WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WELL-EDUCATED?[1]

John White

A common answer to the title question is: being highly competent in a wide range of academic disciplines, as shown by having a large number of good exam results. Is this acceptable?

Why is such high competence taken to be a good thing? Michael Gove has an answer. He sees this as good in itself, and also extrinsically good in that it 'allows individuals to become authors of their own life story' and also 'helps bind society together', thus strengthening our democracy (see: http://www.thersa.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/213021/Gove-speech-to-RSA.pdf)

These aims, especially the extrinsic ones, seem to me acceptable. But I can't see why Gove appears to think the *only* way of attaining them is via the discrete disciplines of the traditional curriculum. If we want to strengthen our democracy, for instance, yes, I suppose someone might be able to make a case for compulsory algebra, or for Gove's new favourite from his speech at the 2010 Conservative Conference: the 'valence-shell repulsion theory'. But much more obvious vehicles might be getting children engaged in useful projects for the local community, or making sure the school is run on non-authoritarian lines and encourages pupils as well as staff to be involved in decision-making.

If we are to take educational aims seriously and not as rhetorical flourishes, we can't begin from the position that the curriculum as we know it is sacrosanct. That has been a difficulty not only with Gove, but also with the policy of the last Labour government. To its credit, this government supplied the National Curriculum with its first sets of overall aims, thus remedying Kenneth Baker's little oversight in 1988, when he brought in a massively complicated

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curriculum and assessment scheme without telling us what it was all for. But although in 2007 Labour introduced aims to do with being successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens, it made it quite clear that all the existing subjects had to stay put.

This won't do. Either you start with large, overall aims and see what more specific aims they point to, without prejudice as to the vehicles – academic or otherwise – by which they may be realized; or you start from subject-specific aims within maths or MFL etc. It is hard to see how you can do both.

The more rational path is the former, i.e. starting with large, overall aims. In education, as in any other practical enterprise like making a chair, you have to start with some idea of where you are going. When making a chair, you don't start with means to ends: gluing pieces of wood together, for instance. You begin with your basic purpose: making something to sit on. In education it's the same. You don't start with *structures* within which learning can take place – modern foreign languages or music as timetabled subjects – but with what schools are *for*.

OK. Let's start here. It's a big subject and I can only take a tiny bite at it. I'll focus on Michael Gove's aim about allowing individuals to become authors of their own life story. This is an aim that well suits the liberal democracy in which we live. We expect people to be autonomous choosers of the major aspects of their lives, not uncritical followers of authority figures.

Underlying this aim is a still more basic one. We are not in the business of bringing children up to be authors of their own horror stories or disaster movies. There is an implicit assumption here that being an autonomous agent will help one to flourish, to lead a life of well-being rather than misery.

And this brings us round to what seems to me to be a central aim of school education, that it should help to equip all pupils for a life of autonomous well-being. I guess few people would dissent from this. But the problem is that

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people have different views about what well-being is; and once we go into specifics on this, all sorts of disagreements may break out.

It would be impossible in a short piece to discuss all the various views there are on human well-being, so I shall have to be brief – especially because I soon want to move back from philosophy to what schools can do in this area. I'll be assuming we are talking about living a flourishing life in *this* world, not about beatitude in some other, eternal world. I'll be distancing myself from conventional views of well-being like those of the ten year olds in a recent survey who thought the best things in the world are 1. Money and getting rich and 2, Being famous. ('God', incidentally, came in at No. 10, just below 'nice food'.)

And I have problems, too, with the belief that our well-being is increased the more we succeed in getting what we most want, given that we have full information about possible alternatives. This is a widely-held view. It makes well-being a subjective matter, dependent on what individuals happen to want. *Your* well-being will be enhanced if you manage to buy that dream house in Hampstead, *mine* if I succeed in making my younger sibling even more envious about how well I'm doing. It is a philosophy of life well suited to the consumer society in which we live. As long as we have, as it were, a more global version of *Which* magazine to guide us, the world is our oyster.

I have various problems with this view. Sometimes, when we get what we most want, we find it disappointing. The longed-for trip up the Amazon turns out to be a nightmare. Has it really, then, made my life more flourishing? Also, is our well-being really increased if we get *whatever* we most want? Even if what we most want is to play slot machines every hour of every day?

The problem about this example is that there is nothing, or very little, *valuable* about it. An alternative view of well-being locates it in a life filled with wholehearted and successful engagement in worthwhile relationships and activities. This seems to me nearer the mark. It is about

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such things as being totally absorbed in a walk in the country, in working in a flower shop, in some mathematical problem. It is about enjoying warm, intimate relationships within the family, or working with others in a school or hospital.

Wholeheartedness comes into well-being, because we would say of a teacher, or mother, or mathematician, or shop worker that they were less than flourishing if they did what they were doing apathetically or if preoccupied by something else. *Success* comes into well-being, because teaching children, however wholeheartedly, is scarcely a plus if none of them is learning.

Who is to say that the examples I have given are of *worthwhile* pursuits, and that endlessly playing slot machines, or wanting people's attention focused on you 24/7, are not at all, or at best only marginally, worthwhile? I think the answer lies largely in our culture. Five hundred years ago, the novel was unknown, so was the symphony, so was a loving marriage based on equality, so was being a clinical psychologist or a librarian. The last few centuries have seen an astonishing proliferation of activities and relationships which people feel make their lives worth living. In some cases, what was not available even to princes 200 years ago is now in the compass of almost everyone. Think of listening to music whenever you want to.

