‘The unbearable surplus of being human’: Happiness, virtues and the delegitimisation of the negative

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Abstract
The increased governmental focus on happiness since the late 1990s, and particularly since the economic crash of 2008, has been informed predominantly by a conceptualisation of happiness promoted by the field of positive psychology, and adopted and developed in fields such as behavioural economics and more recently in fields such as neuroeducation. Concepts, or traits, associated with feeling happy or satisfied with our lives, such as resilience, are now promoted across both public and private domains as a means to improve our quality of life, our productivity and our attainment. The promotion of this positive psychological notion of happiness in the context of education not only presents these traits as virtues of the productive learning citizen but also effects a delegitimisation of the negative. Analysis of curricula programmes, seen alongside the shift taken towards a focus on the individual as brain, highlights the pedagogical and political implications of this.

KEYWORDS
deleigitimisation, governance, happiness, positive psychology, resilience
INTRODUCTION: HAPPINESS, NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE AND VIRTUES FOR LEARNING

The 2008 global economic crisis accelerated a change in the way governments and transnational organisations framed and strategised growth. Even before this, the economic systems and measures of success that had dominated, in which gross domestic product (GDP) was the accepted metric, were being framed as no longer fit for purpose, either as a measure of societal growth or as a sustainable means to pursue it. The policy rationale for the move away from GDP at a European level was set out in a speech by then European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Policy, Joaquín Almunia, in 2007, who noted that GDP ‘cannot distinguish between activities that have a negative or a positive impact on wellbeing’ and that ‘many studies of affluent countries do not register an increase in happiness in line with wealth’ (Almunia, 2007, p. 2).

Almunia’s statement came in a speech to the ‘Beyond GDP’ conference in Brussels. This ongoing European Commission initiative today describes itself as ‘developing indicators that are as clear and appealing as GDP, but more inclusive of environmental and social aspects of progress’. Arguably, this inclusion of more progressive aspects in the understanding of what constitutes improvement is welcome, given not only the 2008 economic crisis but also the increased acknowledgement of climate emergency, growing inequalities and ongoing struggles for justice and recognition by subordinated groups.

The European focus on updating its measures of growth reflected wider shifts in approach at the level of global governance. The OECD marked the first International Day of Happiness on 20 March 2013. Its presentation of the significance of this, set out on a web page titled ‘Happiness Is…’, lays out the relationship between this auspicious occasion and the shift in policy rationale that followed the global crash:

The economic, financial and social crisis that erupted in 2008 has led people to question the fundamental underpinnings of our societies and how they are governed. The discovery that the preceding boom years, far from benefiting everyone, in fact saw a widening gap between rich and poor in our societies, helped feed the idea that GDP is not an adequate measure of success in modern societies. (https://www.oecd.org/general/focus/happinessis.htm)

The OECD ‘Happiness Is...’ text continues: ‘If our whole system needs rethinking it is essential to know what people actually want to make their lives better in the 21st century.’ The response to the identification of the widening income gap in the first statement reflects wider shifts typical of neoliberal governance, that is, the response is not to address the gap through direct state intervention in the form of welfare support but to appeal to notions of the market and choice in the form of ‘what people want’. This illustrates the well-documented shift from government to governance (see, e.g., Lo, 2017; Rhodes, 1997) that has characterised Western political rationality since the late 1970s, manifest in the ‘rise of “new public management”, national “competitiveness” agendas, privatisations, and outsourcing of public services’ (Davies, 2021, p. 104). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the quickening pace of globalisation and the various freedoms of movement promoted by Europeanisation saw a form of neoliberalism more focused on government, ‘exercised through population’ (Davies, 2021, p. 100)—often referred to in terms of ‘responsibilisation’ (Barry et al., 1996) and seen here in terms of ascertaining ‘what people want’ and subjective measures of well-being—rather than sovereignty, ‘exerted over territory’ (p. 100), to use Foucault’s (2007) distinction.

In the context of ‘digital-first’ or ‘digital by default’ governance (see, e.g., Cabinet Office, 2012), what is made visible is a key component in gauging what people want, and shaping expectations of what is possible, and thereby what is desirable: ‘The Internet has fundamentally changed the way we relate to others, shop and socialise’ and ‘made it easier for people to link up with others with similar interests, whether it be knitting, kite flying or science fiction’ (OECD). In light of this, and particularly in view of economic constraints, how to govern becomes a question again: ‘How can governments respond effectively to what people want in such a tailor-made world?’, the OECD asks. ‘At a time of tight
finances when governments need to make every penny count, it is all the more important to know what people want from life' (OECD).

