Happiness and wellbeing

Happiness: The greatest gift that we possess?

Do we have a right to happiness? Long ago, Americans placed the pursuit of happiness in their constitution as ‘an inalienable human right’ alongside life and liberty. Today governments, economists and social scientists are working to discover the conditions needed to create happiness and how to foster it in the wider population. In Bhutan for instance – the Himalayan kingdom said to be one of the happiest places in the world – the Government prioritises national happiness over economic targets.

The facts

Defining happiness is crucial and has always proved to be difficult, even though it is what people want for themselves and those they love.

Ancient Greek philosophers saw happiness as being linked to living a good and ethical life. Aristotle declared it to be the meaning and purpose of life, and for the Enlightenment Philosopher Jeremy Bentham it was ‘the greatest good’.

The major religions see true happiness as intimately connected to the divine. Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount outlined the virtues necessary to inherit the kingdom of God – and thus be eternally happy. Islam also defines happiness as submission to God and obedience to the faith.

Today many young people see happiness in more immediately tangible terms, with fame and fortune as shortcuts to bliss. This is despite the deep unhappiness which was visible at the heart of iconic lives such as Marilyn Monroe, Curt Cobain, Anna Nicole Smith or Heath Ledger.

The idea that happiness can be measured and that governments should set targets and programmes to increase it, is relatively new. The subject ‘Economics of Happiness’ now exists, and research into wellbeing is an expanding discipline; which although remaining controversial, is gradually gaining acceptance.

France aims to influence global thinking with its 2009 report on social progress produced by a commission headed by Nobel-prize winning economist Professor Joseph Stiglitz. This report sets out ways to ensure that governments take full account of their citizens’ happiness and wellbeing, rather than measuring their success only in financial terms.

But the bigger issue is: ‘should we be re-defining our goal as a society?’ Should we be taking lessons from Bhutan and the growing number of voices from the economic community about new concepts of progress that put wellbeing ahead of big pay packets?

Further information

http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/economics/article6788860.ece
www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/jun/24/healthandwellbeing.schools
www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/13/happiness-enlightenment-economics-philosophy
http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2250666

Also, the UK now has a ‘happiness tsar’, Professor Lord Richard Layard. Professor Layard, an economist, says happiness is one of the most fascinating questions in British life today. His interest in happiness began when he discovered that progress was more about the reduction of misery and an increase in the enjoyment of life, rather than simply a measure of income. Measuring happiness remains a challenge, but Professor Layard sees neuroscience as being able to offer a breakthrough with methods for observing it ‘in action’ via brain scans. He now calls for ‘a civilization based on the Greatest Happiness Principle’.

The Office for National Statistics is figuring out how to measure this almost indefinable term. With the increase in consumerism, happiness has observably declined. Psychologists and economists have been gathering evidence for decades showing that, beyond a certain point, rising national wealth stops making the population any happier (named the Easterlin paradox after the economist Richard Easterlin who worked on the question in the 1970s).