



# Sensuous Scholarship and the Quest for Wellbeing

*A. David Napier* | Professor of Medical Anthropology, University College London

**ABSTRACT** The Enlightenment introduced a concept of human identity based on rationalism, science, and individual achievement. At the same time, German Romanticism of the 18th century recognized that self-awareness and self-fulfilment were the outcomes of emotion and intuition, and the relationship between personal experience and individual emotion. The conflict was epitomized in *Sturm und Drang* ('storm and drive') where the extreme expression of individual emotional states emerged in response to rationalism's perceived degradation of emotional life. Here by contrast human wellbeing lost its emotional completeness when reason emerged as the primary source of knowledge. As such, wellbeing was something only consciously recognized once lost, because individuation itself limits the kind of social extroversion that is essential for exploring the relevance of the senses for harmonious social embeddedness. By contrast modern anthropology has shown how emotional rootedness, being the basis of wellbeing, can be recaptured through sustained fieldwork, and, in particular, through the extroverted risk that builds emotional rootedness with others.

**Keywords:** wellbeing, Goethe, Stoller, uncertainty, higher education, creativity, Enlightenment, Romanticism

## What is wellbeing?

Back in the 18th century the polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, had a great deal to say about human emotional suffering and perceived wellbeing. Though Goethe lived into his 80s, he did not need a long life to represent the pulse of his time. In fact, he became famous at quite a young age by writing a novel about unrequited love in which the protagonist, Werther, eventually ends his own life.

Born in 1749, Goethe was a mere 24-year-old when he approached the completion of a book that defined for an entire culture what we would now call a 'best seller'. Following its publication in 1774, the novel soon became wildly popular, even leading many young German men to follow in Werther's steps by taking their own lives. That's because *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was a book for its time. The then-recent rise of the German Enlightenment had left many living with the idea that anything should be possible in life if we set our free intelligence upon achieving it. Indeed, Goethe's own life was a testament to such success.

But being self-made is a noble thought with a dark conclusion. For if all is possible through clear thinking, failure leaves only the self to blame. Amongst those who fell short of self-fulfilment, not achieving was either the effects of bad luck – a hopeless fate out of one's hands – or a flaw of character resulting in a squandered opportunity. Under such conditions what could an honourable person do? The no-win situation of failing under rationalism left many, as today, feeling hopeless and without purpose. Hence, Werther's radical choice became fatally popular.

In reaction to such feelings of failure, German Romanticism emerged – *Sturm und Drang* (“storm and urge/anxiety”) – in which the open expression of deep emotional angst would shock readers and theatre audiences into transcending the Enlightenment’s deeply flawed presumptions. Paradoxically, Werther stood for Germany of that era, while Goethe himself became perhaps the Enlightenment’s most successful intellectual in his own life. Not only did he emerge as the best-known poet author of the late 18th century, he was also a Renaissance polymath.

A successful civil servant, scientist, urban planner, artist, and statesman, Goethe travelled widely, and especially to Italy where he fell in love with Italian art and architecture. He also accumulated a vast collection of fine art, and in his later years was followed around by sycophants who literally recorded every moment of his life, including his habits of toilet. In a sense, he became too well known. Though he tried repeatedly to host soirées at his home in Weimar, neighbours stopped attending because the discussion always seemed to revert to Goethe himself and his ideas. He quite literally became the prisoner of his own success – a fact in itself unremarkable, unless we think about what kind of ‘success’ the lost love of Werther stood for.

Goethe knew this fact; for in his collected letters he gives hints of the deeper causes of Werther’s loss. Though the specific event that drove Werther was unrequited love, the cause that led to his death in the novel was not only a love he could not consummate: Werther’s loss was the loss of wellbeing that becomes apparent only in its absence. Like any of us imagining simpler times, Werther laments for his readers the moment when hope no longer, as Alexander Pope (2016) wrote in his *Essay on Man*, ‘springs eternal’ – where ‘Man never Is, but always To be blest’. To put it simply, Werther to the contrary could not imagine how wellbeing could be regained.