What follows this in the OECD’s text draws attention to the rationality according to which this idea is pursued: in order to know what people want, we need accurate ways of measuring this. In the OECD’s account of ‘Happiness is...’, ‘this’ is framed as a matter of cognitive activity:

…how do you measure the intangible feelings that exist only inside someone’s head? If you ask someone how healthy they feel, you can test the result with a medical check-up. But if you ask someone if they feel happy, the cross-checking mechanism is a lot more complicated. (OECD)

The idea that feelings are purely cognitive and in need of verification in the absence of direct access establishes a need to verify ‘what people want’ with evidence. The conceptual frameworks of behavioural economics, positive psychology and neuroscience have come together to provide just such ‘cross-checking mechanisms’, as we will see in the ensuing discussion in this article.

The involvement of the expertise of the psy-disciplines in governing societies is by no means new. It reflects the psychologisation of self and society since modernity, characterised by ‘psychological vocabulary and explanatory schemes entering fields which are supposed not to belong to the traditional theoretical and practical terrains of psychology’ (De Vos, 2012, p. 1). For Nikolas Rose, psychology has been constitutive of the contemporary ‘regime of the self’, in Foucault’s terms (1998, p. 22). The specific individual form of modern Western personhood is one in which we understand and relate to ourselves as psychological beings, as psychology provides ‘a particular way of speaking the truth about human beings and acting upon them’ (p. 22). The regime of the self of late neoliberalism has been shaped by particular iterations of the psy-disciplines, as will be discussed: positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), behavioural economics, including ‘nudge theory’ (Layard, 2011; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), and neuroscience (see Allen, 2011, for an illustration of how it has been used in UK policy).

Since ‘happiness’ emerged as a policy focus, for Western economies in particular, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there has been no shortage of critical responses. The title of Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz’s 2019 book Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives captures the overarching theme of the critiques: a culturally pervasive notion of happiness is now promoted by positive psychology, economists, policy makers, educators and entrepreneurs that has reshaped how we understand ourselves and what it means to live a good life. This was typified by the story of Christopher Gardner, portrayed by Will Smith in the film The Pursuit of Happiness: ‘happiness is not a thing as much as a particular kind of person: individualistic, resilient, self-motivated, optimistic, and highly emotionally intelligent’ (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019, p. 3). Such terms are now commonplace in our professional and educational contexts and in how we are addressed by health services and mass media alike. This particular conceptualisation of happiness emerges from the field of positive psychology in particular, and critics have drawn attention to its close affinity to the needs of late neoliberal capitalism. Kingfisher (2013) notes, wryly: ‘it just so happens that the type of person most valorized by neoliberalism is the type of person most valued by positive psychology. Positive psychology and neoliberalism both emphasize—and attempt to render normative—a particular personality type: the self-examining, self-governing, autonomous, positive, entrepreneurial self’ (p. 77). The discourses and practices relating to this conception of ‘happiness’ lead to the promotion of a range of skills, capacities and dispositions seen to enable, if not happiness, then a proxy of it: some sense of well-being or satisfaction and the development of traits such as resilience and self-determination. An array of psychological concepts have become embedded in our personal and professional vocabularies such that they are constitutive of what it means to be a good learner or a good citizen today. These concepts are not interchangeable, of course, but are taken here as interrelated as they constitute a general discourse of happiness that is mobilised within our current context.

The happiness turn, as Sara Ahmed (2010) characterises it, refers not only to its presence in policy but also more broadly to the ‘popularity of therapeutic cultures and discourses of self-help’ that include not only EuroAmerican psychology but also Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and the mass marketing of these via ‘the happiness industry’.
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2010 and to promote the virtue of happiness. Curricular and pedagogical initiatives, such as the introduction of a Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning curriculum (to be discussed later) or the introduction of practices such as ‘circle time’, have led to the identification of a therapeutic turn in education (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Hayes, 2005) that has been raising concerns at least since self-esteem became a focus for education in the 1990s (see Smith, 2002). The understanding of education today as, in part, a process of instilling positive attitudes to and capacities for learning, which align with those of the happy individual outlined by Cabanas and Illouz (2019), is now embedded in educational practice. Concepts such as ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck, 2006), ‘resilience’ (Wosnitza et al., 2018) and ‘grit’ (Duckworth, 2016) are now part of common-sense ways of speaking about improving learning outcomes and overcoming adversity. Such character traits or skills are seen as essential to the development of successful learners, not only for formal educational attainment but also for success in our personal and professional lives.

