

# Well-Being White Paper

*Liam Kavanagh & Laurie Parma*

Life Itself Institute



Life Itself

# Executive summary

A true conviction that human well-being is the most important goal would imply revolutionary changes in our lives and our societies. That such deep changes are necessary is also somewhat odd, given that well-being is one of the most basic, longest enduring, and universal goals of mankind. Here we explore what has kept a well-being focus from shaping our private lives, the organizations that we spend our time being part of, or our society at large, and propose ways to reorient ourselves. We first survey both ancient wisdom, current science, and history that form the context for the current well-being movement. We observe that “well-being” is inseparable from the conscious experience of “feeling good” and that the private and inner (subjective) nature of this conscious experience has made public conversations over it very difficult. In order for a well-being orientation to replace a growth orientation, it would be desirable for a consensus to be reached on how well-being is achieved. However, objective measurable concerns, especially income, have tended to dominate over well-being. From here we discuss the move towards a true well-being orientation, which will have to happen as much at a cultural as at an institutional and governmental level. We suggest specific priorities and inquiries that will help the well-being movement to realize its fullest potential.

## 1. Introduction: Well-being, a sudden craze for an ancient goal

The importance of well-being is so self evident to many minds that it seems preposterous to support this idea with scientific evidence. In case you are not one those

people, a survey of [48 countries](#) showed residents of every single country wanted happiness for their children. To other minds, well-being remains somewhat fuzzy because such surveys are simply “an opinion.” The element of “subjectivity” is inescapable in well being; the quality of our inner experience is the ultimate test of well-being. *We might be able to see activity that corresponds to happiness in brain scans but we can only identify this activity with happiness because the subjects tell scientists that they are happy while being scanned.* The only time any government permits anyone to help a person to end their own life is when that person reports subjective experiences of intense and constant pain and anguish, with no hope for change. A lack of negative feelings and many positive feelings are central to any conception of well-being (see section 2.2. below.) Opinions vary on exactly what kind of decisions, goals, and pursuits make one feel well and over what time scale. Our subjective feelings are actually what guide us through a complex and changing set of questions that we must deal with in order to flourish in life. The question of what course we should pursue to find a joyful life will always have a large element of subjectivity, because the choices we face change.

Even those who argue that we should organize our society around production and profits cannot escape well-being. Free-market economists still assume that individuals spend their time maximizing “utility” which actually is defined as subjective positive sensation. Unfortunately it became common practice among economists to assume that positive feelings are determined by consumption and free time: the more an individual consumes, and the more leisure time they have, the more positive feelings they get. From here, it is relatively easy to arrive at the conclusion that prioritizing growth is the same as prioritizing well-being, though nobody can really justify our working hours.

However, when one already has the previously unheard levels of wealth experienced in the contemporary industrial world, this paper<sup>1</sup> shows that additional consumption produces little satisfaction with life overall. The uncertainty that comes with the

---

<sup>1</sup>Stanca, L., Veenhoven, R. Consumption and happiness: an introduction. *Int Rev Econ* 62, 91–99 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12232-015-0236-x>

competition that drives growth has resulted in a more stressed population, and unsurprisingly a social system that is organized around producing more of the things that we already have enough. This does not inspire a sense of meaning and purpose. True well-being requires radical departure from the now-traditional economic model; a thorough embrace of the fact that well-being is distinct from success and money and unfortunately, a messy question that stubbornly resists capture by neat equations.

If we are looking for clean truths, there is none better than that well-being is worth putting first. This assumption may lead us to unusual conclusions; well-being may have more to do with the simplification of our desires rather than the fulfillment of existing desires. To put well-being first, we must finally internalize the truths that formation of deep communities, meaningful lives, healing from trauma, deepening our appreciation of what we already have, and the use of our talents will give us more satisfaction than if all of our incomes doubled or tripled. The need to align our beliefs and actions through conviction is something we'll return to.

## 1.1. Just what is well-being, really?

### 1.1.1. Being well. (And feeling well?)

Precise definitions are elusive in many areas and well-being is no different - there is no accepted, perfect way of capturing the essence of well-being in words. Well-being, happiness, the good life, and utility are all related terms, and are often associated with different strategies for achieving basic needs. To understand the evolution of these related terms, we start with a basic experience, feeling good, and the difficulty of pursuing this experience.

### 1.1.2. The Value of Good Feelings is Obvious, but the Route to Them is Not

The idea that positive feelings are important to a life well lived is ancient and is self-evident to most people. What our life is like as a whole, how it feels to be alive, and how our family, friends, countrymen, fellow humans, and future generations feel about being alive are the most important thing to most of us. To illustrate this, polls of assisted suicide show that we are largely sympathetic to people who want to end their lives because they feel they are doomed to live in pain<sup>2</sup>. We should add though, that in this paper take the widest possible interpretation of good and bad feelings. These are confined to pain and pleasure. For example, we “*feel* that life is meaningless or without purpose” and this feeling is not good, a feeling of meaninglessness can contribute to depression, self-destructive behavior, and suicide<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.1.3. Why Well-being Rather than Happiness? Why Now?

Many similar goals, all having to do with feeling good, are referred to with different terms, and each term for this overarching goal is associated with a different approach. For example, as mentioned, the economist’s utility is simply subjective good feeling, but the word is heavily associated with a strong emphasis on growth and consumption, argued for in terms contemporary economics, using a mathematical calculus which seems surreally precise for the subtle task at hand. The term utility is then shunned by critics of economics, because the approach, not the experience, that it is associated with.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Joachim; Urwin, John W.; Onwuteaka-Philipsen, Bregje D.; Emanuel, Ezekiel J. (5 July 2016). "Attitudes and Practices of Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide in the United States, Canada, and Europe 2016". *JAMA*. JAMA Network. **316** (1): 79–90. doi:10.1001/jama.2016.8499. PMID 27380345.

<sup>3</sup> See here for a short review:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/opinion/sunday/suicide-rate-existential-crisis.html>

Feeling good was more traditionally called “happiness.” The term well-being has become favored, in part because the pursuit of happiness is associated with particular strategies for happiness. Namely, consumerism, and imperatives to “be positive” such as the ones that smiley-faced retail workers operate under.

Writing on well-being has connotations of health, of a sort of sturdy happiness. Seeing robust good feeling as part of (mental) health is appealing in our secular and pluralist society which shies away from being prescriptive about how happiness should be pursued, and tries to accommodate as many values as possible. Well-being has also been sold to consumers and corporations as a means of enhancing productivity enhancing and attracting the best workers. As with any terms that which has acquired a desirable halo (e.g. Green, Organic, Big Data, Mindfulness) many people and products will inevitably attempt to associate themselves with the term. As more tenuous claims about well-being are made, the term will become gradually associated with less desirable things and a new term will probably replace it. However, the basic goal of feeling good will not, however, go away.

