The Good Life: What is it, do we have it?

Ross Homel

> *The State exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only. (Aristotle, Politics)*

The nine papers in this issue of the *AJSI* were presented originally at a conference on the theme of *The Good Life* held in Brisbane in February 2009 to mark the launch of the Griffith Institute for Social and Behavioural Research.

The Institute brings together eight Griffith research centres engaged in very different facets of social and behavioural research, but united in their interest in understanding social change and exploring the impact of change on the wellbeing of individuals, families, and local and global communities. Given this theme, the Institute, in partnership with the Queensland Government, has adopted as a signature project the development of the Queensland version of Community Indicators Victoria, which is described in the paper in this volume by Dianne Cox and her colleagues from the McCaughy Centre at the University of Melbourne. Interestingly, although we have tended to adopt a typically pragmatic approach to the concept of 'wellbeing' and its measurement in this project and some others, we keep stumbling against some knotty problems.

For example, in deciding what statistics to include the project working group has had to focus on the question of what an 'indicator' is, and what indicators 'indicate.' One illustration is provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA indexes of socioeconomic status for geographic areas. Are these 'indicators,' or are they just 'social statistics' that help to explain why wellbeing varies between areas? Since one of the versions of SEIFA, the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, uses information such as low income and low education as markers of relative socio-economic disadvantage, and since improvements in average levels of income or in educational qualifications are often taken as evidence that things are getting better at a societal level, maybe the SEIFA indexes should be used as indicators of wellbeing (Bauer 1966; Wilcox et al. 1972). On the other hand, perhaps wellbeing is better indicated by more direct measures of (say) mental health status, family stability, or levels of social participation. How should we decide?

These kinds of debates have been going on for decades and perhaps could be taken as an indicator of the lack of theoretical progress in the social indicators field, in contrast to the impressive improvements since the 1970s in the range of data available and the technologies for collating, analysing and presenting such data. The theoretical debates within our research community took on further complexity when the philosophers reminded us about the truly ancient literature on the nature of wellbeing and what constitutes 'the good life.' The Greek philosophers in particular have had an enduring, if not always acknowledged, influence. Thus it seems that much of contemporary thinking on wellbeing and the good life revolves around maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, which derives from Epicurean ideas (*hedonia*). Our obsession with GDP as the major, or even sole indicator of progress and wellbeing at the national level reflects this philosophy, as does the preoccupation with achieving personal happiness. As Bill Ransome states in his paper in this volume, "Hedonistic theories of wellbeing focus on the intrinsic value of certain psychological states, holding that what is good for a person overall is the greatest achievable balance of pleasure over pain" (p. 42). By contrast, Aristotle emphasised that living the good life and experiencing personal wellbeing (*eudaimonia*) involve achieving excellence, both intellectual excellence and excellence of character (Ransome, p. 45). This philosophical approach would seem to call for quite a different set of indicators if we took it seriously.

It became abundantly clear then, in planning the conference, that we had to begin with some rethinking about what we mean by the good life and personal or community wellbeing. The imperative to rethink was underlined by the global financial crisis (the GFC) which dominated the news in early 2009 and was causing many people to seriously doubt the fundamental tenets of free-market fundamentalism with its emphasis on wealth creation and material progress. Indeed, the Prime Minister's article on the GFC, which attacked "the triumph of neo-liberalism," appeared in *The Monthly* in the same month as our conference (Rudd 2009: 20). Even more dramatic and distressing was the fact that the week before the conference (which was on February 12) the Victorian bushfires occurred, peaking on 'Black Saturday' February 7. Thoughtful people found it impossible not to worry that these horrific fires were the direct result of the other global crisis: global warming.

Both global crises are taken up by Charles Sampford in his paper on reconceiving the good life and achieving global sustainability. He emphasises the need to rectify weaknesses in global governance that impede progress on global warming and exacerbate the weaknesses in national, corporate and professional governance that contributed so much to the GFC. Mike Salvaris and Geoff Woolcock continue the global theme, focusing on the global progress measurement movement and how measures of progress and of wellbeing can reinvigorate democratic functioning and challenge the deeply entrenched belief in the primacy of continuous economic growth. Their paper also constitutes a useful link to other papers in this volume with its discussion of the development of statewide and local progress measurement frameworks in Australia over the past decade.

Bill Ransome's paper focuses, as we have already noted, on the philosophical underpinnings of ideas about the good life. He starts with the Greek philosophers but the central theme of his paper is Amartya Sen's proposal for a pluralist 'capabilities' approach to personal wellbeing based on freedom of choice and the Aristotelian idea of a 'function.' Ransome concludes that empirical research should be directed to "personal wellbeing as it is conceived of, pursued and best achieved in lives as they are actually lived" (p. 51), a challenge that is taken up by Peter Saunders in the fourth and last paper in this volume that is focused primarily on the meaning and measurement of the good life. Drawing on data from a recent deprivation survey designed to determine what material and non-material items Australians regard as essential and what items they actually possess or have access to, Saunders (p. 65) shows that "except at high income levels, well-being is greater for a given level of ownership of non-material items than for the same degree of ownership of material items." His data on the deficits in essential items are fascinating, indicating that they lie mostly on the non-material side of the ledger and involve in many cases attributes of community amenity and services, such as a doctor who bulk bills, streets that are safe to walk in at night, and good local public transport.