What is evident in such educational programmes is not only the promotion of the need to develop particular traits but their presentation as virtues on the basis of an assumption that they will be directed towards productive engagement and attainment. The focus here is not on whether or not the qualities promoted within the happiness turn ought to be considered as virtues, but the constitution of them as such by their framing according to the fields of positive psychology and neuroscience. In what follows I outline the scientific basis for the way the happiness turn takes shape through policy. This is followed by an overview of key lines of critique of the particular conception of happiness promoted by positive psychology, which begins to identify how the distinction between traits and virtues is constituted, and how this way of talking about happiness and our responsibility for it delegitimises other forms of response. This is then further illustrated through two examples of educational programmes, one from the English context (Gagen, 2015) and one from the Flemish context (Van Damme & Ramaekers, 2022). The examples and the analyses of them illustrate what is referred to here as a delegitimisation of the negative. This is brought into conversation with De Vos’ (2016) account of the implications of the focus on the brain in our current context to show the pedagogical and political implications of this.

**POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS**

The development of positive psychology is premised on the idea that, until relatively recently, psychology’s exclusive focus has been on pathology, and that this has provided ‘a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), key figures in the development of the field, set out the need to focus on the prevention of mental illness rather than the correction of pathologies, ‘on systematically building competency, not on correcting weakness’ (p. 7); ‘Much of the task of prevention in this new century will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to understand and learn how to foster these virtues in young people’ (p. 7). The relevance to and potential application of such findings in education is already clear. Since 2000, positive psychology has significantly influenced the way in which we speak about ourselves and our children and students. There has been an abundance of initiatives, from curricula to popular literature, to support the development of the traits promoted by positive psychology, such as resilience, and to promote the virtue of such traits in improving our attainment and productivity.

The principles of positive psychology have been adopted by economists and policy makers seeking to address the rise in mental health issues among our populations and the impact this has on the economy through absences from work and the cost to public health services. Richard Layard has been a prominent advocate of the need for happiness to be a principal aim of social policy. His book, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, opens by revealing a paradox at the heart of Western society: ‘Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier’ (Layard, 2011, p. 13). Building on this finding, Layard’s approach brings together philosophy (namely, Bentham’s Greatest Happiness Principle), psychology (neuroscience, positive psychology) and economics (Layard’s own specialism) to argue for the need to pursue happiness as a public
policy aim. He sets out how advances in neuroscience have given scientific validation to subjective statements of happiness:

Good feelings are experienced through activity in the brain’s left-hand side behind the forehead ... Bad feelings are connected with brain activity behind the right-hand side of the forehead ...

... Until recently, if people said they were happy, sceptics would hold that this was just a subjective statement. There was no way to show it had any objective content at all. But now we know that what people say about how they feel corresponds closely to the actual levels of activity in different parts of the brain, which can be measured in standard scientific ways. (Layard, 2011, p. 19)

Such research provides the ‘cross-checking mechanisms’ referred to by the OECD. Layard refers to research on brain physiology led by Richard Davidson (e.g. 1992) to ‘reassure’ doubters that happiness is indeed ‘an objective feeling that can be properly compared between people’ (Layard, 2011, p. 21): ‘In most of his studies Davidson measures activity in different parts of the brain by putting electrodes all over the scalp and reading the electrical activity. These EEG measurements are then related to the feelings people report’, that is, positive feelings = activity in the left-hand side of the brain, negative feelings = increased activity on the right-hand side (p. 23). Corresponding findings are produced through direct brain scans using an MRI or PET scanner. On the basis of findings from Davidson and others, Layard writes: ‘brain science confirms the objective character of happiness’ (p. 23). Layard poses the rhetorical questions of whether this is a bit simplistic and whether happiness can be measured along a single dimension. The answer is yes it can, because it is not possible—according to the evidence-based conceptualisation he uses—to be both happy and unhappy at the same time (p. 25). This claim is based on what is observed in terms of brain activity: in response to a stimulus, parts of the brain ‘either light up or they do not’ (De Vos, 2016, p. 3). The presentation of the argument works to overcome the sense of the complexity of emotion and its relationship to how we behave by rendering happiness scientifically verifiable by appeal to advances in brain science.

Layard expresses the political importance of the ability to measure, through advances in brain science, what the OECD refers to as the ‘intangible feelings that only exist inside someone’s head’, in terms of his support for Jeremy Bentham’s Greatest Happiness Principle. As we now have ‘a society in which there is no agreed philosophical basis for public policy or for private morality’ (p. 87), we are ‘seriously in need of a clear concept of the good society, and of the good action’ (p. 87). For Layard, Bentham’s principle offers this ultimate good, superior to goods such as health or autonomy. These are instrumental goods in that we can identify further goods that justify them. But, he argues, we cannot just impose this view. To avoid the risk of paternalism, ‘if we want to measure the quality of life, it must be based on how people feel’ (p. 87). It is a matter not only of seeking further scientific understanding of brain function but also of reinstating a clear concept of the good society and of what it means to be good. Here we begin to see that the manifestation of happiness or the development of happiness is not seen as merely a trait but as a virtue.