Well-being has become a subject of conversation as disillusionment with a common approach to it, consumption and simple pleasure seeking, has been thoroughly enough explored at the mass level. For a few generations in which money and possessions, as well as sex, drugs, and rock’n roll were the “it” things. This has made for experiential acquaintance with limits of such behavior that were beyond the means of past generations, creating space for a mainstream conversation about where true satisfaction comes from. This conversation is augmented by intellectual foundations from mental health and science.

## 1.2 Concepts of Well-being

Over time, well-being has concerned too many thinkers to count. This section covers approaches that are highly influential in the current well-being movement. This includes hedonism, Aristotle's concept of Eudaimonia and associated contemporary scientific notions, Christianity, and the Buddhist approaches which underlie popular mindfulness practices, many strains of counterculture, and contemplative neuroscience. There are still other approaches, and we must apologize to Psychoanalysis, Marxism, some sections enlightenment philosophy, and many others for their light coverage.

### 1.2.1 Hedonism

From the fact that feeling good is desirable follows the ancient and common-sense philosophical idea that we should pursue good feelings, which is often called "hedonism." This name can be confusing, because it is usually associated with shallow pleasure seeking -- which we will refer to as "sensual hedonism." Inconsistent uses of the term hedonism come about for several reasons. Firstly, it is easy to agree that more good feelings are desirable but understanding how to achieve as many good feelings as possible is a puzzle of sublime difficulty. So, what is actually entailed by the "pursuit of happiness" is a subject of some debate. Secondly, some sources of good feeling are not as widely or clearly experienced as others, making it difficult to establish states such as meaningfulness or equanimity and inner peace as worthy of pursuit. Finally, we seem to be convinced only by personal experience that experiences of novelty and consumption are ultimately unsustainable and satisfying, and even after such realizations, we are driven to these behaviors by force of habit. So humans have a drive to act as hedonists, no matter what they believe on a philosophical level.

### 1.2.1.1 The Hedonic Treadmill

It is worth pursuing the last point in detail. Sensual pleasures are an obvious direct and immediately rewarding behavior. But, when we get used a source of pleasure it loses its luster quickly. One important observation, attributed to Siddhartha Gautama (aka the Buddha), is that we think we are attracted to objects, while actually, we are attracted to pleasure. The most exquisite sensual pleasure, basically, comes from consuming new things, and so that in order to repeat experiences of pleasure we need new things leaving the sensual pleasure seeker restless and unsatisfied. This tendency for us to run after pleasure only to inevitably return to a set level, is called the “hedonic treadmill.” No matter how fast we run, we tend to remain in about the same place.

When we consume enough, over time, of a certain item that we “get used to it”, it can difficult to continue to find pleasure in consuming it -- but we will continue to want it. Consumption continues but mainly to temporarily stop the bothersome feeling of craving. In other words we want things, even after we stop liking them. So the treadmill is not one that can simply be stepped off.

### 1.2.1.2 Hedonist Diversity

As we become conscious of the seductive nature of the hedonic treadmill, the conception of what makes us “truly” feel good expands, we may look to our relationships, capacity for appreciating what we have, understanding, or to a broader purpose to find more lasting source of agreeable feelings. Hedonists end up with a great many answers to question of how to pursue happiness. The famous Epicurus, to take one extreme example, is considered a hedonist, but advocated control of one’s desires and even abstention from sex and dwelling in tranquility, which he argued was a pleasure that can be sustained.

So, exercise and a meaningful occupation both seem to help people feel good in the long run, but they aren’t what comes to mind when we think of hedonism. A hedonist may engage in these behaviors after experiences forces them to expand their concept of

pleasure and take not just today's pleasure, but also tomorrow's into consideration. The well-being conversation reflects this perennial conundrum -- it turns on what feels good, and how one can actually manage to feel good, sustainably, over the long run. When forced into expanded consideration, hedonism becomes harder and harder to cleanly differentiate from other more "moral" or even "religious" approaches to well-being. Unfortunately, life is short, and it seems that each generation must spend some time on hedonic treadmill before taking up other approaches to well-being.

### 1.2.1.3 Hedonism in Economics

A final point is that neo-classical economics may be the most influential intellectual tradition that embraces sensual hedonism. In one of the discipline's famous simplifying assumptions, a society's "welfare" (yet another word for subjective quality of life) is typically treated as increasing solely through consumption of goods and leisure time. The drive for "objective" conclusions conflicts with the obvious importance of "utility" (which is subjective) but economists still want to measure utility, somehow. Assuming that utility is driven by the measurable things makes measurement of utility possible -- we just infer it from consumption. Though economists seldom explicitly endorse sensual hedonism, to the extent that they work from these simplifying assumptions, and then make prescriptions based on this work, they are effectively embracing sensual hedonism.

We shouldn't be too hard on economists, as we help maintain this implicit belief in hedonism by acting more like convinced hedonists than we would like to admit. As mentioned consumption hedonistic habits die hard. Part of economists' faith in hedonism, ironically, comes from their faith in human rationality. Because it is assumed that we do what is best to make ourselves happy, prevailing hedonistic behavior is assumed to reflect our rational pursuit of our true preferences. In contrast, traditional perspectives on wisdom almost universally hold that sensible people with a long

enough lifespan would learn to prefer simplicity in material goods, and most people's experience their own behavior as distractable and short-sighted.

### 1.2.2. Eudaimonia

The term Eudaimonia originated with Aristotle, it means "the good life." Aristotle like ancient hedonists, agreed that happiness and pleasure are desirable, but is not considered a hedonist because his answer to living the good life was not to seek pleasure. Rather Aristotle felt that a good life must involve the use of the reasoning abilities unique to humans, which he felt entailed the intentional cultivation of virtues and participation in the public life. Aristotle also held that such a life will ultimately be more enjoyable than the one that we would live by following impulses toward pleasure, arguing that chasing pleasure usually results in misery.

This ancient concept of Eudaimonia was an attractive starting point for the scientists who lead the positive psychology movement. Aristotle challenged the timeless focus on sensual pleasure, and did so by appealing to reason, rather than to divinities or revelations. He also made a systematic attempt to explain specific behavior and intentions that could lead good life, which in his opinion involved cultivating virtues such as courage, temperance, honor, good temper, justice and so on. Positive Psychology has continued like Aristotle on establishing more concrete priorities that may lead to happiness rather than trying to give detailed accounts for pursuing happiness.