The next four papers focus on charting Australia's progress, using either quantitative indicators (Dianne Cox and her colleagues, and Lance Emerson) or historical analyses (Janet McCalman and Glenda Strachan). Cox and colleagues provide a valuable service to researchers and policy people as well as to the wider community in describing in some detail the system of community indicators used in Victoria (CIV). They reprise the theme of democratic functioning introduced by Salvaris and Woolcock, emphasising that because the choices involved in selecting and using indicators reflect competing value positions, "[t]he process of selecting and using indicators therefore requires a transparent and democratic process" (p. 73). Although they recommend further research to investigate how CIV is actually being used for strengthening democratic governance and evidence based policy making, perhaps an even higher priority, given the renewed interest in the geographical dimensions of social exclusion, is to first replicate the Victorian system in all states and territories.

The papers by Janet McCalman and Lance Emerson focus in very different ways on how Australian children and their families are faring. In a highly readable historical overview, McCalman contrasts Australia's good society for the majority – the presentable, if socially divided front yard – with the "bleak backyard" where "[m]any of the children have darker skins and they are visibly not doing well either physically or mentally" (p. 90). McCalman observes that the depression of the 1890s caused families to "live defensively," investing in social difference over human capital, and that the good life only started to become a reality for a large number of Australians from the 1950s. Even so, Australia remains a very unequal society and outcomes for children are, in international comparative terms, quite average – and for Indigenous children, far worse than average. Lance Emerson provides strong statistical evidence for this conclusion, based on detailed data on the wellbeing of children and young people assembled for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Report Card: “When crudely averaged, Australia ranks 16th out of 30 OECD countries” (p. 107). Emerson’s paper provides an extremely useful account of the rationale for and the technical details of the Report Card data system, but also refers to other research conducted by ARACY that highlights “that parents are feeling stressed, overwhelmed and exasperated, and their children are seen to be pressured, direction-less and sometimes without hope. People in general feel time-poor and commercially battered… and believe that the societal pressures on children and families are going in the wrong direction and ‘getting out of hand’” (p. 108).

Glenda Strachan’s paper addresses the question of what constitutes the good life for Australian women. As she observes: “Over the course of six decades there has been a major shift in Australian society from one where women’s primary role was in the private sphere of the home and family care to one where women’s lives revolve around both paid work and family care” (p. 119). She describes in some detail the many social, legislative and policy reforms that have contributed to this shift, and it seems that in some respects Australia can take pride in its progress: “… Australia’s female to male earnings ratio increased faster in the 1970s than that of any other country, from around 0.60 to 0.80 in six years” (p. 122). Nevertheless, in 2010 women are still ‘working for the man’ in the context that most managers are men.

The last paper in this volume, by Robyn Jorgensen and her colleagues, differs from all the others in that it is concerned with an innovative educational intervention in part of Australia’s bleak backyard: the remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The paper is not unique because of its focus on education but because it describes an intervention based on evidence about what works for students who have traditionally been excluded from the benefits of formal education. The specific focus is mathematics learning, the rationale for which is that performance in numeracy at Year 10 is a stronger indicator of life chances than performance in other areas such as literacy. The heart of the paper is a description of, and a reflection upon, the struggle to move from traditional modes of mathematics teaching for Indigenous children to an approach based on an ‘inclusive pedagogy.’ Two beliefs underlie this shift: teachers must have high expectations of learners, and maths learning must be genuinely deep and rich. The account of what has been happening in this struggle makes for compelling reading.

It has been a delight to serve as editor for this stimulating volume. I should like to thank my colleagues around Australia who so willingly provided peer reviews, the authors who cheerfully revised their papers, and Louise Sims and Deborah Mitchell from the publication team at the ANU who have waited so patiently for this work to be completed. These nine papers are offered as a contribution to the national discussion about contemporary Australian society, how it got to be the way it is, and where we should be going as a nation in the light of our mediocre performance in many areas that we say we care deeply about, such as the wellbeing of children. I hope that a future volume will document the results of more of the numerous policy innovations and evidence-based interventions currently underway that are designed to bring the good life within reach of many more Australians, especially those living out of sight in our "nasty backyard."

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Author Bios

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Charles Sampford completed a DPhil in Law at Oxford in 1984, he then worked in law and philosophy at Melbourne University before being invited to apply for the Foundation Deanship of Law at Griffith University in January 1991. In 1999, he was appointed Foundation Director of the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance (the only Australian centre in law or governance to receive centre funding from the Australian Research Council). In September 2004, he became the Director of the Institute for Ethics, Governance and Law, a joint initiative of the United Nations University, Griffith, QUT and ANU. At the same time he took on the role of Convenor of the Australian Research Council funded Governance Research Network. He has written over 90 articles and chapters in Australian and foreign journals and collections ranging through constitutional law, legal philosophy, legal education, politics, applied ethics and econmics and has completed twenty one books and edited collections for international publishers including OUP, Blackwell, Routledge, Cavendish and Ashgate. Foreign fellowships include the Visiting Senior Research Fellow at St John's College Oxford (1997) and a Fulbright Senior Award to Harvard University (2000). Professor Sampford has been consulted by various parliaments, governments, international agencies and business and has been a company director and Chairman.

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William Ransome is a research fellow at the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University, Australia. His research in ethics focuses on virtue theory, moral psychology, theories of justice and well-being, and on topics in applied ethics and the philosophy of law. He is author of several papers addressing these and related themes, and of a monograph, *Moral*