CRITIQUES OF THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS

Conceptual complexity

Critiques of the conception of happiness as developed by positive psychologists have emerged from across the social sciences and humanities. They highlight its assumption of conceptual simplicity and its individualistic, neoliberal and Western basis (see, e.g., Mathews & Izquierdo, 2010; Sointu, 2005). Critics also draw attention to the shortcomings of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian conception of pleasure, on which Layard and others draw. Bentham’s conception of pleasure as ‘a single sensation, varying only along the quantitative dimensions of intensity and duration’ (Nussbaum, 2012,
p. 336), leads Martha Nussbaum to characterise it as ‘a sketch crying out for adequate philosophical development’ (p. 337; see also Cigman, 2014). Both Nussbaum and Cigman (2014) turn to Aristotle to address these shortcomings, drawing attention to the importance he placed on qualitative distinctions between forms of pleasure, ‘related to the differences of the activities to which it attaches’ (p. 338).

The positive psychological conception of happiness raised particular concerns when it began to be adopted into educational curricula, perhaps most prominently in the UK by Wellington College. Suissa (2008) highlights how their ‘10 point programme for developing well-being’ presents the achievement of happiness as a matter of mastering particular skills (Suissa, 2008, p. 579; more recently reduced to six elements that promote well-being.6 The shift from teaching happiness, first announced in the UK by Wellington College in 2006, to promoting well-being here also highlights the elision of the two, or of the latter serving as a proxy for the former.) While in general Suissa welcomes the attention currently given to children’s mental health and well-being, she raises concerns with the language in which happiness is discussed and the failure to distinguish empirical from conceptual questions:

any rigorous understanding of happiness necessarily involves not just empirical study but conceptual philosophical enquiry. Connected to this point is the problem of assuming that whatever is being measured [in neurological research] can be unproblematically described as a ‘manifestation’ of happiness. What does it mean to say that a neurologically identifiable phenomenon or a reported mood is a manifestation of happiness? … To construe the relationship between particular measurable states and the concept of happiness as being one of ‘manifestation’ is itself to imply a particular picture of the meaning of happiness and of human life. To ignore the conceptual aspects of these questions and to approach the idea of happiness and its role in education solely on the basis of empirical research is thus inadequate.

(Suissa, 2008, p. 577)

Suissa takes issue with the way in which conceptual complexity is overlooked, in spite of an awareness within the happiness literature of the philosophical traditions of thinking about happiness. She argues that to render, for example, Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia—a worthwhile life—into a narrower understanding of happiness as, for example, life satisfaction, measurable along a single scale, overlooks the normative, contextual, value-laden aspects of what distinguishes the concept.

### Traits and virtues

Such critiques, which raise essential questions about the epistemology and ethics of the way positive psychologists seek to measure our happiness, are also echoed within the wider field of psychology. Robbins and Friedman (2011), for example, provide further detail on the conceptual simplicity and epistemological issues with positive psychology. They focus in particular on resilience. Within the family of concepts, or traits, associated with happiness and well-being, resilience is one of the most prominent. Lack of educational attainment is often attributed to a lack of resilience, that is, a lack of ‘ability to overcome adversity and be successful in spite of exposure to high risk’ (Greene, 2003, p. 77, cited in Robbins & Friedman, 2011, p. 94) or, as Rutter (1987, p. 316) has it: ‘the positive pole of individual differences in people’s responses to stress and adversity’ (cited in Robbins & Friedman, 2011, p. 94).

Resilience is a core concept in positive psychology, where it is seen as ‘a core strength that can be measured in isolation from other character traits’ (Robbins & Friedman, 2011, p. 94). Like critics from within philosophy and educational philosophy (cf. Cigman, 2014; Nussbaum, 2012; Suissa, 2008), humanist psychologists such as Robbins and Friedman (2011) take issue with this, arguing instead for the need to see such traits holistically, in line with an Aristotelian eudaimonic understanding of the good life, and to recognise the contextual nature of whether a trait is ‘good’ or not. One may, after all, be highly resilient but in no way virtuous. Robbins and Friedman (2011) question, therefore, whether resilience can inherently be seen as a virtue, as positive psychologists seem to. They suggest that it can, in the very
specific sense that it is ‘those collective traits in an individual that allow him or her to realize eudaimonic happiness in spite of, or even because of, adverse circumstances’ (p. 98). It is not a trait that exists in isolation from other character traits or qualities, however; nor can it be considered virtuous if not driven by the agency of the individual towards virtuous ends.