We know this to be true because Goethe said as much. In his writing Goethe claimed that “we experience the fullest sense of wellbeing when we are unaware of our parts and conscious only of the whole itself” (Bell 2016). Wellbeing, in other words, is a thing only known in a kind of belonging and stability that is largely unconscious, and only recognized consciously, therefore, once lost.

Yes, we may say at any given moment that we ‘feel good’, or that something gives us ‘a good feeling’; but, as Goethe well knew, perceived wellbeing carries with it the implicit awareness of an unconscious moment now polluted by conscious thought – as if wellbeing were a part of a past no longer available to us. The more we think about our wellbeing, that is, the more we cling to a memory invaded by the knowledge that consciousness itself can undo our emotional wholeness. To put it another way, the more consciously we describe what we remember, the more in the past we resides, to the point where we wonder if such innocence can ever be regained.

No doubt, Goethe, like other German Romantics of the era, was haunted by this problem – that is, the problem of consciousness. And that downside of conscious awareness, in turn, became a theme that ran through much of Goethe’s work, and especially his characterization of Faust.

Unlike Werther, who knows his innocence is lost to the past, Faust actively sells his soul to the devil to ‘know’ anything and everything rationally, so as consciously to control human destiny. Faust was for Goethe the paragon of self-conscious individual reflection. That’s because Faust’s flaw was to put himself above emotional life – to prioritize his personal

desires as calculations with the devil; to become an individual loner – a narcissist who placed merit in having things for himself at all cost.

Goethe, thus, sees Faust in direct contrast to Romantic fulfillment, because we need to feel we belong in order to feel whole. And when that belonging is disrupted by our individuality, by the awareness that our sense of belonging has been undermined either by nostalgic feelings about an innocence lost (Werther) or by rational self-interest (Faust), a profound isolation eventually ensues that makes life impossible. As Goethe concluded, “life in its wholeness is expressed as a force not attributable to any individual part of an organism”. Wellbeing, that is to say, cannot be individuated.

### **An Anthropology and the Senses**

Were Goethe alive today, he would find many sympathetic souls engaged in studying the anthropology of emotions (Howes and Classen 2014), but probably few as devoted to the senses specifically as Paul Stoller (1989, 1997b 2008). For much of Stoller’s writing has focused on how our sensuous experiences can define new emotional registers through which sensation itself make our lives meaningful.

In particular, Stoller has tried to bring to life the spaces between us (2008) – the places where, to remember Goethe, “wholeness is expressed as a force not attributable to any individual part”. Stoller has, also like Goethe, struggled with how we express those sensations in writing, and, perhaps most challenging of all, how we translate our own inchoate sensations for readers (1989, 1997b).

From early writings as a Songhay sorcerer’s apprentice (1995, 1997a; Stoller and Oalkes 1989), through his work on film and art (1992), to evocative stories of what he calls ‘sensuous scholarship’ (1997b) (including the sensations induced by his own illness experience [2004]), Stoller has never strayed far from the question of how we build emotional meaning by taking risks with the unknown, and with the new and often strange sensation of seeing ‘Oneself as Another’, to recall Paul Ricoeur’s beautiful phrase and book title (1995).

And what has Stoller discovered? In addition to acknowledging the importance of our senses in building social meaning, Stoller, as Goethe once did, acknowledges the compounding effects of incorporating our emotions into our observations of and engagements with others. We need to trust others to feel well ourselves, to build emotional ties with the unknown through sensuous engagement. Here, wellbeing is not only about social stability, but about a sense of emotional rootedness that makes possible a life fully realized. Indeed, it is this sense of being socially embedded to which Paul Stoller alludes when he describes the importance of long-term, engaged fieldwork.

