WELL & GOOD

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Well & Good

Morality, meaning and happiness

Richard Eckersley

To my mother and father.
For my children.

Contents

On 20 March 1995, members of a Japanese religious sect, Aum Shinrikyo (or Aum Supreme Truth), carried out a nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway, leaving twelve people dead and thousands ill. One of several 'doomsday cults' linked in recent years to mass murder and suicide, Aum Shinrikyo attracted many highly intelligent and well-educated young people, including chemists, physicists and medical specialists. As the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development observes, these people possessed a formidable mastery of scientific know-how, but not an iota of know-why. 'I did not want my life to be meaningless,' a senior sect member said.

Across the Pacific some years later, a special young American was grappling with similar questions. Conceived in the hope that he would turn out to be a genius, Doron William Blake was named after the nineteenth-century English romantic poet and painter William Blake, from whom his mother claims direct descent. His father is among some of 'the world's finest intellects'—Nobel laureates, professors, artists and musicians—who donated semen to the Repository for Germinal Choice—better known as the genius sperm bank—set up in 1980 by a Californian millionaire optometrist. His mother knows his father only as Batch 28. Doron is, indeed, mathematically and musically very

gifted, but he is no Nietzschean superman. His manner is diffident and he stammers. He finds science boring and he hates competitive sport. In 2001, he was studying comparative religion at college. He told an interviewer: 'You know why I find religion so interesting? Because I am not sure quite who I am or what is meant for me. I want to feel I have my place in the universe.'

Questions of meaning frame contemporary world events, the most dramatic being the recent acts of global terrorism and the wars waged against it. But these events are just the tip of the iceberg of a much bigger convulsion taking place in our view of the world and our place in it. How they develop and are resolved will depend fundamentally on how we, individually and collectively, respond to this situation.

Meaning in life is a crucial aspect of human wellbeing. We need to have reasons to live, to know what makes life worth living. For most of our existence as a species, meaning was pretty much a social given. Children grew up in a close network of family and community relationships that largely defined their world—their values and beliefs, identity and place. People knew little of what lay outside that world, of other ways of living, except through the intrusions of trade or conquest. Beyond the mortal realm, they had a religious faith that gave them a place in the cosmic scheme of things. Much of life was predictable and what wasn't was explained in terms of the supernatural. The old ways might often have been harsh and oppressive, but they allowed people to make sense of their lives at several levels, to answer the fundamental questions of existence: Who am I? Where have I come from? Why am I here? As the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said: 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.'

Today, things are different, especially in the West, but increasingly elsewhere as well. The speed, scope and scale of economic, social and cultural change have made the past seemingly irrelevant, the future uncertain. Family and community ties have been loosened. We know

much more of the rest of the world and how differently others live and think. And while most people today retain some form of religious belief, this is not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. Initially, as these changes occurred, we were convinced they represented progress. The old certainties gave way to the exhilarating possibilities of human betterment through economic growth, social reform, scientific discovery and technological development. Even if life's meaning became less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer.

Over the past few decades this faith in material progress has given way to growing doubt. We now live in 'postmodern' times, marked by the end of the dream of creating a perfect social order and the realisation that some of our problems may be unsolvable. Despite our efforts, war, poverty, hunger and disease remain with us. Science and technology, intended to give us mastery over the natural and social world, have instead (or, at best, also) created risks on an unprecedented global scale. The result is a world characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism, fragmentation and contingency. The profound paradox of our situation was well described by the scholar Marshall Berman, who said: 'To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.'

Meaning in life is now less a social given and more a matter of personal choice; it has to be constructed, or chosen, from a proliferation of options. Some writers celebrate this development as offering unparalleled opportunities for personal growth and development. 'Liquid identities'—multiple, flexible selves—are undermining traditional notions of identity as a single, stable entity. The new technologies of cyberspace assist the process: players joining online virtual communities through 'multi-user domains' can move from one computer window to another, changing personas like costumes. 'This is more real

than my real life,' says one player, a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man; for another, 'RL' (real life) is just 'one more window'.

There is something in all this. From today's perspective, the conformity and constraints of the past are suffocating. Martin Scorsese's film *The Age of Innocence* shows how thoroughly, and subtly, the lives of the rich in nineteenth-century New York were ruled by the norms, customs and traditions of their class and times. Yet the celebrations of our situation also reveal a very postmodern quality: the inability to separate reality from fantasy. The openness and complexity of life today can make finding meaning and the qualities that contribute to it—autonomy, competence, purpose, direction, balance, identity and belonging—extremely hard, especially for young people, for whom these are the destinations of the developmental journeys they are undertaking. Another vital quality, hope, is also easily lost if life is episodic, and lacks coherence and predictability. Faced with a bewildering array of options and opportunities, we can become immobilised—or propelled into trying to have them all. Pulling together the threads of our postmodern lives isn't easy.