Early work in positive psychology, focused on positive subjective experiences defined by measures of subjective well-being, seemed to endorse a hedonistic view of happiness in which ‘happiness is understood to amount to the ratio of pleasure to pain in one’s life’ (p. 96). As its attention turned increasingly to character strengths and virtues, the emphasis shifted to a more eudaimonic conception. The treatment of ‘virtues as isolated variables that are logically independent’, however, as in Seligman’s (2002) Authentic Happiness, is quite at odds with Aristotle’s conception (p. 98). Robbies and Friedman highlight two issues that arise from positive psychology’s confusion between hedonistic and eudaimonic happiness. First, its attempt to examine the virtue hypothesis is undermined, and second, it has been inconsistent about the role of values in its science, sometimes claiming value neutrality, and sometimes attempting to combine science with normative ethics (p. 100). In their view, ‘by assuming a eudaimonic ethics, positive psychology, or any psychology for that matter, already becomes a prescriptive science, in addition to being a descriptive and predictive one (Robbins, 2008)’ (p. 100). There is an assumption within positive psychology, they argue, that people will use positive character traits, such as resilience, for good.

The fact that the meaning of the same trait varies across contexts, such as the potential for resilience becoming a vice instead of a virtue … suggests that an exclusive focus on the positive, without a holistic sensitivity to the complimentary negative aspects of the human condition, can lead both theory and research astray. (p. 102)

When such theory and research have an influence on education, rather than being led astray, it seems that alternative paths are not a possibility.

DELEGITIMISING THE NEGATIVE

To build on these critiques, I want to focus specifically on the emphasis on the positive that accompanies the discourses and practices of happiness. Nussbaum draws attention to the framing of positive and negative emotions, paying particular attention to the psychological conception of satisfaction that is currently promoted: ‘For Seligman, positive emotions, to put it somewhat crudely, are those that feel good. So, love would be positive, anger and grief negative, and so forth’ (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 344). This conceptualisation falls short if we understand emotions to be evaluative responses, whereby ‘negative’ emotions, such as fear or anger, are appropriate when they embody an appropriate appraisal:

For all the ancient thinkers, a necessary and sufficient condition of an emotion’s being truly positive—in the sense of making a positive contribution toward a flourishing life—is that it be based on true beliefs, both about value and about what events have occurred. This is as true of good-feeling as of bad-feeling emotion. Many instances of good-feeling emotion are actually quite negative, inasmuch as they are based on false beliefs about value. Pleasure is only as good as the thing one takes pleasure in: If one takes pleasure in harming others, that good-feeling emotion is very negative; even if one takes pleasure in shirking one’s duty and lazing around, that is also quite negative. If one feels hope, that emotion is good only if it is based on accurate evaluations of the worth of what one hopes for and true beliefs about what is likely. (p. 345)
Drawing again on Aristotle and Plato, Nussbaum discusses the appropriateness of negative emotion (‘Anger is a sign of what we care intensely about and a spur to justice’, p. 345), and to the interrelation between positive and negative feeling: ‘Where you have love, you will also have anxiety—and, very likely, anger. Where you have gratitude (when someone does something importantly nice for you), there is also conceptual space for anger (if that same person should decide to treat you badly)’ (pp. 345—356). The emphasis within positive psychology on minimising negative thoughts, therefore, is seen to be problematic: ‘Seligman, in particular, thinks that it is good to promote good-feeling emotions and to minimize bad-feeling emotions, often by thinking hopeful thoughts. But sometimes having a hopeful ‘take’ on the bad thing that has happened seems to trivialize it’ (p. 346). Of course, there are therapeutic processes that aim, appropriately, for exactly this. It is the translation of these principles into everyday practices that is the concern here.

Critiques developed within educational philosophy also take issue with the way in which the negative is minimised. Both Judith Suissa (2008) and Peter Roberts (2013) stress that education ought to be ‘challenging, unsettling; possibly liberating, but painfully so’ (Suissa, 2008, pp. 587—588) and is ‘meant to create a state of discomfort, and to this extent may also make us unhappy’ (Roberts, 2013, p. 2). Roberts (2013) warns that ‘apparent happiness can be dehumanising’ (p. 2). It may be a step too far to say that the focus on happiness is dehumanising, but it does seem to deny important aspects of what makes us human in its delegitimisation of negative emotion and, further, in the increasingly narrow focus on brain activity. The critiques outlined here draw attention not only to what is left out of the picture of human experience in the reliance on positive psychological conceptions but also to the denial of the validity of particular responses. To illustrate how this manifests in educational practice, I draw on two examples. First, an analysis of the English ‘Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning’ curriculum (Gagen, 2015) and, second, an analysis of the Magical Forest programme for preschool children in Flanders (Van Damme & Ramaekers, 2022).

Shift that mood!: Citizenship and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

Elizabeth Gagen’s (2015) analysis of how a focus on social and emotional skills has become part of the way in which citizenship is conceived helps to illustrate the manner in which happiness, or positive emotional dispositions, are not only promoted in education but also seen as essential to short- and long-term success. She examines in particular how ‘citizenship is being transformed from a subjectivity performing specific civic duties to a subjectivity requiring the close management of neurologically defined emotional behaviour’ (p. 141). Gagen analyses specific aspects of the original SEAL curriculum to illustrate how children are asked to relate to their emotions. In the ‘Self-awareness’ strand of the curriculum, one session is titled ‘Shift That Mood!’, in which children learn to understand how to ‘take simple physical actions to help shift difficult feelings’ (DfES, 2007a, p. 15).