### 1.2.3 Positive psychology

Abraham Maslow coined the term 'positive psychology' in 1954 and revived the concept of eudaimonia. His influential hierarchy of needs, a prominent cornerstone of humanistic psychology, is crowned by self-actualisation. Maslow describes self-actualisation as:

*"The desire for self-fulfillment, namely the tendency for him [the individual] to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming."*

In this model, virtue, psychological strength and collective sense of meaning are front and central compared to the self-focused ideas of sensual hedonism.

Maslow's early efforts did not translate into a sustained research program on the good life, instead mainstream psychology focused heavily on the negative aspects of life, such as depression and anxiety. The manual every psychologist in the world owns is the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders).

Between 1887 and 2001, for every 21 research studies related to a negative topic there was only one related to a positive aspect of life. A few researchers tackled topics like creativity, optimism and wisdom but there was no theory or overarching framework uniting them. Particularly after the second world war, given the human crisis and the demands of that period, all available resources were directed towards researching and treating psychological disorders. Though 14 previously incurable diseases can now be treated, the failure to study talent, strength and other positive aspects of life left a gap in the field of psychology. And any science that deals with the fundamental questions of human living is incomplete if it addresses only one part of it.

Martin Seligman, who initiated the current wave of positive psychology, describes it as:

*"The scientific study of optimal human functioning that aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive."*

Seligman has contributed the most recognised and wide spread model of well-being, which posits that flourishing has four elements (originally 5) or pillars: positive emotion (happiness, satisfaction, engagement); meaning; positive relationships; and accomplishment (mastery).

Seligman's model is a great contribution, but not a final answer on how to attain well-being. One criticism is that his pillars of well-being are not clearly either causes of or consequences of well-being, so that this does not amount to a causal scientific theory. Each identified factor may be a source of happiness — having a good marriage makes one more happy, for example. Or they may also be outcomes — happier people are likely to forge satisfying relationships. Other concerns are related to the particulars of individual situations (what is a more meaningful life or a better set of relationships for a particular person), cross-cultural validity, or observations that not all factors need to occur together and originate and evolve differently in time. Still, the basics of the model have been tested in a number of countries, and this research is useful for pointing out that people's reports of their own well-being are driven by things that have not typically been acknowledged in utility functions.

Positive psychology has now reached the mainstream, being discussed routinely by politicians, educators and mental-health professionals. Major themes from positive psychology are applicable to AET's philosophy:

- Finding a path towards optimal human well-being and functioning
- The belief that research has the power to support making the world a better place. Using applied science as a blueprint to translate empirical evidence from the laboratory to the real world.
- The constant process of returning to happiness and well-being, and the community required to keep it alive
- The primacy of wisdom. The cognitive strength, love of learning, and intellectual effort required to use our knowledge to reach insight, stay curious, and strive for the greater perspective

## 1.2.4 “Non-Western” Approaches and Their Convergence with Cognitive Science

If the ancient greek philosophy drove positive psychology, the new wave of contemplative science is inspired by ancient asian philosophy and practices, especially those stemming from Siddhartha Gautama (aka the Buddha.) The most prominent contribution of this tradition in recent years to well being has been its focus on cultivating mindfulness though this is far from the only way in which it differs from Western traditions.

Mindfulness is traditionally described a few ways. One is as a basic feeling -- a quality of consciousness, which scientists would call “qualia” but which is often popularly called an “energy”. It is worth noting that Aristotle’s original concept of *energeiai* encompassed from which our notion of the physical motion and heat. Is a practice focused on attending to the present moment including one’s own thoughts, curiously and

Like the eudaemonia perspective, ancient Buddhist thought attempts to improve on the simple hedonistic advice to pursue good feeling. The Buddhist answer is to learn non-attachment - which can briefly be called not holding on to notions that things must be or will some particular way. Buddhist philosophy<sup>4</sup> holds that suffering results from conflict between incompatible perceptions and thoughts about the way things might be or could be and the way the way things are (an observation confirmed by studies of cognitive dissonance in psychology.) Thus, by simply observing and accepting the way things are, including one’s own mind, suffering is lessened by seeing and accepting the way things are. In the process it is held that we develop more humility, compassion, freedom, less distraction and thus overall well-being. Non-attachment is more like a

---

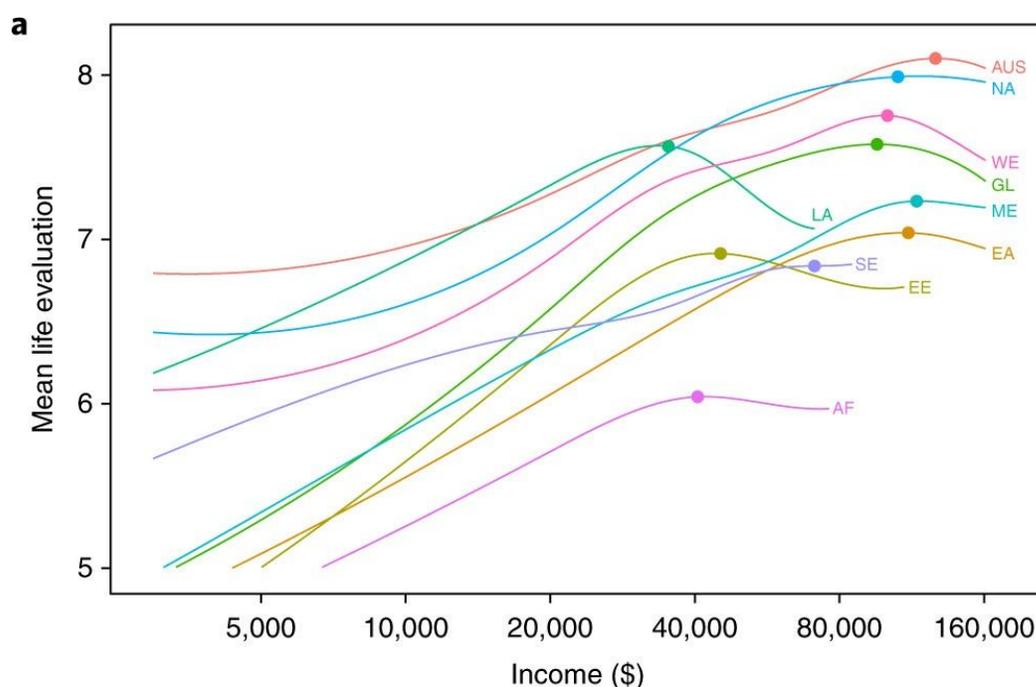
<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Buddhism has a complicated and subtle relationship to the intellect and often practitioners are encouraged to get beyond “merely intellectual” perspectives on the mind which are considered merely supportive. Because of its emphasis on insight beyond the intellect, it is questionable to call Buddhism “a philosophy” but it has a philosophical aspect that has made some impressive observations.

skill, however, and like other ways of being well does not automatically occur because, intellectually, we conclude that non-attachment is useful.