But perhaps that’s where the comparison ends. Because while Goethe did indeed understand the deep need for emotional wholeness, his focus on the effects of its disruption were informed by the intellectual concerns of his day – and perhaps most by Spinoza’s ‘vitalism’ (Bennet 2010). For Spinoza was a rationalist when it came to religious orthodoxy, but a romantic when it came to ontology – even at times a pantheist when describing the immanence of nature and the deindividuation that can allow us to appreciate our emotional rootedness. For Goethe, this rational ‘loss’ made wellbeing part of an innocence lost, a view which by definition places it in the past.

To put it differently, wellbeing for German Romantics was largely something recognized consciously in its emotional absence – either in unselfconscious conviviality,

or in ontological dissociation, or through the way consciousness itself disrupts perceived wellbeing. Because the actual experience of wellbeing is different than our reflections on it.

Wellbeing, to push this line of thought, is about not consciously recognizing anything. It is the feeling of being productively embedded in wholesome social relations – a kind of ‘selective dissociation’ (Napier 1992) where we allow ourselves to exist harmoniously in what my Indonesian friends call ‘the flow of life’ (Fox 1990). For wellbeing implies the ability to count on a coherent world and to rely on those around us to be there when we need them. It is about believing in the enduring nature of things outside us. In short, it is about social trust, and about recognizing the loss we feel when continuity is disrupted through our reflecting on a past now possibly destabilized by the very act of reflecting on it.

Thus, because we by definition can only in hindsight be consciously aware of a lost unconscious belonging, we can neither measure wellbeing as a present condition, nor define it as a conscious reflection on a state of present being. In this sense, wellbeing (for Romantics at least) is a thing named in the present, but belonging to the past; for its recognition involves a form of reflection on a feeling undisturbed by reflection. That’s why there are hundreds of definitions of wellbeing that somehow fail to capture it.

Wellbeing is a thing felt, not thought – a dynamic steady state – and our thinking of wellbeing signals the very insecurity that characterizes a past we now see at risk, a conceptual warning of what we fear losing, a need for others to help create new moments of collective agreement in which hope can again emerge.

For, when life is going well for us, we permit ourselves to take things for granted. It’s only when that which is taken-for-granted turns out to be otherwise – when our inductive assumptions prove wrong – that we simultaneously become aware of our aloneness while remembering the bliss we’ve now lost. Thus, wellbeing is not at all what any of us think, because it is thoughtless – its fullness being known in the belonging we so much feel the need for when belonging suddenly disappears – when lost hope must urgently be replaced by the belief that belonging can be remade.

That, in short, is why addressing the drivers of social trust is critical to understanding wellbeing’s loss; for reflecting on wellbeing sets trust seeking in motion, a coded way of acknowledging our desire to generate trust with others. The many calls today for human wellbeing and sustainable prosperity are, in other words, ways of spawning an awareness that society itself is indeed quite unwell, and that we need to work together to fix it.

### **The Role of Uncertainty**

Yet, while wellbeing may be (quite literally) not what you or I think, it is wrong to believe that ignorance is bliss; for ignorance cannot be recognized without knowing. As a homeless friend once put it, “You don’t know what you don’t know; because not knowing defines ignorance”. The rhetoric of wellbeing, on the other hand, is the result of knowing, a perception of the past that emerges in the past’s absence – that is through knowledge.

By contrast, existentialism (and especially the existential phenomenology that informs the anthropology of Paul Stoller) is not only about rethinking the past as a creatively embodied exercise. It is also, because of this creative possibility, about emotional gain, about taking our sufferings and making not only new meaning, but artful meaning – even if that demands taking a flaw, as the Baroque sculptor, Bernini, once said, and turning it so much into the centerpiece of a new work of art that the new work could not have existed

without it. Indeed, this hope – that wellbeing is also about emotional gain – is what incites anthropologists, like Paul Stoller, to take certain risks with the unknown, and to take them again and again.

In this sense, engaged fieldwork over a lifetime is about the emotional gain we hope for when we acknowledge that fulfillment is not the personal experience we so often make of it in the self-help books that millions read. It's not, that is, just about coming to grips with one's own mortality; it's about embeddedness. For no amount of success can make a person feel well while living in complete isolation.

