning of life, and could guide the masses towards it? One answer is that they were emboldened by

a new cognitive science of wellbeing that arose in the 1960s and came to prominence in the 1990s and Noughties. This science gave technocrats faith that they were not imposing their moral philosophy onto the masses: they were merely disseminating the objective evidence.

CBT: Stoicism for the masses

In the late Noughties, governments embraced the work of behavioural economists and psychologists like Daniel Kahneman and Ed Diener, who claimed it was possible to measure what makes people happy and satisfied with their life. France, the UK, the OECD, the WHO and other bodies have since introduced measurements of happiness and life-satisfaction into their indicators. But what policies does this data suggest governments should pursue? Lord Richard Layard, a left-leaning economist who specialized in employment economics and perhaps the central figure in the UK politics of wellbeing, says: 'The most obvious policy implication was for mental health services' (Evans, 2013a). People with mental illness have levels of life satisfaction far below the national average. Yet mental health services attract a fraction of the funding that physical health services attract, despite the obvious suffering they cause. So a government that takes wellbeing seriously should increase funding to mental health services (Layard & Clark, 2014). Lord Layard helped to drive a huge expansion of NHS funding for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a form of therapy inspired by ancient Greek philosophy.

In the early Noughties, Layard became interested in the implications of wellbeing economics for mental health policy. In 2003, he met a psychologist called Dr David M. Clark, at a British Academy tea party (Evans, 2013a). Layard asked Clark if he happened to know anything about mental health. Clark replied that he did. He was, in fact, the leading British practitioner of CBT. Clark explained to Layard that trials of CBT showed recovery rates of around 50% for depression, anxiety and other emotional disorders, and that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence had recently approved CBT as a treatment for these disorders. The problem, he said, was there were very few CBT therapists available in the NHS. Layard decided he wanted to 'get something done about

mental health' (Evans, 2013a). So, at the age of 70, that is what he did. He and Clark drew up plans for a new mental health service, called Improving Access for Psychological Therapies (IAPT). They proposed doubling the NHS psychological therapy budget from £80 million a year to £160 million, in order to train an army of 6000 new CBT therapists. The new service would help millions of people to recover from depression and anxiety, and this would reduce the state's incapacity benefits budget - so the service would pay for itself. Layard and Clark presented their recommendations at a seminar at 10 Downing Street in January 2005. They managed to get IAPT into the Labour Party's manifesto for the 2005 election, and were then faced with the task of turning it into a reality following Tony Blair's re-election. The service launched in 2008 across the country - after three years, over one million people had been treated through the service, with recovery rates at around 45%. By 2016 it was treating around half a million people a year.

CBT has been brought into the heart of British health policy but few politicians or even cognitive therapists realize how much it owes to Greek philosophy. It was invented by two American psychologists - Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck - working separately in the 1950s but who came to the same conclusions about what kind of treatment was needed. In interviews, they both told me that they were inspired by Stoic philosophy, and the idea that 'men's suffering comes not from events, but from their opinion about events', as Epictetus put it (Evans, 2012a). CBT, like Stoicism, tries to show people how their own beliefs and perspectives guide their emotions. We can change our emotions by using the 'Socratic method' to discover our underlying beliefs and values, and then changing those beliefs that are harmful, as well as changing our behaviour. Both CBT and Stoicism insist on our ability to take responsibility for our own thoughts, and they stress the importance of habits - we have to think or do something repeatedly, until the thought or behaviour is ingrained (an idea that also features heavily in Aristotelian and Buddhist virtue ethics). Stoicism was presented in the classical world as a form of therapy, a 'medicine for the soul' in Cicero's phrase. However, it was also a religious philosophy - we attain inner peace when we relinquish our attachment or aversion to externals and accept the will of the Logos, or pantheistic God.

CBT used the techniques and emotional theory of Stoicism, without accepting its austere ethics or pantheistic metaphysics. It reduced Stoicism to a secular technique for emotional therapy, much as mindfulness has done with Buddhism. Unlike the ancient Greeks, modern CBT psychologists then empirically tested if the therapy actually worked. Beck devised the Beck Depression Inventory, which evaluates how depressed or anxious a person is by asking them to what extent they agreed with questions like 'I feel my life is a failure' or 'I often consider suicide', on a ten-point scale. Using this measurement, Beck suggested psychologists could diagnose someone as suffering from depression or anxiety, and then see if they had recovered after a brief eight to 16-week course of CBT. The depression and anxiety recovery rates achieved by this short-term therapy persuaded the British government to put more funding into the public provision of CBT (Layard & Clark, 2014).

