Education, time-poverty and well-being

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It is one of the obligations of the state to protect and promote the well-being of its citizens. This applies to education policy as well as other areas like housing and security. In particular, the state – in some form, not necessarily in the shape of a minister of education – has a duty to lay down the broad aims of school education. It is reasonable to expect this, among other things, to benefit all students.

It can do this partly by focusing on basic goods like health, laying down aims (in this instance) in the area of health education. As well as basic goods – those necessary for one’s well-being – there are also the goods in themselves, those valued for their own sake, that constitute this well-being. What these are is disputed. For hedonists, they are all forms of pleasurable experience. Others take them to be the objects of informed preference satisfaction. For yet others, they are not dependent on one’s desires, but objective rather than subjective. Lists of objective goods typically include such things as intimate personal relationships, aesthetic experience of art and nature, and knowledge.

Like many others, I see problems in the subjective position. Nozick’s (1974: 42-3) ‘experience machine’ makes hedonism problematic, given that someone with only thoughts and feelings associated with activities, but not the activities themselves, can scarcely be said to be flourishing. The informed desire-satisfaction view has the perverse consequence that a person’s well-being is enhanced if they get the retirement they have always wanted, even though it disappoints. In any case, the fact that someone satisfies a want, even an informed one, is not enough to show that they are engaging in something of value. Rawls’s (1971: 432) example of the man who wants above all to count blades of grass in a city park brings this out.

Considerations like these suggest some kind of objective view of well-being. I will explore this shortly, but first need to keep in view its bearings for education. Suppose we find good reasons why engaging in the items mentioned – intimate relationships, aesthetic experience and pursuing knowledge – enhances one’s well-being. (Nothing hangs on the examples. We could talk more abstractly about items A, B, C...). There is no good reason why everyone’s welfare has to depend on engaging in all these pursuits. In a society like our own that values personal autonomy, it would be enough if people engaged in those that suited them.

This supports a familiar account of a school’s aims. It should induct students into a wide range of objective goods and encourage them to follow up in later life those that attract them. There are other legitimate aims – civic or vocational, for instance, but here I focus only on the student’s own good. Given this, it is clearly important to try to determine the (objective) constituents of personal well-being.

**Lists of objective goods**

What guidance comes from philosophers’ accounts of objective goods? Here is an abbreviated survey:
There is not a hundred per cent overlap by any means, but certain items often recur, especially close personal relationships/friendship, knowledge/understanding, aesthetic activities, and pleasure/enjoyment. Pleasure is here one item in an array of possible objective goods, not the only good as in hedonism.

Success/accomplishment is also in several lists. I mention it separately, because it is doubtful whether any of the philosophers who include it would think of it as a specific source of well-being on a par with friendship, for instance, or aesthetic activity. It is odd to label it as one item among others, for not every kind of success – at ear-wiggling? – promotes well-being. The philosophers who include it may be like Raz, who sees well-being in general as involving successful engagement in worthwhile pursuits. Writing poetry that totally fails does not forward one’s flourishing.

Practical rationality, too, occurs on lists more than once, as does virtue/moral goodness. The former is, again, a pervasive and necessary feature of personal well-being, not an itemized component of it. Insofar as the above list is of intrinsically valuable goods, one might quibble that practical rationality is a necessary enabler of engagement in such goods rather than one such good in itself. But against this is the Aristotelian insight that the fact that a good – a courageous disposition, for instance – is enabling does not rule it out as also valuable in itself.

Assuming ‘moral goodness’ is synonymous with ‘virtue’, there are well-known problems about seeing it as conducive to or a constituent feature of personal well-being. (Cannot a tyrant live a flourishing life?) On the other hand, if
friendship and other cooperative goods are among a person’s intrinsic well-being goods, it is hard to see how they can fail to bring moral goodness with them.

Can we adopt a Razian perspective not only on success, but also on pleasure/enjoyment? He requires that engagement in a worthwhile pursuit be ‘wholehearted’. If this is partly to be understood hedonically, would pleasure have to yield its possible place as a separately itemised good? Or could one imagine wholehearted immersion of an agonized sort, as in caricatures of Wittgenstein? Contra Raz, can pleasures not connected with active engagement contribute to well-being – unexpectedly enjoying a delicious cooking smell, perhaps?