Were this otherwise, we would not witness so much deep unhappiness in countries where material welfare is secure; nor would we have those who have abundant resources fleeing violent environments for global capitals where they feel they can express their successes under the watchful eyes of every other upwardly mobile person on earth. Wellbeing, in other words, requires the 'Other'.

Indeed, what emerges in Stoller's view of wellbeing is the importance of experiencing both the unknown and the ineffable that together allow us to witness more creatively what is feasible in our own lives. This need is what brings Stoller to focus on the life-long work of engaged fieldworkers like Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl. Knowledge of the deep emotionality of how others make meaning is a kind of knowledge that is only gained by taking risks with difference.

Thus, wellbeing is not only a thing recognized in the past – something unfettered by critical thinking – but a human potential. Here, knowledge emerges as the inevitable foundation for remaking ourselves – the foundation for making better rather than poorer meaning; the basis for recreating a fuller life with others. That is why exploring boundaries is critical for social health; because that's how we get new knowledge, create new ideas, and grow emotionally.

Because wellbeing, in this line of thought, is about social trust and the stability that comes of shared awareness, it emerges and reemerges through faith: faith that others will be there for us; faith that they will behave mutually in making meaning when wellbeing is threatened. This faith is not only the foundation of wellbeing, but the foundation of society itself – a belief in goodness and its potential. This faith is not only what allows anthropologists to become deeply, and at times even dangerously, involved in the lived experience of other, but the link that allowed Rouch, Holtedahl, and Stoller himself to remain engaged with the very things that otherwise might have undone them.

Faith being central, risk-taking becomes critical. Because faith in others is the outcome of many experiences that collectively lead us to feel we can, even against the odds, create harmony with the world we inhabit. Because counting on others means having the faith that stability can be built. Because feeling life's continuities gives us the strength to cope with the instabilities that are what life is. And because our many experience of the same event produce, as Aristotle once argued, "the effect of a single experience" (Clark 1975). In other words, wellbeing is about wanting inductive certainty as much as it is about a paradise lost – about the belief that mutual social relations can have similarly good outcomes in the future because they have done so in the past.

However, induction itself deserves critical unpacking; because when things turn out to be not what we think, we question ourselves. We ask what went enough wrong to undo our perceived wellbeing. Because when what we learn does not lead to new knowledge, when

our many experience do not allow us to make the right decision at any given moment, the whole enterprise of learning from others is put at risk.

And this is why it is important to listen to what creative anthropologists tell us about the importance of risk-taking in understanding the emotional lives of others. Having known what can be learned from long-term exposure to difference, it becomes our individual responsibility to help safeguard environments that remain open to free thinking when social insecurity strikes.

Human wellbeing, in summary, is as fragile as it is perceived: a healthy nation or globe may be measured by a decline in the impact of a devastating disease; but even a quite healthy population may feel very unwell (Napier et al. 2014). Though societies can gauge themselves against various measures of mortality and morbidity, even the highest of scores on any given measure of physical health will not abate a culture of complaint in which a sense of unhappiness and a divisive mistrust prevail.

Indeed, a nation may be wholly equipped to solve a threat to public health, while still being quite convinced that things are not well at all. At such times, those working to tackle a critical social problem affecting us all may get more meaning from scaring us about the future than from doing something about it.

The persistence of that disjunction – between health and wellbeing – is, therefore, precisely why human wellbeing must now become an educational priority.

### **Education and Future Wellbeing**

Throughout the academic world there is an ongoing conversation about how our moral obligations to the future affect the ways in which we define our disciplines and our professional and personal relationships to them. How do we protect the ‘social contract’ as defined by Locke and Rousseau against Adam Smith’s self-interested formulation, in which the reciprocity of mercantile activities themselves are thought to constitute a social contract that is both binding and reliable?

In my multicultural and very urban university, and in educational setting across the globe, such challenges now coalesce around the areas of intercultural interactions, sustainable environments, global health, and human wellbeing – each reflecting, as it were, both a ‘grand challenge’ to our skill sets across disciplines, as well as an ethical obligation to make things better.