And the proliferation goes on, not only in major categories like novel reading, but also in burgeoning subdivisions of these like reading detective novels, comic novels, romantic novels, and further genres within all these. – Or, to take an example from intimate relationships, we now have traditional marriages, companionate marriages, living as unmarried partners, close friendships, gay partnerships, and other variants. There is widespread and growing consensus that all these add meaning to our lives. Perhaps this is as close as we can get to an objective basis for the worhwhileness of a pursuit. Part of the task of education is to induct young people into this cornucopia of relationships and activities, including work activities, encouraging them,

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as autonomous agents under construction, to choose among them those which suit them best.

There is much more to say about these claims, of course. But let me now say more about the upshot for education.

My main thesis is that if a fulfilling life is built around wholehearted immersion in worthwhile pursuits, a large part of education should be directly habituating pupils into these. This could mean actual experience of an activity or relationships, as in getting children involved in cooperative projects. Or, it could involve experiencing something *imaginatively*. Literature has an enormous role here. It extends far beyond Gove's predilection, expressed at the 2010 Conference, for teaching Dryden and others in his 'great tradition'. Literature – and biography too – can help the reader to experience what it would be like to be in this kind of relationship or that, to undertake different kinds of work or other pursuits.

On this view, schools would be very different from the academic institutions they are now. For several reasons.

First. I should make it clear at the start that I am far from denying, despite calumny to the contrary from the *Daily Mail*, that studying history or chemistry, or any other of the usual subjects, can still play an important part in a pupil's education. In some circumstances schools may find that teaching these subjects neat is the best way of promoting the child's well-being. But if they do so, children will be getting inside these subjects not simply because they are on the timetable, but as far as possible with wholehearted involvement. Whether it is reasonable to expect all pupils to feel such commitment to all the fourteen or fifteen National Curriculum subjects they now have to study is very doubtful. The problem is exacerbated in the last few years of secondary schooling up to 18, since so much of this time for so many students is fraught with the anxieties, the toils, the corner-cuttings and question-spottings that public exams bring with them. How different this prime time in a young person's life could be if wholeheartedness were a major priority!

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Secondly, schools would throw their net out to embrace more than the traditional subjects beloved of Michael Gove. Worthwhile pursuits go so much wider, as we have seen. This is true even in the academic sphere to do with knowledge-acquisition. There is a good case, from a well-being point of view, for ensuring that pupils know about their society. This would seem to point to something like social studies, rather than sticking only to history and geography. There is an equally good case for knowing about one's own and other people's psychology, both through the academic discipline of that name and through a greater immersion in literature than schools usually have time for.

But well-being does not reside only in knowledge acquisition. We can get children involved in cooperative and practical activities of all sorts, including those related to the world of work, inside and outside the school. Since relationships play such a part in virtually everyone's well-being, should not schools, as the gate-openers to a fulfilling life, do more on this front, too? Should they not also attach more priority to encouraging the dispositions we all need in order to flourish – to do, for instance, with the proper regulation of our bodily desires and emotions, with considerateness towards other people, and a host of other personal qualities?

Another point. Schools as we know them are places where you are expected to work hard, at things and at times usually not of your choosing. Just as in traditional protestant culture, unremitting hard work was a sign of grace connected with one's salvation rather than perdition, so the diligence typically demanded in our schools is a sign of grace of a more secular kind, a token that one is on the way to becoming one of life's Successes, and not one of its Failures.

If schools as we might know them are inducting people into a flourishing life, imposed hard work of this sort may well become less salient. Schools are places for learning and not all learning involves work, i.e. intentionally

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generating some kind of end-product. Think of what a pre-school child learns through social interaction, noticing features of the world, imaginative play. Think of what, later on, we can pick up from reading novels and biographies, conversation, discussion, visits to new places. If we are seriously interested in encouraging learning, we could well make much more of non-work activities.

This is not to deny that work, too, can be important for learning. You can't learn to write, or draw, or work out a mathematical proof, without intentionally generating an end product. Work will continue to have an important place in schools in all sorts of ways. But here, too, there could well be a shift of emphasis. Not only could there be less work overall, including homework as well as work at school, but what there is could be less something that a pupil *has* to do, and to do at a time not of his or her choosing, but something which he or she really wants to do, is really committed to. If we want schools to be full of autonomous persons in the making who are wholeheartedly involved in work-related activities like writing essays, solving problems, painting pictures, designing web-pages, or various kinds of cooperative practical projects, then we cannot go on with a system that for 90% of the time *compels* them to work hard at something, whether they want to or not.

I conclude with just one application of what I have been saying. We should rethink the conventional assumption that an undergraduate university course should be full-time at age 18 or 19. Perhaps we could change social norms so that it is usually part-time, made more accessible to more people, and undertaken later? That would reduce the insane pressure that the demands of university entrance at 18 or 19 now put on students at school, a pressure so antipathetic to the ideal of education for autonomous well-being. It would free up those years from 14 or so for pupils to throw themselves into all kinds of worthwhile pursuits – to lose themselves in them. This would be a far cry from the exam-dominated regime they have to suffer at the moment. It would also do something to prevent the

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education system becoming a device for separating Life's Winners from Life's Losers.[2]

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Notes

[1] This article was delivered as a talk to a conference on 9 October 2010 in Hampstead, London, on What does it mean to be well-educated? organised by the King Alfred School Society.

[2] The account of personal well-being given here is indebted to the work of Joseph Raz in such books as *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986), chs. 12, 14; *Ethics in the Public Domain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994), ch. 1, and *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1999), chs. 6, 8, 9. (All Clarendon Press publications).

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