...students are asked to make a poster ‘to show how they might change the uncomfortable feelings into comfortable ones’ (2007d[b], 16). Suggestions include physical activity and dance, positive thinking exercises and relaxation techniques like breathing. (Gagen, 2015, p. 147)

Gagen writes: ‘the power to manage moods—to take responsibility for neurochemical states—is the responsibility of the newly skilled emotional citizen’ (p. 147). Moreover, it is a difficult feeling in particular that we are required to overcome. Specific attention, Gagen finds, is given to anger:

While the SEAL documents espouse the therapeutic benefits of understanding feelings, the presentation of anger in student behaviour prompts a very different response. Anger is cast as a dangerous and explosive emotion, and the most consequential both for institutional behaviour and managing a social
and economic future. The programmatic response to anger, then, is not understanding but eradication.

(p. 147)

Anger is referred to in the curriculum documents as an ‘emotional hijack’ (likened to a plane hijack; DfES, 2007b, p. 9). Once the brain science has been covered in the lesson ‘What happens to our brains when we “lose it”’, students are taught exercises in anger management.

Students are asked to come up with their own ‘calming down tricks’. The lesson guidelines suggest some ideas: ‘thinking calm thoughts, or speak them aloud quietly to self’, ‘visualising, e.g. ring of protection around self, taking self to happy place’, or ‘deep, steady breathing’. (p. 148)

All of these are, of course, effective techniques for calming down and relaxing. But not only do they seem out of kilter with the level of danger and threat that anger is seen to pose—‘Under a neural hijack we are liable to “feel confused, and say and do inappropriate, hurtful, harmful or even violent things”’ (DfES 2007b, p. 9)—but in doing so, anger itself seems to be delegitimised. Instead, it needs to be objectified as an external force that is acting on the brain and brought back under control through skills of self-regulation. Allowing negative emotions to ‘take control’ indicates a lack of skill in self-regulation, and a danger. Thus, mastering the skills that ensure we behave rationally becomes a virtue of the good learning citizen.

Gagen’s analysis draws attention not only to the way in which particular behavioural dispositions and a psychological understanding of ourselves are sought but also to the ways in which particular emotional states are positioned as problematic. This illustrates the concerns raised above a the focus on the privileging of positive emotions by developing skills to overcome and control negative responses. The ability to translate a negative into a positive or to regain control of an equilibrium does not in itself suggest the achievement of happiness or positive feelings or resolution of a problem. As Nussbaum points out, a negative response is often appropriate, for example, anger at injustice. The focus on the positive seems to delegitimise affective responses to the conditions in which we find ourselves that can be identified as negative feelings. Unless, that is, they can be harnessed and translated into productive action.

What will I do with that feeling?: The Magical Forest

I turn now to a second example, an analysis of an early years programme from the Flemish context. The programme in question, Het Toverbos, or the Magical Forest, is, Van Damme and Ramaekers (2022) write: ‘a method developed for Flemish nursery education and informed by the principles of psychodrama in order to support the socio-emotional development of toddlers’ (p. 56). They describe the programme thus:

It consists of ten sessions in which a group of toddlers engage in role play, each of them carrying an animal hand puppet and the teacher or ‘coach’ playing along in the role of Big Bird. In every session, the children in their animal roles travel to the imaginary world of the Magical Forest where they can play around freely, only to be guided by Big Bird in particular ways. At the end of each session and before heading back to the ‘real world’, a discussion is held with all the forest animals on how they experienced their play. After a ritual ‘exit’ of the world of the Magical Forest in which the toddlers put off their animal roles and come back to their ‘real’ selves, a similar discussion is repeated, now from the stance of the children ‘themselves’. (pp. 56–57)

The method aims to ‘encourage toddlers to cope in a more positive way with their feelings and with the problems they experience’ (Malfait & Jeannin, 2012, p. 13) by teaching ‘emotional expression, regulation and control’ and ‘social
resilience, a notion that is associated with being “thick skinned” and somewhat indifferent to the judgement of peers’ (Van Damme & Ramaekers, 2022, p. 57).

Van Damme and Ramaekers situate the programme within the therapeutic turn in education and society (cf., e.g., Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008) and global efforts to address declining mental health by strengthening our emotional, mental and social well-being, as discussed in the introduction. Their analysis of the Magical Forest draws in particular on Berardi’s *The Soul at Work* (2009), a post-Marxist account of our changing relationship to labour in the late 20th century. The shift from societies centred on industrial labour to cognitive labour explains for Berardi why our identities and self-realisation are now bound up with the specialised, personalised, creative nature of our work. Longer hours, working from home, or from anywhere due to the affordances of our networked digital existences, are now not only accepted but also, often, pleasurable and desirable.