Of these four broad areas, it is surely the last – human wellbeing – that is, as we now recognize, the most difficult to define and to locate in any given field of expertise. What, we may ask, is being measured when the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan promotes a policy of Gross National Happiness? What may be understood in the claim that the citizens of Denmark are Europe’s happiest people? A ‘gross national’ anything is a condition thought to be measurable; yet an expression of happiness may to the contrary express something ineffable. What is more, human wellbeing is defined quite variably. So what actually is being measured?

Unlike ‘health’, ‘survival’, or ‘sustainability’, wellbeing is largely a perceived state, a sense that one’s efforts, even one’s suffering, can have an instrumental and beneficial impact that is widespread. Human wellbeing, in this sense, is a social construct. It is (regardless of how we try to define or assess it) about an individually perceived trust in the social contract; about the welfare that emerges out of collective investment; about the empathic sensibility that each of us cultivates in the particular social place we inhabit.

Because of these complexities, measuring wellbeing often does not lead where it should – namely, to an acceptance of the social dimensions of perceived goodness. This in itself is surprising. Because, in spite of how exquisite a psychologically controlled measure may appear, the final test of wellbeing always stands outside of what can be experimentally controlled, precisely because it is so profoundly social and experientially negotiated.

This idea is easily demonstrated. Imagine we are in the controlled environment of a hospital ward. As in a lab experiment, we have exacting conditions: two patients side by side with precisely the same bone fracture, the same levels of care, and the same expressions of concern and empathy from caregivers. What might be the social conditions that could give rise to a divergent manifestation of perceived wellbeing?

Think basic concepts; for the issue is about the simple perception of wellness. One of our two patients broke his leg pushing a child out of the way of an oncoming car; the other experienced the same fracture after sliding down an icy staircase left unattended to by a greedy landlord. What we see before us are identical fractures, modes of treatment, and (hopefully) clinical outcomes; however, how wellbeing is understood at the level of perception could not be more different.

Here is another example. Twins live in identical apartments, work identical jobs, and make identical wages. Both flats are directly above a noisy underground station. Both must respond to the repetitive noxious stimulant of the rumbling trains beneath their floors. Both remain in their flats the exact same number of hours, exposed identically to the irritation of train noise and vibration, but one has a summer cottage that, even though never visited, exists as an escape destination. Yet again, the perception of wellbeing of the two could not be more different.

Wellbeing, in other words, is exceedingly difficult to measure, and statements about feeling well or not well cannot in themselves be taken as conclusive proof that all is actually okay. Cultures vary significantly in what is considered to be appropriate expressions of wellness or its absence. Many say they are ‘fine’ on the very day they harm themselves. Saying one is fine can even indicate its opposite, as so many ‘stiff upper lips’ make clear.

There is an inescapable conclusion here. This being that social wellbeing is difficult to measure (World Health Organization 2015), and not just because it is individually perceived, subject to constant variation, and so often unquantifiable (in spite of what statisticians may claim). Indeed, we know about its resistance to measurement by the very proliferation of research tools that exist to measure it. If one looks at indicators of so-called ‘social capital’ – for example, measures of a society’s willingness to contribute to social wellbeing – one can uncover several hundred definitions, each offering a somewhat different view of what is or is not an indicator of citizen wellbeing.

Such proliferation exists – and let’s register this – not because we need so many instruments, but because social empathy, like wellbeing, is equally challenging to measure. For our feelings, like human wellbeing itself, so often have less to do with understanding ‘health’ in the strict sense, than with understanding our ability to trust or not trust one another over time.

How do we know that perceived social continuity, and long-term creative engagement with an ‘Other’, are more important to human wellbeing than trying to quantify it? The answer is simple: while it may be time very well spent to refine our indicators of human happiness, the fact remains that perceiving wellbeing – that is, sensing its existence and value – is, as we now recognize, a cumulative endeavor.