The development of IAPT is the most significant policy consequence of the politics of wellbeing in the UK. It is an interesting moment in the history of ideas - spiritual exercises developed two millennia ago by religious philosophers are now being provided by a government, on a mass scale, to try to cope with an apparent epidemic of mental illness. Some non-CBT psychologists have accused IAPT of Brave New World-style emotional totalitarianism - the government fixing smiles on its alienated workforce (Leader, 2007). This is over-blown, but certainly, the mass provision of psychotherapy - a word that comes from the ancient Greek for 'care of the soul' - does seem to move beyond Locke's classical liberalism, in which government leaves the 'care of the soul' to the individual. But many people *want* some guidance as to the care of the soul, as long as it is not intrusive, dogmatic or cultish, and in a country where only two per cent now go to church (Sherwood, 2016), that pastoral role now seems to have fallen to the NHS.

IAPT is not a programme for mass spiritual reformation. CBT is a set of resolutely secular and instrumental techniques - there is no mention of ethics, God or the Logos. Unlike Stoicism, CBT does not tell people how to live; it simply gives them techniques to transform their emotions (although I would suggest there are, in fact, some ethics implicitly embedded in the techniques, such as the

Socratic virtues of equanimity, self-discipline and wisdom). Crucially, IAPT is voluntary - people choose to sign up (via self or GP referral) because they want to suffer less. Some critics of the service worry about instances where job seekers have been told they will only receive benefits if they take a course in cognitive therapy (Friedli & Stearn, 2015). Compulsory therapy is obviously both illiberal and a waste of money. But providing free talking therapy for people struggling with depression or anxiety seems a just and compassionate policy, and it may be surprising that IAPT is not more celebrated. Although, as Peter Fonagy, one of the founders of IAPT, remarks: 'Show me any aspect of mental health care that is celebrated' (Evans, 2015).

Wellbeing education in schools

The second significant policy area that the politics of wellbeing has influenced is education. Schools, governments and corporations have, over the last two decades, increasingly attempted to teach children and adults how to be happy, how to be resilient, how to have character, 'grit', and so on. The idea that character can be taught goes back to the ancient Greek concept of *paideia* (Nussbaum, 1996). Greek philosophers like Aristotle and the Stoics believed you could mould a person's character through philosophy, teaching them virtuous habits that would serve them well in later life. Renaissance humanists adopted the classical *paideia* programme as part of the education of the courtier (Weakland, 1973), and a similar sort of character-building ethos was adopted by British public schools in the 19th and 20th centuries (Arthur, 2003).

In the 1990s, a psychologist called Martin Seligman claimed to have developed the scientific equivalent of classical virtue ethics, which he called Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2002). Seligman was a colleague of Aaron Beck's at the University of Pennsylvania. Observing the success of CBT in the 1970s, Seligman wondered if its techniques could be taught to people not just to help them recover from mental illness, but also to become more resilient and flourishing in life. Seligman aimed to move people not merely from -10 to 0 on the Beck Depression Inventory, but from zero to 10 on the scale of flourishing (Seligman, 2002). After all, Stoicism, Buddhism, Aristotelianism and other forms of

virtue ethics were not intended merely as short-term interventions for the mentally ill. They were life-philosophies aimed at helping people to build good lives. Positive Psychology would discover the techniques and practices that genuinely helped people to flourish. Seligman launched Positive Psychology when he was president of the American Psychology Association in 1998. He proved an adept publicist, and the movement attracted a great deal of media interest and funding in the two decades that followed, and colleagues developed the Penn Resiliency Project, which aimed to teach young people basic techniques of emotional intelligence (in large part derived from CBT and Stoicism) in order to make them more resilient, more virtuous, and less likely to develop depression later in life (Seligman, 2012). A handful of US schools made Positive Psychology part of their curriculum, notably the KIPP charter schools, which aimed to teach children 'grit' and even rate them through character score-cards (Snyder, 2014).