Raz unlike Griffin does not make autonomy a separate item on a list, but sees it as a value prized in a society like our own – where people are encouraged to choose how they are to live – but not in tradition-directed communities.

Play occurs in two lists. If it covers physical activities like games, this is the only place where bodily pursuits are recognized as intrinsic goods. For the most part the writers go along with Mill in emphasizing ‘mental’ phenomena.

Nussbaum’s list is one that mentions play. I find it somewhat hard, more generally, to pigeonhole her list with the others, since some of her functionings have more to do with necessary conditions of well-being (bodily health, for instance) than with intrinsically worthwhile goods. On the other hand, if we take her list as a whole, it presents a rounded picture of enabling and constitutive features of human well-being that mirrors much of what many of the other philosophers in the list probably have in mind.

**Why the overlap?**

There is considerable overlap in these accounts of objective goods. What can explain this?

They are not ‘objective’ in existing independently of preferences. I do not know what this might mean. Preference-satisfaction theorists may agree, but say that all the overlap shows is that these writers, unlike some other people, have informed desires for such things as the pursuit of knowledge and personal intimacy.

But the philosophers are not expressing their personal preferences. They are not like consumers in a market all broadly agreeing, and *indeedently of each other*, that what they would most like as a television would be a large flat screen set.

There are two differences. Their focus is on values applicable to all, not what would satisfy themselves; and they are not deciding *indeedently* of each other like the TV buyers. They exercise judgments about the nature of well-being from within *a shared tradition* of philosophical thought about the topic.
A reply might be that the TV buyers are no more acting independently than the philosophers. Flat screen sets are in vogue. Consumers are motivated by what they see others buying. They react not solely as individuals but as members of a wider, interconnected group.

This is a fair point, but merely underlines the kind of connectedness among the philosophers. Insofar as consumers are influenced by each other, this is because they are collectively the instruments of those who have produce to sell. The philosophers are no one’s instruments. They are autonomous, independent thinkers, sharing their ideas to test out their soundness.

Their tendency towards convergence gives us some reason to think that such things as intimate relationships, aesthetic and intellectual pursuits, and possibly forms of play are among objectively good ends in societies like our own, given that people choose them autonomously and engage in them successfully and with enjoyment or wholeheartedness.

I stress ‘some reason to think’, bearing in mind that we have been dealing with very few philosophers, and that philosophers opposed to objective lists would disagree. The converging philosophers are also likely to have cultural interests in artistic and intellectual fields and their ‘objective’ lists may, perhaps unconsciously, be biased towards them. More practical activities, that for many are sources of intrinsic delight as well as functional, like gardening or do-it-yourself, are not among them.

**Well-being in historical perspective**

Let us pursue the convergence further. It is not just philosophers who value close relationships, art and learning. In [Raz (2003)](#), influenced by Raz (2003), I discussed the development of attachments to these and other well-being goods over the past few centuries, showing how interest in the arts burgeoned across proliferating genres and sub-genres – a tendency found among other intrinsically valuable goods. The result is that we are now living in a vastly more complex world of well-being goods than our ancestors in the seventeenth century – when the novel, the main genres of music, all kinds of personal, family and collegial relationships, swathes of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines and countless intrinsically worthwhile forms of work were unknown. How closely this development is linked with the accelerating, belief over that period that human life is to be enjoyed for what it is and not as preliminary to eternity, I do not know.