In the discourses and practices mobilised in the Magical Forest, as Van Damme and Ramaekers argue, we see the promotion of a way of:

- going about emotions, peer interaction and imagination that is ultimately concerned with their direct use-value in view of the socio-emotional development of toddlers. Emotions, sociality, and creativity seem to be principally appreciated as resources to be managed and mined for learning and further developing and ‘optimising’ the self. (p. 59)

Importantly, Van Damme and Ramaekers’ analysis illustrates the rationality that underpins such programmes: it is not that or why something is the case that is the concern, but what works to solve it. As one of the method’s developers puts it, *The Magical Forest* wants to animate toddlers towards a disposition in which they ask themselves: ‘If I’m feeling said, then what will I do with that feeling?’ (Onderzoek HUB-KAHO, 2013). In other words the method aims to teach toddlers that feelings are something they can (and should learn to) do something with. (p. 59)

Furthermore, the something children are encouraged towards is to turn that negative feeling (e.g., sadness) into something positive. As we saw earlier, particular traits and emotions are seen—assumed—to have a use value, that is, that they will be used for productive good. Van Damme and Ramaekers relate the ‘intent to cultivate a problem-solving attitude towards emotions’ within the Magical Forest to the way in which ‘the construct of mental resilience takes shape within education today’ (p. 60). Following Ecclestone (2012), they note that there is a risk that young people’s problems are individualised ‘while simultaneously rendering them responsible for the solutions’ (p. 60). Such an approach ‘settles for a solution that silently allows the actual cause of the child’s problem to continue to exist’ (p. 61).

Van Damme and Ramaekers argue (cf. Ecclestone, 2012, p. 476) that by ‘recasting the child’s resilience as a psychological construct open for training and amendment, there exists a risk of entirely leaving out the political and moral dimensions of resilience’ (p. 61). This amounts, they argue, to its depoliticisation. Rather than arguing directly for a repoliticisation of such curricular activities, however, Van Damme and Ramaekers draw out the pedagogical implications of the productive, problem-solving attitude towards negative emotions. Drawing on Berardi’s notion of ‘linguistic automatism’ (Berardi, 2009, p. 203), wherein our responses are predetermined, scripted almost, they suggest that the Magical Forest method:

- seems to cut off, beforehand, alternative routes of expression—all in the name of smooth communicability and sanitised relationships. As such it effectively reduces the transition from ‘infant’, understood in its etymological sense of ‘not being able to speak’ (*infantia*), to speaking subject to a process of mere training of the ‘correct’ understanding and expression of emotions; hence it furthermore assigns the speaking subject to a position of mechanical repetition. The message seems to be: ‘Speak clearly’
(period). The option of not speaking is not even there. Simply put, children are at risk of being stripped of their ‘pedagogical potency’. (Van Damme and Ramaekers, 2022, p. 64)

The very sense that the newcomer, to use Arendt’s term, takes up a language, a culture, in new and unforeseen ways and the disruption this presents, is neutralised.

The Magical Forest method further illustrates a denial or delegitimation of the negative as seen in the earlier example of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning curriculum discussed by Gagen (2015). The Magical Forest aims to ‘responsibilise toddlers for their emotional wellbeing by teaching them how to readily rid themselves of any emotion that stands in the way of their immediate happiness’ (p. 61). The ability to do this, as a trait, becomes a virtue when they return their intention to productive, appropriate play. It draws attention, too, to a further dimension of this delegitimisation: the pedagogical and political impotence it effects.

FROM HAVING A BRAIN TO BEING A BRAIN

We have seen in the discussion of positive psychology and the language of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning curriculum (cf. Gagen, 2015) and the Magic Forest programme (cf. Van Damme & Ramaekers, 2022) that neuroscientific findings have recently come to the fore both as a way of understanding human behaviour and emotions and in turn in the promotion of these in educational contexts. As noted from the outset, the psy-disciplines have long been constitutive of discourses and practices of governance; however, the more recent neuro focus in policy and practice represents a shift in our relationship to ourselves and others that seems to further emphasise that a mere repoliticisation of our educational spaces will not address the issues being raised. As Jan De Vos (2016) puts it:

the dictum ‘You are your brain’ raises several questions: not only pertaining to why we so readily accept it and, indeed, even embrace it so eagerly at times, but also concerning why this dictum must be stated so firmly, so coercively (make no mistake), as if we were being addressed by some final sovereignty or god, that amounted to the ultimate super-ego command. (p. 1)