## 2. Well-being does not have a preeminent place in social organization

### 2.1. Obsession with material wealth has crowded out a focus on feeling well.

It is undeniable that money contributes to our happiness. Having the means to find shelter, food and participate in the life of a city and global economy is systematically enabled by money. At first, increasing material wealth does increase happiness (as shown on figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The left vertical axis shows self-reported life satisfaction on a scale ranging from 0-10 where 10 is the highest possible life satisfaction (source Gallup). The horizontal axis represents annual income in dollars (US).

Beyond covering our basic material needs, money also enables us to satisfy a wide range of pleasurable activities, goods and means to raise our social status. To the extent that we value status, then climbing up the social ladder, accessing prestigious jobs, or gaining power in any shape or form become an end rather than a means to happiness. The pursuit of such hedonic pleasures seems, however, to place us on an endless treadmill where satisfaction doesn't necessarily prevail. In a society where people gain satisfaction from being relatively rich, many people will be unhappy.

Maybe even more conflicting in practice is that the pursuit of wealth and associated external signs of success are a constant devious reminder of what we aim to detach from. As long as wealth confers status and respectability wealth matters. Especially if those who value and pursue wealth get more influence. The phenomenon doesn't stop at the individual level, accumulated wealth and influence confer the ability of corporations to move across borders to states that make profits as easy as possible means that well-being is hard to be ambitious about.

To close the loop, it so happens that stimulating others' craving, so that they can be sold goods, happens to be the easiest way to get even richer. And there we have the hedonic and economic treadmill of perpetual growth and pleasure. Adding to this the knowledge of behavioural science and neuromarketing renders the system nearly irresistible (almost as much as it is unsustainable).

The dynamic that emerges from these interactions means that we may often be in denial about the extent to which the two goals of economic growth and well-being are in conflict. If the relationship between the two is indirect, as the above chart suggests, then by constructing a society in which crucial decisions are made to maximize growth, we must be sacrificing well-being. Income security, housing security, education, work hours, vacation time.; the importance of money to people has been shown to negatively affect their life satisfaction.

## 2.2. A societal focus on minimal values of individualism and freedom.

The inner life and development of wisdom in modern pluralistic society falls to either individuals or communities, and spiritual traditions. Where spiritual tradition have lost their sway, it became the job of isolated individuals. While, well-being is exactly what requires wisdom. Wisdom can be thoughts about the choice of wise ends rather than wise means, which involves intuition and holistic thinking. In the meantime there is also a limit to how involved institutions can get in fostering well-being without overstepping on individual freedom. Later sections will detail further how the role of states may be to facilitate well-being rather than providing prescriptive guidance. Another barrier to consider is that wisdom has become almost a dirty word in our society, as have love and spirituality. It is remarkable how much room there is for these words in the public discourse. The body entrusted with caretaker status and collective action in pluralistic society has yet to re-invest those concepts. This is not to harken back to the days of the universal church, but to offer the hypothesis that wisdom must be cultivated, somehow. The matter is to re-allocate those topics and conversations to a new space. Love and wisdom are two words that have famously unusual uses in the contemporary west.

## 3. Mental health statistics show little progress in industrialized countries

### 3.1. Priority is increasing

If well-being science development or its practical application is not fully in motion yet, it is not the case of mental health awareness. Depression, Anxiety, and loneliness are now receiving a greater focus than ever before. Though realising that mental health is as important as physical health is important, this realization may have come about in part because large parts of the world are increasingly stressful and lonely. On a global scale, 1 in 4 people worldwide suffer with a mental health problem each year. More than [300 million people](#) worldwide suffer from depression making it the world's most common cause of disability. Rates of anxiety disorder are not far behind with 260 million souls suffering, and many live with both conditions.

### 3.2. Negative indicators

More attention-grabbing is the fact that the diagnosis of major depression in the U.S. have risen by 33% since 2013, according to US insurer [Blue Cross Blue Shield](#) (BCBS). While the general trend is a global slow decrease, suicide is however rising fast among millennials (up 47%) and adolescents (an increase of 47% for boys and 65% for girls).

In addition to its human cost, the mental health crisis also has resounding economical impact. The global cost of mental health problems is an estimated \$2.5 trillion. Mental health disorders cost the global economy \$1 trillion in lost productivity a year, with depression being the leading cause of ill health and disability, according to the World Health Organization. Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) reports that major depression has a diagnosis rate of 4.4%, affecting more than 9 million commercially insured Americans. Women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with mental

illness (6% versus 3%). People with major depression use healthcare services more than other commercially insured Americans. They also have more than double the usual healthcare costs (\$10,673 compared to \$4,283). Depression and other episodes of mental ill-health are part of life, therefore it is unrealistic to aim to eradicate the age-old phenomenon all together. The burden is only a burden as far as exists in excess, a large part of which can be avoided.

Work seems to be a major contributing factor to mental-ill health. Work related stress is taking its toll on the population at large, from the adverse effect of the anxieties of studying in teens to the pressures of the workplace that are impacting adults. Much of the blame for depression and poor mental health is based on the experiences employees have in US workplaces, according to a 2017 [Mental Health America \(MHA\) study](#) of 17,000 employees across 19 industries. The report points out a lack of employer support, which contributes to higher levels of workplace stress and isolation. In the UK, a 2017 study found that up to 300,000 Britons lose their jobs each year because of mental illnesses, while about 15% of workers have symptoms of existing mental health conditions. The estimated losses to the economy range from £74 billion to £99 billion a year.

### 3.3. Age adjusted suicide rates are increasing in many places.

An extreme effect of mental ill-being is suicide -- close to 800 000 people decide that they would prefer not live any longer every year worldwide, more than in all wars and homicides combined. It is the leading cause of death in men under 45 years of age. Examining suicide is sobering, and useful to behold for a few reasons. It convincingly underlines the folly of focusing on consumption because it happens even in rich countries. Secondly, suicide is easy to define and has been measured in a similar way for quite a long time. In contrast, the recorded cases of other signs of mental health, such as anxiety may have increased because the inner lives of people are more filled

with discomfort, or they may have increased because the our extensive contemporary mental health institutions do a more thorough job of asking people about their inner lives than did they did in the past.