In the UK, the first attempt to teach wellbeing within the national curriculum came in 2003 when a subject called Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) was introduced as a voluntary subject in state primary schools in 2003. It was then introduced into secondary schools in 2007 (see also Ecclestone, forthcoming) where it became a core module in the compulsory primary and secondary subject Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE). SEAL was created in the late 1990s by the chief educational psychologist in Southampton local education authority (LEA), Peter Sharp, after he read a book of popular psychology, *Emotional Intelligence*, by the American journalist Daniel Goleman. Sharp was so enthused by Goleman's idea that emotional intelligence could be taught in schools, that he decided emotional intelligence (EI) should be given priority alongside literacy and numeracy (Weare, 2013). Unfortunately, Goleman's book, although a popular success, faced criticism in scientific circles (Epstein, 1998, p. 3). It seemed to have thrown many different, and conflicting, psychological theories under one catch-all phrase. It also made unfounded claims, such as that EI classes led to better career prospects. Yet it took until October 2010 for the Department of Education to publish the first independent assessment of SEAL, by the University of Manchester (Humphrey, 2011). It found that SEAL had no quantifiable impact on

children’s emotional wellbeing or academic performance. The loose format of the subject enabled schools to teach more or less whatever they wanted. The Department of Education stopped promoting SEAL in 2011.

In 2007, Lord Layard spear-headed an attempt to make wellbeing education in schools more evidence-based. He helped to launch the UK Resilience Programme, a pilot-scheme in which three local education authorities adopted a resilience curriculum designed by the Penn Resilience Project. The results were then evaluated in 2011 (Challen, 2011). The trial found a significant short-term impact on pupils' depression scores, school attendance rates and academic attainment in English, but no long-term impacts at two-year follow-up. While teachers could apparently teach whatever they wanted in SEAL classes, teachers in the UK Resilience Programme found the materials 'too didactic and thought they could be improved' (Challen, 2011). It was not a home run for the pilot.

Wellbeing and character education was not a priority for Michael Gove when he was Minister of Education between 2010 and 2014 (Watson, 2012). It was more popular with his successor, Nicky Morgan, who declared in 2014 that she wanted the UK to become a 'global leader' in character education. But Morgan took few practical steps to make this happen during her brief stint at the ministry, besides launching a £5 million 'character fund' to finance small after-school projects. At the time of writing the Secretary of State for Vulnerable Children and Families, Edward Timpson, has said: 'We want schools to have a whole-school approach that makes talking about feelings, emotions and wellbeing as normal for pupils as talking about their physical bodies. That might include lessons taught as part of the PSHE curriculum, whole-school programmes such as mindfulness that become a normal part of the school day, role play in drama lessons, or offering meditation or yoga sessions' (Dominiczak, 2016). At the time of writing, however, Timpson had yet to come up with concrete proposals. Lord James O'Shaughnessy, formerly head of David Cameron's Policy Unit, suggests the Conservative Party prefers to encourage schools to find their own best practice for teaching wellbeing rather than imposing a curriculum (Evans, 2012b). Lord O'Shaughnessy subsequently left government and set up a chain of state academy schools called Floreat, in which Positive Psychology

is a core part of the curriculum. He and Lord Layard are now overseeing a four-year trial of a new curriculum for Personal, Social and Health Education, called 'Healthy Minds'.[1]

Perhaps the biggest initiative in character education over the last few years has been the introduction of the National Citizen Service, a volunteering scheme for 16-17-year-olds, which was launched by the government in 2010 and is set to receive £1.2 billion in funding in the 2016 Parliament. David Cameron became chair of its board of patrons after leaving Number 10, declaring it was 'one of my proudest achievements' (Cameron, 2016). The scheme has the Aristotelian aim of teaching young people the joy of volunteering and public service and participation in the scheme was found to have a marked impact on young people's wellbeing (Halpern, 2016, p. 250-252). It is also hoped the scheme will improve social cohesion among people from different backgrounds by giving them a sense of the common good (Wilson, 2015).

Positive education for adults

There have also been some policy attempts to teach resilience, happiness, and other emotional aptitudes to adults. The NHS and some local governments have used public health campaigns to promote the New Economic Foundation's 'five ways to wellbeing'. In 2011, Lord Layard, Geoff Mulgan and Wellington College former-headmaster Anthony Seldon launched a grassroots movement, Action for Happiness, which aims to spread the insights of Positive Psychology to the masses through events and courses (Seldon, 2015). David Cameron's government also tried to encourage volunteering through the Big Society initiative, which aimed to get community groups involved in providing local services. The army of volunteers who helped to run the London 2012 Olympics was probably its biggest success but the Big Society was promoted against a backdrop of cuts to local government funding, which seemed to undermine its ethos.