No doubt, wellbeing can be expressed or felt in single events; but feelings are authenticated through repetition. We cannot describe a society as feeling ‘well’ if its sense of wellbeing is put repeatedly in doubt. Because of this need to transcend doubt, wellbeing has less to do with singular expressions of fidelity – of what we faithfully claim in specific statements about our relations with others – than it does with the belief both that sociality itself is durable, and that one can create and sustain it with an ‘Other’.

Human wellbeing, then, is built on social redundancy and its creative potential – that is, on being evidenced repeatedly in various and diverse settings. Its reality is by definition social, because its durability is known when witnessed diversely. It is through repetition – when “we are what we repeatedly do” – that, to again quote Aristotle, excellence emerges as “not an act but a habit”.

Thus, while any government can claim to work in the interest of its citizens, only those that consistently support the growth of social capital may be said to enhance human wellbeing. Indeed, when governments fail in this obligation it is usually churches or families that must take up the task, to the extent that a state’s failure to promote wellbeing may be in direct proportion to the degree to which it projects, as so many conservative governments do, such obligations into the religious and private spheres.

This being so, any culture or state that supports high levels of social capital is, by extension, attempting to provide the opportunity – the space – for nourishing collective wellbeing and the belief that a better future is an important social aspiration. But when states (or religions, or families) fail in this obligation, other institutions must take up the task – hence today the increasing importance of our schools and universities, which now, as a final target of blame for social unrest, are equally held accountable for not instilling confidence in the future by producing better citizens.

But why, we may ask, should our universities, as places of higher learning, be today especially singled out for this task? There are many reasons, but four that are especially important.

The first reason is that without perceived wellbeing we have no choice but to attend to personal survival, retreating into what simple things we believe can allow us to persevere. Hardship can require new forms of collaboration and even on occasion enhance creativity (as the lives of so many artists amply demonstrate). But when people are made accountable to neo-liberal values (impacts, benchmarks, and deliverables) they retreat into their core disciplinary strengths as a survival strategy, and in so doing limit their creative potential.

Increased accountability means that funders and investors now demand in advance and up front an assessment of outcomes before the insecure investor becomes capable of showing any kind of trust or generosity. In business models, it is the spontaneous and explicit ‘elevator pitch’ (the ability to convey a message to a superior between floors while riding a lift) that is held up as desirable, admirable, and efficient. There is little time here for the expression of anything other than what one can say with complete certainty. Under such conditions, there is absolutely no ‘use’ for social redundancy, and no space for exploration of mutuality.

But redundancy is precisely the stuff of creativity. Indeed, Thomas Edison once famously said that “to invent you need a good imagination and a pile of junk”. What he understood intimately was that true inventiveness requires multiple failures, many experiments on and around that pile of junk. Edison had little respect for innovation – the reverse engineering, the rebuilding and refining of an existing thing, even as he built on the ideas of others.

Innovation, however, is very responsive to benchmarks and deliverable: is this new thing a better mousetrap? But invention is a wholly different matter. Influential minds of the 19th-century all thought that our most pressing public problem in the 20th-century would involve the disposal of horse manure in the face of exponential population growth. Nobody could imagine a fossil-fuel breathing motor car, let alone a light bulb, a phone, or a computer. For the innovatively obsessed neo-liberal, the pile of junk is only 'wasteful', 'useless', and 'redundant'; not 'potential', 'creative' and 'possible'.

The point here – and it must be emphasized – is that real change is the outcome of trial and error – lots of error in fact. Creativity (understood as the process of finding something new) is, like Edison's pile of junk, a very messy activity. Any inventor will tell you this. Invention require lots of imaginative superimposing of unlikely things – a real meditation on what the pile of junk might become, making the new art form out of the flaw, to the degree that the flaw becomes the new work's centerpiece. True invention does not, cannot, never did, and never will respond to the neo-liberal business obsession for benchmarks, deliverables, and immediate returns on investment. Innovation is a process driven by efficiency and a refinement of what is already known; it is not generous. Invention is a wholly different activity.