Suicide's existence among rich populations tell us that our levels of consumption, which are outlandish in the wider context of human history, can be so outweighed by inner anguish that people would prefer simply end their materially privileged lives. Though wealth lowers suicide rates, the suspicion that life is not worth living is remarkably resilient, affecting a great number of people in all cultures. 1 million Americans report seriously considering ending their lives every year, which implies that psychological anguish can be such that it makes many wonder if the utility of continued life experience is overall negative. The number one reason why people report considering suicide is a lack of felt meaning, which does typically appear as an entry in utility functions.

Suicide statistics are also useful to focus on because they are measured widely and over long stretches of time, and the criteria for what counts as suicide are exceedingly clear and stable over time, in contrast to the conditions such as depression or general anxiety disorder. Especially notable is the suicide problem of the US, one of the richest countries in the world where suicide rates are increasing among many age groups. It is middle aged white males that kill themselves most often with a suicide rate twice that of any group other than Native Americans.

While suicide is decreasing in worldwide trends, in the USA, suicide mortality increased in the 35–54 years (+62.9%) and in the age group of 55–74 years (+41.5%), while it decreased in the other age categories (see figure 2). The The World Health Organisation (WHO) also adds:



## 4. Society only intervenes in mental crisis

### 4.1. Preventative mental health is mentioned, but not emphasized

The current approach to managing mental ill health consists in expanding access to effective care (e.g. antidepressant, etc) by increasing resources, trained health-care providers, and removing social stigma associated with getting help. Another barrier to effective care is inaccurate assessment. In countries of all income levels, depression goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed and treated with drugs which may not work for a majority. The current line of action is for mental health disorder according to the [department of health-care](#) is currently to:

- Identify earlier and intervene sooner
- Improving the quality and efficiency of current services
  - Provide access treatments faster to stay healthy for longer,
- Promote positive mental health and prevent mental disorder at all ages
- Addressing the social determinants and consequences of mental health problems

There is overall good intent here, but a clear focus on barriers to existing treatments and a focus on damage control and symptom management. The last point -- “addressing the social determinants and consequences of mental health problems” -- is particularly illustrative. It compiles two fundamentally different endeavours: identifying causes and addressing consequences, but is nevertheless welcome because at least it looks outside the individual. Finding root causes does not seem to be the priority and, overall, one does not see a reckoning of the cultural, philosophical and psychological shift necessary to address mental health issues. We should emphasize, here, that we do not mean to fault government officials they work within limits determined by political will -- it may be that as a society, this is as far as the UK has gotten.

## 4.2. A lack of integration and sustainability

What is most striking in the mental-health prevention policies already in place is their disconnection to a larger and more sustainable strategy. The need for prevention is a testimonial that we live at high risks of becoming ill in the first place. Society, as it is organised now, to maximise profits, seems to come in direct conflict with our potential to flourish. The system only cares about well-being insofar as it is not coming in conflict with profit. Considering people as cogs in a money making machine, is unfair to the level of development and intelligence we are at and leaves no space for people to find the deeper meaning they long for.

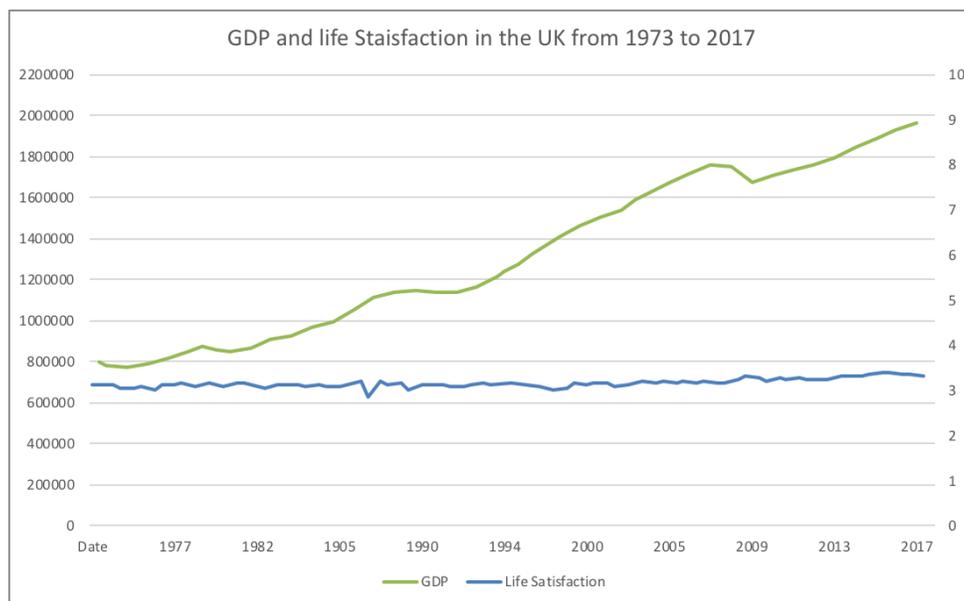
To cope with the high risk system we have created, prevention and the well-being movement) are necessary, and if nothing change they will remain so. What might be a more effective approach than applying a band-aid on a broken system might be to put well-being first. This approach doesn't need to happen to the detriment of profit. On the contrary, a large range of research suggest that happier and more purpose-driven people are more effective, more engaged or more creative in the workplace (ref).

## 5. A well-being orientation

Much has been done, and is still to be done to prioritize well-being in a meaningful way for individuals and social systems. Measuring well-being is hard, and personal and political will to change is still formative, and we lack is an overarching vision that integrates well-being in all we think, feel, and do. Though finding a compass that points to the "true north" of well-being is simply not easy, steps in this direction have been taken. In the remainder of this section we cover current efforts aimed at raising the profile of well-being in society.

## 5.1 Measurement

The simplest way to influence policy is measuring well-being through survey, in theory measurement of levels of well-being should help us assess our direction and influence policy. Results here are illuminating. With unprecedented security with our material needs, a growing scientific understanding of the mind, and a thriving well-being industry that offers solutions from nutrition to social connection, one might think that our well-being should be increasing in leaps and bounds. Surveys also say that we would be wrong -- evidence clearly points-out that many countries have gotten richer but no more satisfied with life in the past 50 years (see figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The right vertical axis shows national average self-reported life satisfaction on a scale ranging from 0-10 where 10 is the highest possible life satisfaction (source [eurobarometer](#)). The left vertical axis represents Gross Domestic Product, chained volume measures, Seasonally adjusted £m (source [National Office of Statistics](#)).