Accompanying this has been a growing higher-order interest in how to tell what makes a pursuit intrinsically worthwhile, or more so than another. In the same article, I discussed Mill’s claim that mental pleasures are higher in value than physical ones because those acquainted with both markedly prefer the former. Whatever one says about its soundness, a condition of being taken seriously in debates about intrinsic valuable pursuits is that one has a broad acquaintance with candidates of many types. Those who know nothing about art, or sport, or lying in the sun are not well placed to judge their role in a flourishing life.
Those who do have a wider involvement, I suggested, ‘must be people who have some knowledge about all these things and who also must have some free time and freedom of spirit in which to do their thinking’. While three centuries ago these were found mainly among the rich, virtually all living today in a country like Britain have ‘been exposed to a huge array of well-being goods, some experienced directly, others via the imagination’. A smaller, but still considerable number, ‘thanks to educational improvements, engage in artistic, intellectual and other pleasures less accessible to others’.

I saw this historical development as reason to doubt the subjective view of a person’s well-being that defines it in terms of how far that person’s informed preferences are met. For what has grown up is a large, if ragged-edged, group of people qualified to make judgments – some acquainted with a wider range of intrinsic goods than others – about the well-being not only of themselves but of people generally. On this view, well-being judgments are still dependent on desires, but no longer on the agent’s. We have instead the shared judgments of an amorphous group of people, with most weight given to the judgments of those with the most comprehensive experience of well-being candidates.

How far we can call these judgments ‘objective’ is moot. We are in the realm of long-term aspiration. Judgments about well-being are more like those about the aesthetic merit of works of art than the soundness of a piece of historical writing, and even more than work in the physical sciences. Taking these three in reverse, the role of sensitivity to empirical or logical fact grows less, and that of individually-differing weighting of values – moral, aesthetic, personal – more.

Where values-weighting comes into the picture, the aspiration towards objectivity is on the way to being met as those judging become more aware of differing value-judgments among them, of their final irreconcilability in some cases, and of the extent to which judgments are based on arguments whose cogency those of other value persuasions acknowledge. We see this in the aesthetic area, where, although there is continuing dispute over the value of many works of art, most critics have come to realize the good reasons behind judgments made from other value positions, as well as the openness of their own judgments to legitimate disagreement. All this suggests that progress towards greater objectivity in value-laden fields like art criticism is partly a function of increasing catholicity, in accepting as legitimate views with which one sometimes radically disagrees.

How does this relate to views about well-being? It offers some hope that the aspiration towards greater objectivity can be met. Philosophers are in a favourable position here, since the aspiration depends on discussion of opposing views and this is the lifeblood of those working in universities. But it can also be a weakness if the debate remains inward-looking, slanted towards shared predilections for intellectual and other high-cultural activities. The more open the discussion to outside views, the more the value of catholicity is likely to be realized.
Time and well-being

Granting the desirability of this openness, their experience of the pursuit of understanding for its own sake that few others have privileges philosophers – on Mill's argument – in assessing well-being candidates. A condition of being able to assess them is having time to do so. Philosophers have more of this than most. In this they are, other duties apart, in a somewhat similar position to the more cultured members of earlier leisured classes. This is one reason why their views should be taken seriously – as should those of writers and others with time to contribute to public debate on these issues.

Time is necessary not only for thinking about well-being, but also, and in more abundance, for engaging in the more time-consuming of its possible components. Among these are the pursuit of understanding and of artistic ends. Philosophers are appointed to universities with time for the former, and their interests often extend to the arts. Given their type of profession, authors, artists and journalists also have more time than most to explore these cultural pursuits.

Close personal relationships also take time to create and depend on time to be enjoyed. Most people, including most philosophers and writers, have experience of these, even though fewer people have the experience of intellectual and aesthetic pursuits that puts academics and writers in a more favourable position to comprehensively assess well-being candidates.

In mentioning time in the above paragraphs, I have in mind fairly long stretches of it. Instances of any candidate well-being component must, of course, take place in time. This is true of eating an ice-cream or even of catching the scent of roses. But it is noteworthy that the three items that most recur on philosophers’ lists are the pursuit of knowledge, aesthetic activities and close relationships, all of which need longish periods of time.

This is significant if we take well-being across a lifetime. In the west we live on average eighty years or longer. In a life rich in well-being, much of that time, infancy and illness excepted, is available in theory for intrinsically worthwhile pursuits.