By analogy, a healthy society is one that is confident about its wellbeing. It is by definition socially generous. If society refuses to be generous at the level of welfare, we will all individually suffer as we retreat into whatever strategy of survival fits our personal need. We will drop our expectations and hopes for a better world and replace those hopes with simple greed. Bankers are best at this; indeed, in the aftermath of the last great financial collapse, the top 1,000 employees of financial markets in London awarded themselves on average £70,000 in bonuses while so many of their faithful investors of only the previous year stood by in financial ruin. We are all, in other words, infected when wellbeing is openly undermined by a dragon's den mentality now occupied by self-centered achievers.

The second reason has to do with failure of government. Though there is more than a strong argument for the claim that neo-liberalism is built on fear of the unknown, the second reason why educators must support the study of social wellbeing now is because if they don't, who will?

In his book on John Maynard Keynes Lord Skidelsky (2010), emeritus professor of political economy at the University of Warwick, argued that political clamoring about the need for financial cuts emphasizes the degree to which governments (as instruments of the people) have been replaced across the globe by financial markets (as an instrument of business). Citing Chicago economists who claim that austerity fails to restore public trust in markets, Skidelsky reminds us of Keynes's famous view.

What Keynes argued strongly (and in our financial panic we have forgotten), is that when the economy slows and demand falls short of supply governments (and now in their neo-liberal absence, universities) should increase, not reduce, their deficits (their investments in 'welfare') to make up for the lack of investment from the private sector. It is what, Skidelsky reminds us, Keynes called the 'paradox of thrift' in which we destroy our own opportunities for social reciprocity, for exchange, for invention, and, finally, for growth. If the welfare state does not, for instance, support the imaginative arts (literary or technical), who will – especially if the private sector won't? It is here where scholars like Paul Stoller can play

an essential role in shaping the future. Because if we don't take risk with redundancy and failure, who will?

The third reason is that when society cannot protect creativity, someone must. When the state fails in its welfare responsibilities (as it clearly has, for instance, in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States) there is no one outside of the university to take the risks necessary for creativity to be encouraged. In hard times, not only do individuals panic about protecting their personal territories, but because creativity has a very low conversion rate, businesses that once funded research (either through intellectual property cartels or through now-vanishing indirect costs on funded research) come to see no obvious profit margin in high-risk climates. We know this for many reasons, but one compelling example has to do with invention and creativity.

Awarded patents are a telling place to look at creativity in its most applied configurations. To be awarded a patent, any individual or corporation (defined legally as an individual) must demonstrate to an experienced examiner (like the once-employed Albert Einstein) that the proposed idea is new, useful, and non-obvious to any user of the craft in question. No patent in other words can be granted unless the idea presented is unique, has a clear application, and would not have been thought up by a practitioner of a given art in the normal course of his or her work.

Yet despite the clear emphasis of this process on the encouragement of producing things that appear to an experienced examiner to meet these criteria, only 3 percent of all patents actually get enough taken up by society to the extent that they produce a business profit. It must be emphasized here that we are not even talking about a majority of simply bad ideas; we are referring to ideas that experienced people find new and useful. In short, with only 3 percent of all "new and useful" things producing profit, few bonus driven companies would rightly today take the risk of supporting invention. Businesses cannot be expected under such terms to step forward. If neo-liberal governments also by definition will not, universities must.

The fourth, and final, reason why it is now the university's task to build confidence in the future by promoting social wellbeing is because retreating from the social contract (i.e., cutting back) erodes and eventually destroys our confidence, our willingness to accept that new problems require new ways of engaging one another as social subjects looking for creative solutions.

When we cut back, the social environments that sustain our collective sense of common good disappear; human welfare and wellbeing suffer; we destroy creativity itself. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche once said that "in times of peace the war-like man attacks himself". But Nietzsche also argued that inequality produces anxiety, and anxiety new thinking.

Being tough on others, this argument goes, makes them think outside the box. But the toll of innovation under duress is staggering. Moreover, the haunting predictive value of social capital enhancing creativity cannot be ignored.