Some have dared to imagine that measurements of well-being could even replace GDP as a measure of social progress and benchmark for government policy. Despite many attempts starting in the 1970s, this has obviously not happened. One reason is because popularity of indices may be more determined by the culture, rather than creating a

culture. As discussed extensively, we, as a culture, give monetary income great importance, this was true long before anybody invented GDP, which is basically the sum of every member of a society's income. If history repeats itself, then popular recognition of the preeminence of well-being will precede official recognition of collective well-being.

Another reason is that measuring well-being is hard because of the subjective nature of well being, which gives rise a variety of measurement approaches. The simplest means would be to assess people's satisfaction on a ten point scale. To ask oneself just how convincing you find this measure, we might do a short thought experiment. Write down your life satisfaction on a ten point scale, and then think of two people, one you feel happier than, and another that you think that is much happier than you. Imagine now that both give the same well-being score as you did. Do your impressions of relative well-being change? Many people do not find others' reports convincing, and so approaches to measuring Gross Domestic well-being have often tried to incorporate other more "objective" or widely visible measurements (such as years of education or infant mortality) or a broader range of subjective measurements. All of these approaches end up being subjective, however, either by measuring opinion or by relying on the index-makers subjective assessment of what objective things matter for well-being.

To be clear, we think these indexes compare favorably with GDP as an indicator of how society is doing, but the foregoing explains why this is not widely recognized. The other part of the explanation is culture.

## 5.2 Top-down policies and their limitations

### 5.2.1. Comprehensive theories of well-being are elusive

The most widely influential theories of well-being in Western countries are those coming out of positive psychology.

While Seligman's pillars of positive emotion, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment and ambition to see 51% of the world's population flourish by 2051 is enticing, there is no overarching consensus on how to create such widespread well-being. A breadth of models and historical debate about well-being exist outside of positive psychology, and no single conception has emerged. As a result, contemporary Western academics seem to "agree to disagree" accepting that numerous conceptions of happiness are in wide circulation such as hedonic happiness, various eudaimonia inspired concepts, and more recently, gaining mainstream respectability - buddhist and "eastern" approaches to well-being.

At least as importantly, Seligman's pillars have primarily been conceived to inform individual actions and choices. However the nature of societies determines the actions available. To take just a few examples, discrimination of various stripes will prevent people from mastering a skill, it is hard to create good relationships when one's friends are moving to other cities.

### 5.2.2. Proscriptions for Well-being Conflict with Individual Liberties

As the well-being movement unfolds across the globe, we have to ensure that adults and children are given the opportunity to challenge any advice given, and embark on their own journey of reflection and pursuit of a fulfilling life. Strong answer to well-being often imply values in life, such as prioritizing relationships and meaning,

humility, concern for others, and moderation of desires. Controversial value judgements are one thing that the government tries to avoid in modern secular societies, as these will greatly upset some part of the electorate. Policies are more effectively made and enacted when they reflect a broad democratic consensus. Societies ultimately decide its own values through experience and cultural exchange.

### **Learning from past mistakes**

In the first attempt to introduce well-being into British education, in 2003, the British government decided to teach emotional wellness through The Every Child Matters policy. British school was given a statutory responsibility to to see that children are 'Safe, Healthy, Enjoying life, have Economic well-being and experience Positive contribution' -- or SHEEP. This well-intentioned, but unfortunate acronym resonates with the principal dangers of the 'well-being movement' by suggesting that the British government wants to raise a nation of docile conformists. The subsequent policy, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), though more attractively named, has still not reached the promises of rising the well-being of students ([Department for education, 2010](#)). One of its major conceptual pitfalls was that it focused heavily on positive feeling rather than aristotelian conceptions of wellbeing rooted in a more purpose and meaning driven philosophy which is now reflected in initiatives such as the award for school best at [instilling character](#).

These examples show that there is some truth in worries that the 'well-being movement' could lead to advice on living being spoon-fed by authority, without allowing space or means to critically consider and challenge that advice. This approach will not create rational, autonomous and empowered citizens, especially if the young are exposed to it. Instead, we have an inherent need to self-actualise and explore for ourselves what is means to be well, in our own terms, within our own context and for our own reasons.

## **Opening-up the wellbeing movement: democratisation & co-creation**

Until the science and larger societal conversation converges on model of well-being robust enough to inform clear action plan, it should not be presented as an objective science offering a comprehensive path to follow. Indeed such a path may never be identified, but in the meantime we can find consensus where it exists, and take a pluralist approach to the many enduring questions about well-being. Which would include painting a whole picture for wellbeing which acknowledges many perspectives on how to live well? Where do they agree, and where do they differ? Although we cannot mandate well being, it is possible to identify areas of consensus across many value systems, and create policies informed by that consensus.

Such approach also respects the realities of democracy. Leaving experts at the top, debating the philosophical ideas of well-being - how can one define it, what moral assumptions are we making, what philosophers have come up with the best answers in the past - while presenting the masses the conclusions as 'facts', does not work in democratic societies that respect individual self-determination. Liberal governments strive to allow individuals to create well-being their own way while securing our freedom from war, crime, disease, want and so on. We also must acknowledge that individuals' informed pursuit of space for serious consideration of well-being, and that the choices left to individuals are determined by policies' effect on economic security, health, and educational options.

That's why AET focuses on creating a dialogue (see our [collective intelligence white paper](#)) inviting deep recognition of the points we can agree on, such as the prime importance of subjective experience, and the importance of community for subjective experience, and considering what is in the way of actions consistent with these. Our main goal is to contribute to the development of a powerful and productive conversation on well-being that acknowledges differences, while not shying away from discussing values.

## 5.3. Methodologies and approaches for well-being in action

Embracing the primacy of well-being means allowing a goal of well-being to pervade all we think, feel and do as much as our obsession for growth currently does. This is obviously massively complicated and intricate, but nevertheless, here we identify a few guiding principles to help inform this broad conversation.

### 5.3.1. Presence, mindfulness and desire simplification

Stepping back and considering well-being with a determined focus the quality of experience leads us a few conclusions straight away. Firstly, being present and feeling alive in the moment is rewarding. What takes us away from this moment to moment presence are often desires, which drive us to think about the future and “what might be” instead of “what is”. Desires are not only driven by, but are the outcome of devotion to sensual pleasures. Desires thus cause us to be dissatisfied with the way things are now. It may be more effective to simplify our desires than to satisfy them.

