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Flourishing as the Goal of the New Development Paradigm

The discipline of Positive Psychology studies what free people choose when they are not oppressed. These are the elements of “well-being,” and when a nation has them in abundance I say it is “flourishing.”

The old paradigm organized its politics, its knowledge, and its economics around the relief of suffering. But if there is to be a “positive human future,” and not just a “non-negative human future,” we must discover what the elements of well-being are and then learn how to build them.

Well-being has five measurable elements (Flourish, 2011):

- 1) Positive emotion (of which happiness and life satisfaction are aspects)
- 2) Engagement (being in flow, being one with the music)
- 3) Good Relationships
- 4) Meaning and Purpose (belonging to and serving something you believe is bigger than you are)
- 5) Accomplishment, Achievement, and Mastery.

A handy acronym for these five elements is PERMA.

Well-being theory is plural: it is a dashboard theory and not a final-common-path, monistic approach to human flourishing. The first element, positive emotion, is a wholly subjective variable; what you feel is dispositive. Engagement, meaning, relationships and accomplishment, on the other hand, have both subjective and objective components. The upshot of this is that well-being cannot exist just in your own head: well-being is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, engagement, good relationships, and accomplishment.

While I welcome happiness as one goal of the NDP (Layard, 2005), I disagree with the idea that happiness is the end-all of well-being and its best measure. Happiness and life satisfaction are useful subjective measures, and they belong on the dashboard. Truly useful measurement of well-being for public policy will need to be a dashboard of subjective measures of life satisfaction, along with both subjective and objective measures of engagement, meaning, good relationships, and positive accomplishment. The measures must also be about long-term human well-being, not just about ephemeral states.

Measuring and building PERMA will lead to the “new prosperity.” The old form of prosperity, wealth, contributes substantially to life satisfaction, but above the safety net wealth has rapidly diminishing returns on happiness. At the average income levels of the developed world there is a huge disparity between GDP, a measure of wealth, and well-being (Diener and Seligman, 2005). Building more jails, having more automobile accidents, and lawyering more divorces all increase GDP, but they subtract from well-being. Prosperity in the old way of keeping score equals the volume of goods and services utilized. NDP gives the planet a better goal than more GDP and it gives us a better way of keeping score, one that regards wealth only as one means to more well-being.

When nations are poor, at war, in famine, plague, or in civil discord, it is natural that their first concerns should be about containing damage and building defenses. These distressing straits describe most nations through most of human history. Under these conditions GDP has a palpable influence on how well things will turn out. In those few instances when nations are rich, at peace, well-fed, healthy, and in civic harmony, something very different happens. Their eyes turn upward.

Florence of the mid fifteenth century is a beacon. She became very rich by 1450, largely through Medici banking genius. She was at peace, well-fed, healthy, and harmonious—at least relative to her past and to the rest of Europe. She debated what to do with her wealth. The generals proposed conquest. Cosimo the Elder, however, won the day and Florence invested its surplus in beauty. She gave us what two hundred years later was called the Renaissance.

Our Renaissance will be building international well-being.

History, in the hands of the post-modernists, is taught as “one damn thing after another.” I believe the post-modernists are misguided and misguiding. I believe that history is the account of *human progress* and that you have to be blinded by ideology not to see the reality of this progress. Balking, with fits and starts and gut-wrenching downturns, the moral and economic envelope of recorded history is, nevertheless, upward. As a grandchild of the Great Depression and a child of the Holocaust, I am clear-eyed about the terrible obstacles that remain. I am clear-eyed about the fragility of the planet and of prosperity, and I am clear-eyed about the billions of human beings who do not yet enjoy the fruits of human progress. But it cannot be gainsaid that even in the bloodiest of all of our centuries, the human community defeated fascism and communism, we learned how to feed seven billion people, and we created universal education and universal medical care. We raised real purchasing power more than five-fold. We doubled the life span. We began to curb pollution, we began to care for the planet, and we made huge inroads into racial, sexual, and ethnic injustice. Violence decreased markedly (Pinker, 2011). The age of the tyrant is coming to an end and the age of democracy has taken firm root.

These economic, military, and moral victories are civilization’s proud heritage of the 20th century. What gift will the 21st century pass on to its posterity?

This is the promise of the NDP: **Much higher well-being across the entire planet.**

References

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