If absorbed for long periods in worthwhile pursuits requiring extended engagement, you are well placed to lead a life of great fulfilment. Griffiths (1965) throws light on this. For him the essence of the university lies in engagement in certain intrinsically valuable activities – the pursuit of learning in academic disciplines. I do not agree that the university has a unique essence: it is an administrative category atop a hierarchy of post-school institutions, and, in the British context, not sharply differentiated in its aims from a further education college. But what Griffiths writes about activities valuable in themselves is helpful. An early exponent of a point more fully developed by advocates of achievement motivation and ‘flow’, he suggests that the object of such an activity contains a feature he calls ‘reciprocity’ (1965: 190). ‘In acting on it, it bounces back again and one may miss it or it may bump one in the nose; or it may return from an unexpected angle which presents itself as a discovery demanding a new
response’. His claim is that ‘activities are more valuable as these modifications (of consciousness) are richer and capable of indefinite development without mere repetition’. Whether he is right about a scale of value, I do not know. But one of the characteristics of academic pursuits is an apparent inexhaustibility of features that absorb your attention and make you want to explore further. This is why, in a long lifetime in which you have plenty of time to yourself, academic pursuits can be excellent vehicles of well-being.

Griffiths’s focus is academic activities, but his notion of ‘reciprocity’ also applies to the two other favourites on philosophers’ lists, aesthetic pursuits and close relationships. It applies to both the creation and enjoyment of works of art as well as to aesthetic appreciation of nature. Being with one’s long time partner or an old friend can lead to myriad new perspectives of all kinds, on relationships, common interests, a shared past.

Other activities pursued for intrinsic reasons can also be endlessly absorbing: playing or watching sports, chess and other non-physical games, gardening, craft activities, teaching...

Educational aims

I argued earlier that schools’ aims should include equipping students to enjoy self-chosen worthwhile activities throughout their lives. Current official aims statements in England and Wales are in line with this. In 2014 a new overall aim for the National Curriculum appeared (DfE 2014 3.1):

The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.

The reference to ‘the best that has been thought and said’, quoted from Matthew Arnold (1875: x), bears the hallmark of Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education. He is also an advocate of personal autonomy, saying of teachers in 2013 that they ‘give children the tools by which they can become the authors of their own life story and builders of a better world’.2

The Arnoldian theme continued into the Conservative government elected in 2015. Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister, said in July of that year that ‘education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it’s an essential preparation for adult life’.3 The second of these is about ‘introducing (the next generation) to the best that has been thought and said, and instilling in them a love of knowledge and culture for their own sake’. Schools must teach pupils the ‘fundamental principles’ of core subjects in a way that will enable them to read around the subject for leisure as adults.4 ‘That’s the purpose of education in my judgement, in every subject. Can you read a geography book after you leave school, can you read further history books by famous historians after you leave school? The purpose of school is to provide that grounding to indulge and read around those subjects as you go through adult life.’
British government interest in ‘cultural’ aims raises a number of issues of more global relevance:

[1] The idea of people pursuing academic activities in their leisure time, if they want to, is fine. Curling up with a geography book would not be my choice, but the notion of everyone having the leisure to pursue worthwhile activities of all sorts is appealing. Policy-makers should avoid making the spectrum of their intrinsically valuable pursuits too narrow. Gove and Gibb seem to confine these mainly to forms of knowledge as well as literature. But our earlier discussion of objective lists spoke in favour of a more catholic stance. Most philosophers also included close personal relationships, and some such things as play and love of beauty in art or nature. The earlier argument also suggested extending the range to include practical activities like gardening, craft activities and teaching.

Some may object that many of these additions are not academic enough for a school’s programme. But this assumes that schools should only be concerned with academic matters. If the educational aim under discussion is to equip students to engage in intrinsically valuable pursuits throughout their life, there is no reason to trim these to the preferences of an Arnold devotee.

Close personal relationships may still present a problem: surely schools should not be inducting students into intimate friendships and erotic relationships? Perhaps so. But this does not mean schools cannot open their eyes, via literature, discussion and other vehicles, to the contribution these can make to people’s well-being.