Revaluing simple skills such as appreciation, might be a key to a simplification of our desires. Culturally, we do not tend to see appreciation as a skill and it may seem odd or patronising to assume we need training on a capacity most consider innate. After all who is to say what's is to be most treasured and judge our capacity to treasure the things we already have. Ample research on gratitude suggest that it may well be the case that training our brain to pay attention and generate gratitude more frequently is a rapid and effective way to boost our well-being. Such research is even pervading the trendiest business culture and generating large sales in “gratitude journals” but in fact it is a very old concept. Historically religious have been in charge of not only valuing gratitude and appreciation but also ritualising it. Gratitude is at the chore of many religious ritual, through the most ubiquitous aspect of prayers for example. We can also

consider that in buddhist tradition, gratitude is not only a ritual but is even the first focus of the day as monks start their day thanking the earth.

### 5.4.1. Understanding and leveraging the inertia of identity

When it comes to achieving goals, there is countless processes and techniques available (to the point of choice paralysis overwhelm), on how to accomplish pretty much anything. From subtle alterations to our communication methods to the straightforward, step-by-step consumption of a scheduled diet, the well-being industry has provided a wide range of options to most areas of self-help. In either cases, while the method may differ in nature, they all share an underlying foundational concept: they suggest a series of changes to some aspects of our behaviours. For example: eat different food or exercise more to accomplish the goal of losing weight.

Nevertheless, unlimited access to internet and countless exercise and diet plans have not eliminated the problem of overweight or violent communication. In other words, knowledge does not equate change. What is most striking is maybe that resistance to change goes hand-in-hand with our conscious awareness of the problem and the necessity for change. Most of us are aware of the dreadful impact of chronic stress or consuming nutrient poor food in the long run, yet we still do it. If we acted rationally, it would take a day for us all to stop, all together, the consumption of harmful additives in food. What are we doing? Why is changing our behaviour so hard? Why is all the information in the world not enough?

Behaviour change is faced with a much tougher daemon than our rational mind: our identity. Behaviours repeated overtime, such as smoking, are likely to become integrated in the identity of a person. When this happens, behavior becomes robust to change because it is so closely linked to central self-views. Resulting in a series of deep held beliefs and thinking such as 'I am a smoker'. To change the associated behaviour a person's entire worldview and self-belief has to change too. In many regards, we are

most often attempting behavioural change backwards: we try to change behaviours before adjusting our views on that behaviour and our identity.

To some extent this can be mapped on top of cognitive dissonance theory. According to cognitive dissonance theory, we experience discomfort (here in the case of behaviour change: resistance) when what we think, feel and how we behave is misaligned. For example, our identity and its attached values will emulate a wide range of congruent thoughts and self-belief that may affect a wider range of behaviours than addressing each attitude towards a single behaviour separately and sequentially. For example, if my thinking about weight management or communication are that I am either 'I don't like healthy food' or 'people just do not understand me' chances are my feeling about adopting new behaviours of healthy eating or changing the way I communicate will be uncomfortable, inappropriate and will likely result in resistance or return to baseline. This explains generational differences in adoption of new technologies: we like what we know and are used to. There will be no resistance to change in children growing up with smartphones, their resistance will lie in giving them up.

Collective well-being and associated behavioral change can then only occur if the new (healthier) behavior become part of the "self" or "collective-self": the person one perceives oneself to be, and the collective he or she belongs to. Therefore, our workplaces will remain stressful, as long as we associate work with overload and unsupported difficulties and as long as our companies' culture will pay into that scheme. As long as we will glorify overwork as a stamp of achievement and stress remains a 'must have' (as strong as a personality trait), we will remain a nation of exhausted adults on the brink of burnout. Beyond the rational and persisting need for relaxation and rest time, as long as the ambition for rest and restoration serves the wrong purpose and perniciously feeds into a deleterious social narrative: we will keep coping instead of thriving.

### 5.4.3. Role of states and institutions

States and institutions are the means by which we get big things done collectively. A great deal of resentment of states has developed as of late Based on the mental health pandemic and the current pitfalls of the solution we currently provide to address it: there is room to expand and reframe the current trajectory of the well-being movement.

If the ideals of positive psychology are truly what we are heading for then we need to make it our measurement target. However with the difficulty researchers and historically philosophers have encountered in agreeing upon one single conception of wellbeing, it is not surprising that we would have difficulty placing wellbeing at the center of our attention and policy of success measurement.

Researching well-being is worthwhile and necessary as well as forecasting it to the best of our ability and using it as the ultimate target indicator of state-success. However, using government policy to disseminate the early positive psychology model as it is at large scale is probably premature. This shouldn't encourage us to disengage from well-being interventions but rather to adopt a higher level engagement (and springboard for reflection and the pursuit of happiness) while more research is undertaken.

Academia has an important role to play. As a response, AET is a well-being focused institute, which bring together leaders in neuroscience, psychology, philosophy and theology, and values at its core cross-disciplinary conferences and debates, the proceedings of which we attempt to make as open and broadly available as possible. By way of which we bridge the gap left where/when these disciplines aren't really talking to each other, which is to the detriment of the well-being movement. With a touch of collective intelligence (see corresponding white paper).

#### 5.4.4. Experimental Mindset

Changes in identity and culture are a more imposing endeavour than temporary interventions at a specific point in time to achieve the goals of collective well-being and happiness. It starts with creating safe spaces where differences can be expressed and difficulties supported. If taking up a well-being practice makes one an outlier, an object of criticism or is perceived as laziness or indulgence, in such conditions, habits will not spread as quickly as it is received with an open mind.

An interesting part of this situation is expectation that well-being practices be backed up by science. Though scientific validation can help well-being practices spread, many of the best well-being practices come from outside of science. For example, yoga and meditation were not invented by scientists, but simply tested by scientists. Before scientific validation these belonged to “alternative” practices . It is also worth noting that scientific validation is not easy but typically takes years and requires skills in experimental design and funding which are not trivial to obtain. Thus formal scientific validation lags behind innovation which is driven more by informal experimentation and intuition.

To have a chance to thrive, well-being policies must be embedded in a welcoming, open-minded and favorable environment. Before addressing behaviours of good health and well-being themselves, it is essential to tackle collective identity and values held about health and wellbeing first. For example the stereotypical “Keep calm and carry on” may not be the best springboard to enable open conversations and acceptance over subjects of emotional ill-health. Yet, such ideas, although, age old and dated, still colour and stain the emotional landscape of a nation.

