



## Happiness and ethics

Happiness is in the news. A conference on happiness was held in Sydney in May, attended by hundreds. Psychologists have discovered happiness, and management consultants are trying to figure out how to bring happiness into organisations. There is much froth and bubble in the discussion about happiness, traversing as it does the ostensible preoccupation of media advertising with our happiness.

Nevertheless, some of the current thinkers on happiness are digging beneath the superficial lust for glittering possessions, money or fame, and suggesting that real happiness has a connection with ethics. Martin Seligman, who has visited Australia several times at the invitation of the Australian Institute of Management, talks about "authentic happiness", and asserts that it rests upon the development of character.

Two speakers at the Sydney Writers' Festival also spoke about happiness in our society. Elizabeth Farrelly, author of a social critique called *Blubberland*, talked about "miswanting". She said that we are facing imminent environmental consequences from our unbridled consumption, but we seem unable, as a society, to curb our desires. At the same time, she observed, depression is rife. The question we must answer is, can we want more wisely?

Richard Watson, author of *Future files*, a vision of what our society might be like in 50 years, said that he was not entirely pessimistic. He accepted the hierarchy of needs that Abraham Maslow formulated. This suggests that as people's basic (physical) needs are fulfilled, they become interested in higher needs such as self-realisation.

Watson asserted that many people are already making that transition, as society makes the satisfaction of basic needs more easily available. He quoted the saying, "The future is already here, it is just not evenly distributed yet". With regard to happiness, Watson's view is that it is important to recognise that it is a by-product of living a worthwhile life. It is not an end in itself. Pursued directly, happiness eludes people.

Farrelly explored the kinds of environments that people create when they seek happiness inappropriately. She is an architect, and abhors the spawning of McMansions in the outer suburbs. She argues that the kind of space we create influences our opportunities for intimacy. The creation of separate living spaces for children, for example, inhibits the

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possibility of family intimacy, and this forms the breeding ground for later personal and social problems among young adults.

Watson also explored intimacy and relationships, from the perspective of the impact of the internet. His view is that our technological environment tempts us to exchange real, face-to-face relationships for the attenuated interactions that occur in virtual worlds and through mobile phones. Although he embraces these tools, for him happiness is anchored in the aliveness of human connections that are not mediated by technology.

The connection that Martin Seligman makes with ethics is that, on the one hand we want to have happiness, pleasure, enjoyment, but on the other hand, we want to **deserve** it. He says this is illustrated by the fact that most people, when offered the hypothetical choice of a drug that gives constant bliss with no associated costs or suffering, say they would refuse it.

Wanting to “deserve” happiness indicates that the human quest for happiness is not really as simplistic as advertisements portray it. Yes, pleasure is good, but human needs are more complex. And this insight opens the door to what it means to live a worthwhile life.

## I got interested

I went to a presentation on positive psychology a few months ago by Dr Suzie Green, from the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney. If I had to sum that up quickly, I would say it was about the positive effects of seeking to live unselfishly. It led me to remember Albert Schweitzer’s definition of ethics:

“In a general sense, ethics is the name we give to our concern for good behaviour. We feel an obligation to consider not only our own personal well-being, but also that of others, and of human society as a whole.”

From that point I went to thinking about virtue ethics, which is a widely popular stream of current philosophy on applied ethics. Suzie Green and Martin Seligman (and the Dalai Lama and a host of others) have a particular perspective on happiness and virtue, and in a quite different field, there are philosophers who happen to have a similar perspective.

I thought it would be interesting to delve into the similarities between these different fields. And the thinking of Albert Schweitzer had to be part of the exploration, because his definition of ethics fits so well in the discussion. There was one other element – Chinese philosophy; in particular, the I Ching. In this philosophy, discussion about virtue and happiness is also prominent.

I ended up producing a paper which I presented at the annual conference of the Australian Association of Professional and Applied Ethics in Brisbane on 10-11 June 2008. It covers a lot of these issues, many of which are quite challenging to popular approaches to ethics, virtue,

success and happiness. For example, it includes a discussion of Schweitzer's view that trying to prove that ethics is somehow positively correlated with success is misconceived.

The paper is called "Ethics and the quest for happiness". It covers (sketchily, of course) the authentic happiness movement, the Dalai Lama's thoughts on ethics and happiness, philosophy and virtue ethics, the philosophy that underlies the I Ching, and Schweitzer's analysis of ethics and optimism and pessimism.

A copy is on the website at [www.ethicsandvalues.com.au](http://www.ethicsandvalues.com.au) (it's the featured article). You are welcome to download it (it's in pdf format and it will be there for a couple of weeks).

If you've got any feedback about it, I'd be happy (!) to hear from you. email [glennpmartin@optusnet.com.au](mailto:glennpmartin@optusnet.com.au).

## Read about the book

I've made a new brochure for my book. You can download it from the website (go to [www.ethicsandvalues.com.au/html/book.html](http://www.ethicsandvalues.com.au/html/book.html)). The brochure gives an outline of the book and what it's about.

The book is suitable as "Recommended reading" for any tertiary course on ethics, whether it's business, management, medical, counselling, education or other. It contains a sound and original approach to practical ethics using human values. It will help anyone who is in danger of getting lost in ethical theories or organisational absence of ethical commitment. If you need to develop a coherent perspective to ethical issues in the workplace, this is a good place to start.

The book says, "Yes, it's possible to live with integrity, even in the workplace where many people believe you have to sell your soul."

## The newsletter

If you like getting the newsletter, send it to someone else. Send it to your friends, your colleagues, your students.

## Quote

Carl Jung:

"As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being."

One of the aspects of my book that has become clearer to me since writing and publishing it is that it presents ethics and the quest for meaning in life as a continuum. Ethics is not the province of the rule-mongers; it is about finding a principle by which to live your life with integrity and power.

## Images

I like to include an image with my newsletter. This photo was taken a couple of weeks ago at Bobbin Head, north of Sydney. It was taken from the mouth of a gully looking out onto the river, looking from dark into light, standing on weathered rock, among water, taking in the living presence of trees and forest. Colour and stillness.



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