There is a strong case, therefore, for catholicity. A narrow focus on academic goods alone can be harmful. Students eager to learn tend to trust their teachers to know what is good for them and lead them in a beneficent direction. They are let down if these teachers are blinkered in their vision.

[2] The second issue is about how schools engage students in intrinsically valuable pursuits. In England and Wales this is linked to high stakes examinations. The British government steers schools towards its preferred subjects by making their league table positions dependent on good GCSE results in English, maths, science, a foreign language and either history or geography. This associates the pursuit of knowledge dangerously closely with exam success. Given that the aim in question has a child’s whole future in mind, schools should be developing a love of history, science, etc. for their own sakes, encouraging students to explore deeper layers of understanding. This is not incompatible with exam preparation, but pressures on schools for students to do well in them, as well as pressures on exam boards to make their marking as objective as possible in the interests of fairness, work in an opposite direction.

This objectivity requirement privileges items high on inter-examiner reliability like those asking for factual knowledge. The more an item depends on interpretation or value-judgments – like a deeper understanding of historical facts, or critical judgment about a novel – the more markers are likely to disagree. Teachers are also often tempted, in the interests of their students, to ‘teach to the test’. Preparing for an examination is always stressful, especially in high-stakes testing. It is hard to see how intensifying students’ anxiety about this and its instrumental consequences is compatible with deepening a wholehearted
absorption in pursuing knowledge for its own sake. If love of an activity is what is wanted, there is every reason for detaching it from high stakes examinations.

**School education, social reform and personal time**

[3] The third issue concerns personal time. We have seen that Gibb’s main aim, following Gove, is about ‘introducing (the next generation) to the best that has been thought and said, and instilling in them a love of knowledge and culture for their own sake’. This has implications for students’ use of time both at school and throughout life. We have seen that absorption in such things as history, science or literature is time-consuming. At school, time for developing a love of such activities is limited by the utilitarian demands of examinations, as well as by the bell. Post-school, prospects for most are often slim. Some will be drawn towards occupations like university or school teaching, or work in the arts and in the media, hoping to spread their intellectual or artistic wings in their job; others, towards work that will give them financial independence by thirty. Those who succeed may attain the Gove-Gibb ideal, but not all by any means will succeed; and those who go for employment rather than independence may be disheartened by its routine demands.

This leaves the great bulk of the working population in jobs without space for intellectual and artistic pursuits. If paid employment took only a few hours a week, those in work would be able to follow cultural pursuits in their ample free time. But this is far from the case, especially in the UK, where people spend longer in full-time work than in most European countries. This applies not only to those in the least sought after jobs, since executives sometimes work longer hours than they need to so as to better their chances of promotion. But at least their work is usually interesting. It is harder for the millions in lower-paid, often more tiring, typically more boring jobs whose hours, including overtime, are longest of all.

When education ministers enthuse over the intrinsic delights of reading a history book or a good novel in one’s free time as a rationale for their Arnoldian curriculum, I wonder whether they take the brute reality of most people’s daily lives into account. Their standpoint is more reminiscent of one of the zaniest of the Monty Python sketches, where several Welsh coal miners deep underground go at it hammer and tongs about eighteenth century history and Greek classical architecture.

The ministers’ stance assumes, in any case, that schools will be successful in instilling a love of science or literature into every pupil. But again reality is different. Even many of those who do well at exams are only too glad once their papers are over to abandon forever the maths or foreign languages on which they have worked so hard. Those with poor exam results are even less likely to find joy in higher culture.

The discussion so far in [3] has been confined to the intellectual/cultural goods that education ministers have made central. As suggested, there is a case for adopting a more inclusive perspective on intrinsic goods. But adding in close personal relationships and things like gardening, playing games or walking in the country only exacerbates the problem. All these pursuits depend on having ample time at one’s disposal; it is this, in our time-poor world, that so many lack.
What might be a way forward? What kinds of intrinsic pursuits are available to those who are both too time-poor and in very many cases too lacking in prerequisite attainments to engage in the cultural pursuits our ministers prize? Many people spend much of their sparse leisure in interactions with close friends and family, or in recreational activities with Griffiths’s ‘reciprocity’. These could well occupy them for longer stretches, if they had the time. Excluding these, they are often left with pleasurable experiences low in reciprocity: watching TV shows, listening to music, eating take-away meals, keeping in touch with social media, looking through magazines, going round the shops.