## 6. Radical Well-Being: Is it Possible?

We must ask ourselves, if we were to organize our society and our private lives around well-being what could the benefits really be? Some relevant scientific evidence comes from cross country comparisons of well-being and the recent wave of contemplative neuroscience which has backed up the effectiveness of mindfulness. It is important to recognize, however, that such evidence is formative and incomplete.

### Cross Country Variation in Well-Being

The most obvious source of evidence that well-being can increase is cross-country comparison. Finnish people are the most satisfied with life, scoring a 7.7 on average on the **Cantril ladder** a common 10 point scale of life satisfaction, compared to a US average 6.8 and an Italian average of 6.0. This might not seem like much, but it is worth noting that the difference in long-term life satisfaction of people who are paralyzed from people with full use of their body is about 1 point on a scale of well-being. Though we hear about the benefits of good long-term relationships, the average difference in life satisfaction between divorced (the lowest relationship category for life satisfaction) and married people is also about 1 point on a ten point scale. Put in this light, cross country differences in life satisfaction among countries in which widespread material well-being has been achieved are enormous. Though more work is needed Cross country studies done by positive psychologists suggest that across all countries, increased material security, the ability to build relationships, put one's talents to their best use, and live a meaningful life explain much of this variation. However, among rich countries, material well being explain relatively little variation in well being. Policies that help us to satisfy other needs are necessary to break the stagnant trend in life satisfaction.

### Contemplation

Mindfulness practice has been shown to achieve about a one-point increase in life satisfaction in the space of eight weeks. These studies of people newly exposed to the practice and cannot show the limits of what is possible. Although “expert meditator” studies have also been done, they are of less scientific interest because it is difficult for rigorous scientific methods to compare expert meditators to the population at large. Rigorous scientific experiments rely on “random assignment” in which initially similar groups of people are placed in different conditions by experimenters, so doing an experiment on long-term meditators would be a long term experiment, and not many people would sign up to be randomly assigned to a mystical tradition.

The best we can do, then is just to look at pre-existing meditators, though this is far from ideal from the scientific standpoint. In a much publicized result, when participants in a neuroscience study were asked to intentionally cultivate a sense of kindness and love, areas of the brain associated with happiness strongly tended to light up. Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, who participated in the study was an outlier. The scores of other participants on a scale of neural activation were between -.3 and .3, while Ricard’s score was a .45. Put in other terms, if other participants' activation levels in regions associated with joy ranged between 1 and 10 during this exercise, neuroscientific measures indicate that Ricard’s would be 12 or 13. This study has drawn headlines and the label “the happiest man in the world” for Ricard. This label is an exaggeration, as there were only 18 participants in the study and Ricard was one of 8 meditators (who tested dramatically “happier” as a group than 10 normal people.) Subsequent studies have shown that Ricard’s scores are not totally unusual among people with a long-standing meditation practice. Ricard himself is eager to point this fact out, because a core Buddhist principle is not to feed one’s own ego.

Trauma

Recent studies of traumatization suggest that in many countries as many as 25% of the population has suffered childhood trauma. Persons who have suffered such trauma show completely different brain connectivity and increased incidence of a large number of a diseases known to affect our well-being. A societal focus on treating the damage that is done in early childhood then stands to increase well-being dramatically, especially when we consider that traumatized people are difficult to interact with, tending to become angry and create dysfunction in their families and workplaces. Not only these individuals' well-being, but that of all the people around them will be improved (Bloom, 2012.)

## Genes

It is sometimes asserted that well-being "is genetic." If our genes determine well-being then what can we do? Fortunately claims that well-being is genetically determined are overblown.

Researchers measure the importance of genes in determining well-being by computing a statistic called "heritability." The simplest way to explain heritability is as the answer to the question: "If twins separated at birth in a given society how well can the second twin's outcome be predicted by looking at the first twin's outcome?" If every pair of twins had the same well being, then for each pair we could perfectly guess the second twin's well-being if we know the first twin's, and in this case, heritability is 1. If a trait is not at all heritable then having knowledge of one twin's well-being does help us guess the other twin's well being at all -- we would guess just as accurately if we just assumed the second twin had average well being. If this were true then the heritability of well-being is then 0.

Estimates of the heritability of well-being come to a figure of about .5 which means if we guess that the second twin has the same well-being as the first, our guess is off by

about half as much as it would be if we just guessed that all of our second twins were average in well-being.<sup>7</sup>

It might seem this is a lot genetic influence number, but what does all of this actually mean for our ability to affect well-being by taking it as our societal priority? For sake of a powerful comparison we can consider that income can also be highly heritable. Some efforts to measure the “heritability” of income place it in the same range as well-being (.5), while other studies in other populations show much lower scores (as low as .3).

It should be noted that incomes have increased dramatically across the Western world despite the high heritability. If high heritability really means that there is little we can do to change a certain factor, then why has income grown? The fact of the matter is that heritability tells us about how similar the outcomes of two genetically similar people will be in the same society, but they have little to say about how much the overall performance of a society can change over time. The heritability of income *really* is, but this is not a question with a real answer. Heritability score depends not just on genes but on the environment. In some societies there are huge differences in environmental factors such as differences in school quality or inheritances, here heritability is low. In some societies environmental differences are small and genetics is the major source in variation in outcomes, so heritability is higher.

A society with low but growing wealth also increases its well-being dramatically as basic needs become covered, and so, like in the west one hundred years ago, in quickly growing societies nowadays well-being is increasing despite the relevance of genetics. The question is whether there are other sources of well-being that can be more fully explored. Cross country variation in rich countries and the effectiveness of therapies.

---

<sup>7</sup> A full explanation of the accuracy of guesses implied by heritability scores between 0 and 1 requires familiarity with statistical concepts such as variance, which we’ve eschewed here for the sake of understandability by a wide audience.

## Political Will

A more important barrier may simply be the political will to support changes to social structures that would allow well-being interests, including, but not limited to economic interests to take center stage. The simultaneous steps that can be taken towards this are creating a real conversation about the primacy of well-being on a more global level, and locally for groups of people to help each other to make well-being the center of their life, while individuals in turn do the best they can in whatever group they are currently part of. The global conversation will help all of the groups and individuals to get better perspectives, while group and individual efforts will in turn inform inspire both each other and the global conversation. The more individuals and groups continue to create the experience of prioritizing well-being, the more they will continue experience its benefits and develop the make the difficult political changes necessary to create societies that are radically devoted to well-being.