[1] You can find out more about the project on the website of the Education Endowment Foundation, here: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/EEF_Project_Protocol_DevelopingHealthyMindsInTeenagers.pdf

Positive Psychology has also been taught to employees in some organisations, including Google and shoe company Zappos. The most ambitious adult education programme is the US Army's resilience training course *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness de*signed by Martin Seligman's team at the University of Pennsylvania. At a cost of $125 million, the course was rolled out to all 1.1 million army personnel in 2010, in what has been described as 'the largest wellbeing intervention, military or civilian, ever undertaken' (Warner, 2013, p. 47). It tries to improve resilience and reduce the incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in soldiers by teaching basic Stoic self-management skills, like teaching people how their perspective or 'explanatory style' affects their emotional response to events (Cornum, 2011). Soldiers' social, emotional and spiritual fitness are then annually evaluated using an online questionnaire. The Australian Army started to pilot a similar programme in 2016 (Chen, 2016). Some companies such as Zappos and Google have also introduced wellbeing or Positive Psychology courses for their employees, to try to boost employee engagement and reduce absenteeism (Hsieh, 2010).

Problems with mass wellbeing education

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that, while I applaud many aspects of the politics of wellbeing - particularly government funding for talking therapies - there are other aspects of it that make me uneasy. The politics of wellbeing is potentially illiberal, scientistic, simplistic and patronising. It can lead to psychologists and technocrats declaring, 'we the experts have discovered the scientific formula for flourishing. Now you, the masses, should heed this proven formula, pull your socks up, and get happy' (or resilient, mindful, gritty, or whatever is this year's emotional goal). There are several problems with this attitude.

Firstly, can scientific experts really 'prove' a particular philosophy of the good life is true and valid for everyone? Can science replace religion and moral philosophy? The sociologist Max Weber scoffed at this idea. In his 1917 lecture 'Science as a Vocation', Weber insisted that science ‘is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the

contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.' Who, he asked, believes that science leads to happiness, 'aside from a few big children in university chairs or editorial offices' and insisted that:

> only a prophet or a saviour can give the answer [to the meaning of life]. If there is no such man, or if his message is no longer believed in, then you will certainly not compel him to appear on this earth by having thousands of professors, as privileged hirelings of the state, attempt as petty prophets in their lecture-rooms to take over his role.
>
> (Weber, 1991, p. 143).

One might be able to measure how happy a person feels from moment to moment (even here there are linguistic challenges regarding people's varying definitions). But what makes people happy is not necessarily good. As the Marquis de Sade pointed out, some people take the greatest happiness in cruelty and the suffering of others (De Sade, 2006). Others take the greatest happiness in morphine. Should the government simply hand out the painkillers?

Martin Seligman appears to take a more Aristotelian and pluralist approach to happiness. He says he is more interested in *eudaimonia* or flourishing than happiness (Seligman, 2011), He suggests that flourishing has different constituents, which he sums up in the acronym PERMA - Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement. Different individuals may focus on different aspects of the PERMA formula. Yet he still insists that empirical science can accurately quantify and measure all these aspects of flourishing. He ignores Aristotle's warning that the educated man should 'look for precision in things only so far as the nature of the subject admits' (Nichomachean Ethics, Book 1, chapter 1). Can science quantify and measure the meaning of a person's life, or their achievements? Can it quantify their virtue? You can ask for people's self-assessment of their moral value, but they might be wrong. As the Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump declared in

a 60 Minutes interview in 2016: 'I think I'm much more humble than you would understand.' Should we take him at his word?

The politics of wellbeing dispenses with God, but places huge faith in science, statistical measurements, and in the power of questionnaires to delve into a person's soul. For example, the US Army's resilience training programme claims to measure a person's emotional, social and even spiritual fitness with a set of simplistic questions, which is then quantified in a number. Likewise, KIPP charter schools measure children's character and grit to give them a 'character score card'. The Christian confessional has been replaced by the psychometric test. Who really believes you can scientifically measure a person's spiritual value and sum it up with a number, besides Scientologists?