De Vos draws our attention to the distinctiveness of the shift from ‘having a brain to being a brain’ (p. 2) and the urgent need to understand this transition. He suggests that:

the momentous period in which we are living, what I am designating as the transition from having a brain to being a brain, might represent the last window of opportunity to say something about the shifting conditions of our existence. Having a brain meant that one could contemplate it as an object, look at it and attempt to grasp it in language. However, given that we are now increasingly enjoined to coincide with the brain itself, are we not in danger of losing our capacity to speak about that very thing which itself claims to define our conditions of possibility? Simply put, are we becoming mute? (p. 2)

The neuroscientific paradigm, he argues, ‘reduces human beings to cognitions, a limited range of affects and some unconscious processes, all of which are framed by hormonal driven instinctual impulses’. Put simply, ‘when the notion of having a brain is superseded by the idea of being our brain, we become deprived of a minimal distance and lose our voice in the process’ (ibid.).

There is then something far greater at stake in understanding ourselves in terms of the development of traits that correlate to happiness and their presentation as virtues of the entrepreneurial learning citizen than can be addressed by acknowledging the conceptual complexity of what happiness is or the political, value-laden nature of our educational and social practices. The ‘neuro-turn’ (De Vos, 2016, p. 19) constitutes a particular shift within the broader ‘happiness turn’ (Ahmed, 2010), seemingly turning us further inward such that we cannot take a distance from...
ourselves. If happiness and its correlated virtues are seen as a form of capital in which we must invest, as discussed in
the introduction, the neuro-turn intensifies this. De Vos suggests that ‘the rationale of neuro-education can be said to
provide the operative paradigm: it is the educated brain itself which constitutes the surplus most readily extracted by
the contemporary market’ (2016, p. 19). This is reflected in Van Damme and Ramaekers (2022) account of the Magical
Forest in which toddlers are trained in how to use their emotions productively, echoing the demands of the cognitariat
discussed by Berardi (2009).

This surplus today is constituted of knowledge of how our brains work and the productive, thus assumed to be
virtuous, employment of that knowledge. There is, though, a silenced surplus, referred to by De Vos (2016) as ‘the
unbearable surplus of being human’; that which is delegitimised through the promotion of positive traits, from strate-
gies of translating our negative emotions into positive courses of action as in the Magical Forest to framing them as
outright dangers as in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The denial of certain existential aspects of what it means to be human, through the delegitimisation of negative emo-
tions, is seen here as a feature of both the bodies of knowledge that currently shape policy and our self-understanding,
and the responsibilisation of the individual constitutive of neoliberal governance. The ‘happiness turn’ can be seen as
a widespread phenomenon (cf. World Happiness Reports and OECD initiatives) whose logics in general uphold those
of the entrepreneurial learning citizen. As the skills necessary for achieving and maintaining happiness have been pro-
moted as virtues of the good learning citizen in educational (particularly school) contexts, a growing body of critical
literature has identified the philosophical shortcomings and political and pedagogical force of such discourses. Work
in educational philosophy, philosophy and humanist psychology has drawn attention to what is left out of the picture
by positive psychological conceptions of happiness and its measurement in terms of independently verifiable traits.
These important critiques draw attention to the ethical and epistemological issues with reducing an aspect of human
complexity to single scales of measurement, but the governmental role of psychological and neuroscientific discourses
in our understanding of ourselves and others cannot be overlooked.

Attention to the way in which particular psy-disciplines furnish the discourses and practices of education—at the
level of curriculum, pedagogy, policy, parental advice and the design of digital platforms that support them—and the
delegitimisation of the negative that they effect becomes all the more important in a time of great (and legitimate)
sadness, fear and anger. Not least because, as we have seen, this effects a silencing, a neutralising of our capacity to
take a distance from ourselves that risks rendering us pedagogically and politically impotent. Our affective lives are
profoundly educational in the very ways in which we come to terms with our conditions, precisely and often painfully
due to the surplus with which we have yet to come to terms, or that is legitimately, justifiably, ‘negative’. Standardised
vocabularies and digitised frameworks limit the resources we have at our disposal to make sense of ourselves and of
what it is possible to want or not.

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ENDNOTES

1 https://ec.europa.eu/environment/beyond_gdp/index_en.html. The landing page presents a number of reports including
‘Resilience as a Compass for New EU Policies’ and ‘Economy of Wellbeing’.
There is no space here to focus in more detail on the role of digital technologies in the constitution of the current mode of governance and discourses and practices of happiness and wellbeing, but it is necessary to mention it here in the context of shifting forms of knowledge production on which policy and governance are based.

Here are just a handful of examples from different national contexts and policy levels: Anna Freud Centre, Public Health England, OECD, EU International Evidence Review. Further examples are discussed later in this article.

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