These forms of popular entertainment may or may not be intrinsically valuable: if objective goods are restricted to engagement in activities, the more passive of them will be ruled out; but if pleasurable experience tout court is a criterion, all of them qualify. Although they lack reciprocity, many of them make up for this in excitement, glamour or suspense. Television and radio shows are particularly suspenseful: sporting competitions leave viewers and listeners wondering if a tennis player will win her next grand slam; soaps have cliff-hangers; news programmes flag upcoming verdicts in child abuse trials.

Forms of popular entertainment like these are packaged in small units and suit those with little free time; they are undemanding and it is easy to finish one and pass on to another; they are closely associated with celebrity and, especially, with advertising. More generally, they are such as to allow commercial and political forces to shape the free time people have, across both the days of the week and the months of the year. Regular TV shows are in the first category, the annual calendar both of sporting events and of festivals, birthdays, national holidays and days devoted to mothers and other relatives, the second.

Our time-poor age lends itself to a life-style of this kind. It can be defended as making people’s lives more fulfilling not only on a hedonist theory of well-being, but also on an informed desire-satisfaction view. Channels of information of all sorts give people a good idea, often in micro-detail, of the various options open to them. They are free and encouraged to choose among all these pleasures. On the other hand, the more the scene is being managed for them by salespeople, the less they are autonomous shapers of their destinies and the more in thrall to powerful forces keeping them in an endless cycle of excited suspense and yearning followed by consummation.

I still do not wish to deny all intrinsic value to this way of living. Its hedonic aspects may well make it better than a slave’s life of toil. But at the very least it is a faute-de-mieux, a product of time poverty. If the majority had more time to themselves and a different kind of education, their lives could be far more fulfilling.

It is not enough to think of educational reforms on their own. However rich the school’s provision becomes for a life of personal well-being, opportunities for a flourishing life will be slim if most people work the hours they do now. Here as elsewhere, educational reform has to be premised on reforms in wider society.

In 1930 John Maynard Keynes envisaged a world a hundred years thence in which people had to work no more than about twelve or fifteen hours a week. Around the same time, Bertrand Russell (1935: ch.1) argued for limiting work to
a compulsory four-hour day. Both wrote in the tradition of earlier social reformers pressing for on-going reductions in the working week. This way of thinking, which remained mainstream in progressive British circles until after the second world war, has given way for decades to resigned acceptance of a long-hours culture.

This is advantageous to employers, but not, for the most part, to employees. This paper is not the place to examine alternatives that give the latter more time. This would open up large issues about whether economic growth should remain a political priority or give way to a vision of a society with less emphasis on production and consumption and more on a better life for all.

School reform would thus have to take place pari passu with wider social changes. The aim of equipping all students for a flourishing life would find its place within a wider scheme, including also civic, vocational and moral objectives. If it is to be properly pursued, sensible means of doing so need to be in place. This would mean rejecting the current stranglehold that tests and exams have over the school curriculum. It would mean, among other things, introducing students to a catholic array of intrinsic goods among which to make autonomous choices throughout their lives.

Some indication of how this might work is to be found in . But the ideas in that book will have to stay pipe dreams unless harnessed to wider notions of social reform that free people to lead lives more of their own. The prospects for realising these seem poor if Thomas Piketty (2014, chs. 11, 12) is right in his claim that the post-war movement towards greater equality in countries like the UK and France has now gone into reverse and that we are reverting to the social structures of the late nineteenth century. But is this too pessimistic?

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Notes

1 For a defence of hedonism in face of the ‘experience machine’ problem, see Crisp (2006, pp 117-125).
4 https://www.tes.co.uk/news/school-news/breaking-news/schools-minister-purpose-education-understand-academic-texts-and
5 http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/dec/08/europe-working-hours
6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDmmeJ0GKXY
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