Seligman himself has admitted that Osama bin Laden would probably have scored high on PERMA (Evans, 2011b): the former leader of Al-Qaeda would probably score high on positive emotion, high on engagement, have strong relationships, a deep sense of meaning, and a profound sense of personal achievement. What he did not have was a good ethical compass. This highlights the limits of an overly-Positivist science of flourishing: you need practical moral reasoning, what Aristotle called *phronesis*, to guide your everyday decisions. That is why the good life can never be reduced to a science, or set of instrumental techniques, despite Seligman's claims. Practical moral reasoning shows us there is not a precise formula for flourishing that holds true for all people at all times - life is messy, tragic, circumstances change, priorities change. The risk of the attempt to mould character - whether in a school, an organisation, or an entire society - is that it degenerates into mindless conformism to a rigid and inflexible dogma. There is no room for discussion, rebellion, creativity and experiment. As John Stuart Mill wrote, 'the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of wellbeing' (Mill, 1859, chapter 3).

Action for Happiness, for example, has an eight-week wellbeing course called Exploring What Matters, in which small groups hear videos by Positive Psychology experts, and then have a discussion. It was inspired by Alpha, the 10-week charismatic Christianity course, which also features expert talks followed by small-group discussions (Evans 2013c). The Explaining What Matters'

website says: 'There are no single right answers to these questions and all constructive perspectives are welcome.' But I put it to Lord Layard that, in fact, the course *does* think there are 'right answers' – that is the whole premise of Positive Psychology. He agreed that the course is Utilitarian, it suggests happiness is the goal of life, and science helps us to get there. You can arrive at any philosophy you want, as long as it is Utilitarian. This is just as dogmatic as the Alpha course, where the answer is always Jesus.

I am fairly sure that if I was at Wellington College's wellbeing class and was force-fed its '10-point wellbeing programme', I would have done as much as I could to disrupt the class. And yet, perhaps paradoxically, I also wish I had been given more guidance in how to take care of my mind and emotions when I was at school and university. When I became mentally ill at the age of 18, I was terrified and ashamed of what was happening to me. My university was no help whatsoever; higher education was not designed to teach people any wisdom about their inner lives. When I finally found help through CBT and Stoicism in my twenties, I could not understand why this wisdom was not better known and why there was no mention of it in my 21 years of education.

Is there a way to teach the good life in schools, universities and organisations, without being illiberal, scientistic and patronising? I suggest we need to take a pluralist approach, recognizing there are several different philosophies of the good life, with equally valid but competing ideas about the meaning and goal of life. What I have tried to do in the wellbeing workshops I have taught in schools, charities, companies, prisons and elsewhere is to embrace a two-step approach. Firstly, to teach some of the evidence-based techniques we can use to transform our emotions, techniques such as CBT or mindfulness. Secondly, to offer a space for people to discuss different models of flourishing (Platonic, Epicurean, Buddhist and so on), leaving them free to make up their own minds about the meaning of life. People do not want to just listen to the 'sage on the stage', they want to share their own wisdom, and hear from other people in the group. They want the freedom to disagree. The process of group

discussion is itself cathartic and bonding.[2] But I do not know how significant such small-scale group discussions can be to national policy. Ethical education works best in small groups, not in national policy interventions. The bigger the intervention, the more likely it will be a crude, intrusive, automated and ultimately pointless exercise in box ticking.

The legacy of the politics of wellbeing

At the time of writing (October 2016), having followed the politics of wellbeing for a decade, I wonder if the movement has had its moment in the sun. The electorate seems to be less focused on national wellbeing measurements, and more focused on other statistics - particularly immigration figures. Aristotle warned that if a society becomes too unequal, too diverse or too socially divided, a politics of the common good would become impossible. Perhaps we are at such a moment; the centre-ground of politics seems to be splintering, to the benefit of the far-left and far-right. Nationalist movements such as the alt-right in the US or UKIP in the UK show the extent to which populism can guide people's raw emotions, just as Plato warned in *The Republic*. The rhetoric and science of wellbeing has tended to be used to promote a progressive, liberal agenda, but it could be used for a more xenophobic agenda - some wellbeing studies show that the more ethnically diverse a community is, the lower the levels of trust in that community (Putnam, 2007). The happiest country in Europe, Denmark, has one of the lowest levels of immigration. Bhutan seems to have maintained its high level of Gross National Happiness partly by exporting Nepali minorities into refugee camps (Dutt, 2013). I wonder if historians will look back on the politics of wellbeing as two decades of technocratic optimism before a century of disruption through climate change and mass migration. Technocrats tried to introduce a more emotional, 'touchy-feely' type of politics. But we are now swamped in a politics of more violent emotions - fear, anger, disgust, utopian hope, fanaticism, ecstasy. Wellbeing policy-makers like Lord Layard insisted governments should take citizens' feelings seriously and use

[2] You can read my report about an AHRC-funded trial of my Philosophies for Life course, which I ran in a prison, a mental health charity, and a rugby club, here: https://www.scribd.com/document/229504007/Philosophies-for-Life-Final-Report

them as a guide to policy. But what if the electorate's feelings lead them to xenophobic and self-destructive voting decisions?