High social capital states are also high welfare states; for welfare states embrace the idea that wellbeing is as much if not more social than personal in nature. High welfare states are founded on the belief that once basic needs are met; human variation can proliferate – if not perhaps in the draconian manner Nietzsche imagined. Argue as we may over the impact of

anxiety and inequality on creativity, the fact remains that as wellbeing becomes less social our ability to see our morals and ethics as social in nature is also eroded, and sometimes seriously.

Though this argument may seem purely ethical, it is also biological. Every time we nod affirmatively and in good faith to one another we promote human wellbeing; because our welfare is confirmed redundantly in the hundreds of times a day we look at one another and agree. It is biology's way of affirming basic human contract. Neurobiology has shown this to be the case: social agreement affirms collective wellbeing, and the neural growth that sociality makes possible is indisputable. This fact alone brings a new and powerful dimension to the common Scandinavian assertion that it is impolite not to look others in the eye when speaking with them.

Because of this biological fact, when we limit – for political or financial reasons – our ability to make meaning socially, we also limit our ability to believe in collective wellbeing. What is worse, we also enhance our fear that betrayal proliferates; for betrayal is that opposite kind of nodding where perceived agreement is false.

Today, by example, I cannot read a single tabloid on my way to work in London that does not contain at least one article about corruption – about the political betrayal of voters by their elected officials. For betrayal is quite literally a misreading of that affirmative nodding. To say one has been betrayed by another, is to say that one misread what one took for social trust. Betrayal not only dislodges us socially, but it makes us shy about making social investments because we not only mistrust another, but also our own ability to make accurate judgments. Here, the past is not filled with wellbeing, but with the experiences that eroded it.

And what this suggests is important. When we limit, undermine, or destroy our ability to meet eye-to-eye in welfare enhancing social activity – when we, that is, lose our desire for sensuous engagement – we undermine also the very skill through which such forms of trust have been cultivated and nurtured over time.

This is why trust is so hard to build and so easy to destroy. If we as educators do not build it, who today will? Certainly not short-term, outcome obsessed institutions, whether they be business-focused, or governmental, or alas the very universities that claim to protect the life of the mind. For each and every time we fail to see our morals and ethics as fundamentally social in nature – that is to say, as part of our sensuous engagements – we not only voluntarily limit our own welfare, but also limit our capacity to recognize what is lost when we forget what can be gained through being with one another and witnessing both life's joys and its tribulations.

In short, when we lose faith in the social contract, we settle for lesser meaning. We accept bad meaning rather than no meaning because human wellbeing has been undone and we need meaning no matter what.

Why, then, are open expressions by welfare states of that social support which rebukes thrift so important to human wellbeing? Because without showing how welfare states enhance our opportunities to believe in one another, there can be no argument for investing so heavily in our collective wellbeing. More importantly, perhaps, there can be no argument – as Paul Stoller's entire career has shown – for understanding the social spaces between us where our sensuous abilities can flourish if only given the chance.

## References

- Bell, M. (ed.) 2016. *The Essential Goethe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Clark, S.R.L. 1975. *Aristotle's Man: Speculations upon Aristotelian Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fox, J.J. 1990. *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Howes, D. and C. Classen. 2014. *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Napier, A.D. et al. 2014. Culture and Health. *The Lancet*, 384, November 1: 1607-1639.
- . 1992. *Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art, and Symbolic Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nietzsche, F. 1886 [1966]. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House.
- Pope, A. 2016 [1733-34]. *An Essay on Man*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1995 [1990]. Onself as Another (trans. *Soi-même comme un autre*). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Skidelsky, R. 2010. *Keynes: The Return of the Master*. London: Allen Lane.
- Stoller, P. 2008. *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2004. *Stranger in the Village of the Sick: A Memoir of Cancer, Sorcery, and Healing*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1997a. *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1997b. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 1995. *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power and the Hauka of West Africa*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 1992. *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The senses in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stoller, P. and C. Olkes. 1989. *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- World Health Organization. 2015. *Beyond Bias: Exploring the Cultural Contexts of Health and Well-being Measurement*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.