Still, it is likely that something will survive of the politics of wellbeing. The most obvious legacy, it seems to me, is the increased emphasis on mental health in public policy. Look at the period 2010 to 2016 in British politics. Nick Clegg, former leader of the Liberal Democrats and Deputy Prime Minister, made mental health policy a central focus of his leadership (Clegg, 2016). One of the first speeches that Ed Miliband gave as leader of the Labour party in 2012 was on mental health (Miliband, 2012). His successor, Jeremy Corbyn even briefly created a new shadow Cabinet post in 2015 - Minister for Mental Health (Stone, 2015). When Prince William and Prince Harry looked for a public cause to champion, they turned to mental health (Brennan, 2016). Two decades ago, mental health barely registered on the public policy radar, now it is right up at the top of the agenda. Likewise in media coverage, where 'there has been a seismic shift from mental illness being barely mentioned…to being everywhere' (Sykes, 2016). However, the rhetoric is still not backed up by funding - the campaign to get 'parity of esteem' between mental and physical health services still has a long way to go.

Another legacy of the politics of wellbeing might be in higher education. Ironically, considering the movement owes a lot to academic philosophers and psychologists, the politics of wellbeing has had little effect on what is taught at universities. Most wellbeing research centres at British universities do not offer practical courses in wellbeing to their own staff or students. Universities do have counselling services, but they are completely separate from academic teaching or research. They are a place students go when they are ill, rather than a place where all young adults can learn something about how to 'take care for the improvement of the soul' (as Socrates describes his mission in his Apology). Learning about the psyche and how to guide it to flourishing should be at the centre of student learning; not something you only consider if you break down. Likewise, academic and staff anxiety and stress levels are high, yet there is little sense that universities' own wellbeing research could help their staff. If university HR departments do anything at all for staff

wellbeing (most do very little), it is outsourced to consultants. Why this disconnect between the search for academic excellence and the search for flourishing?

Anthony Seldon, co-founder of Action for Happiness and now vice-chancellor at Buckingham University, recently called for the development of 'positive universities', with proposed measures including free courses on mindfulness or resilience for first-year undergraduates (Seldon, 2015b). I imagine many academics shuddered, but I heartily support this Neo-Aristotelian conception of the university's role, as long as courses in flourishing are pluralist, self-critical and nuanced, rather than banal, conformist, scientistic dogma. There are useful precedents for academic wellbeing centres that combine quality research with practical courses for students and the general public. One precedent is creation of mindfulness centres at universities including Oxford, Exeter, Brown and Virginia, which carry out research into contemplation, while also offering brief mindfulness courses to students, staff and the local population.[3] Another precedent is a research project I have been involved with, called Stoicism Today, working with therapists and classicists. We combine academic research on modern Stoicism with practical wellbeing courses for students and the general public. Several thousand people have taken our free online courses on modern Stoicism, and we have received exceptionally good feedback on how the course has improved people's lives.[4] However, both Stoic and mindfulness courses only teach one philosophy of the good life; they are not pluralist. A useful precedent for a more pluralist course is a freshmen course in flourishing formerly taught at Virginia by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. The course combined ancient wisdom with modern CBT, and taught a variety of different moral philosophies. This the type of wellbeing course I would like to see more of in British universities for undergraduates regardless of their degree, and for any post-docs, staff or members of the public who want to take them. As the Stoic philosopher Seneca put it:

> There is no time for playing around. You have been retained as counsel for the unhappy. You have promised to bring help to the shipwrecked, the imprisoned, the sick, the needy, to those

[3] You can find out about Oxford's public mindfulness courses here: http://www.oxfordmindfulness.org/learn/

[4] You can read the feedback report for the 2015 Stoic Week here: http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2016/03/19/stoic-week-report-part-4-by-tim-lebon/

whose heads are under the poised axe. Where are you deflecting your attention? What are you doing?[5]

[5] The quote, from Seneca's Moral Letters to Lucilius, is quoted in Evans 2012a p. 22

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