While loosening social ties can be liberating for individuals, and create more dynamic, diverse and tolerant societies, too much cultural flexibility can have the effect of trivialising the convictions and commitments that we need to find meaning and to control our own lives. Tolerance, taken too far, becomes indifference, and freedom abandonment. Our power as a people comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency; from pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising individual choice in order to maximise personal satisfaction.

Beyond the risks of excessive choice and freedom is the evidence that these can be, in any case, illusory. Social constraints remain, and in some cases are increasing. Sex and cars, for example, are both modern symbols of freedom that are highly prescribed by rules and

realities; class and privilege still substantially define opportunity. The Belgian sociologist Mark Elchardus argues that, for all the importance placed on individual freedom in modern societies, many contemporary developments threaten, not strengthen, this freedom: 'There seems to be a growing gap between the cultural emphasis on autonomy and individual choice, on the one hand, and the experienced lack of autonomy, on the other.'

There is more. The postmodern ideal is also a Trojan horse for the social promotion of particular choices and values. Western societies present a façade of virtually unlimited autonomy that disguises a powerful preference. We may have abundant choices as consumers, but to choose not to consume requires real willpower. We are told, as part of the new pluralism, that traditional values have passed their use-by date. The values of self-restraint and moderation (and by implication, their converse, social obligation and responsibility) were shaped by scarcity; in a time of plenty, they have become obsolete. And 'plenty' is symbolised by those temples of consumption and indulgence, the vast shopping malls which have replaced churches and town halls as the community centres of modern life. The proposition that past values no longer apply might seem plausible in a culturally diverse and seemingly abundant world. But it is untenable when considered in a context anchored in psychological, social, global and environmental realities. That it effectively defines 'the good life' today is a measure of the moral force of the economy, and the fast-paced, high-pressure, hyper-consumer lifestyle which it depends on, even demands.

In this historical evolution, we have altered profoundly our notions of the 'self', of what it is to be human. The self of the early Middle Ages was an immortal soul enclosed in the shell of a mortal body. Today, according to the American psychologist Philip Cushman, we have created 'the empty self', stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era, he says, has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made

cohesive by being constantly 'filled up' with consumer products, celebrity news and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth.

Martin Seligman, another American psychologist, argues that one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self, and the larger that entity, the more meaning people can derive. To the extent that it is now difficult for people to form these relationships with God, country or family, he says, meaning in life will be difficult to find. 'The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning.' Meaning and identity require a foundation. Without it, Australian futurist Sohail Inayatullah observes, 'the result is a reality with too many selves—the swift Teflon vision of the future, in which identity is about speed and the collection of a multitude of experiences'. The Teflon self is not glued to history, does not stick to pain, but instead moves on to different pleasures; it is choice that is essential.

Lacking quality we seek quantity; in the absence of commitment and certainty we pursue diversity and variety. We see growth at the extremes of self and meaning, a loss of balance: pathological self-preoccupation at one end, the total subjugation or surrender of the individual self at the other. A vast consumer economy has grown to minister to the needs of 'the empty self'; and religious cults and funda-mentalist movements flourish as people struggle to find what society no longer offers.

Despite the cultural propaganda of our times, it is clear that constantly filling up an empty self is a poor substitute for the web of meaning provided by deep and enduring personal, social and spiritual attachments. We are told that a highly individualistic, consumer lifestyle is compatible with strong families, social cohesion and equity, environmental sustainability and a sense of spiritual connectedness to the universe in which we live. It is not.

This critique of our way of life may strike many as exaggerated. But it is an attempt to give a clear definition, a sharp edge, to issues that

are, in reality, diffuse, often unconscious, and hard to discern from 'inside' our culture. To argue that Western society is seriously flawed in these ways is not to say a meaningful life is impossible—only more difficult. Nor is it to suggest that we return to old ways. Rather, we need to go forward towards new goals, guided by different values.

Given the era we live in, the challenge we face can be framed in terms of individual choice. We can choose to go with the flow of modern Western culture, and pursue a life of personal ambition, distraction and gratification. This can be a pleasurable enough existence, particularly if nothing goes wrong and we keep getting what we think we want; but it is a life that lacks depth and resilience and comes at a price to others and at a cost to the future. Alternatively, we can resist the pressures to conform to social expectations, powerful though they are, and choose to find meaning in our lives by focusing on the things that history, religion and science show matter most.

Realistically, the choice is not that stark. What matters is where on the continuum between the two extremes of total acceptance and total rejection we choose to locate ourselves in the quest for meaning—the focal point towards which the 'self' will be drawn even while it is being pushed and pulled about by the demands and temptations of modern life. The research evidence suggests we know in our hearts what is important and what is right. But living by these beliefs can be hard when society appears to operate according to different moral rules.

There has never been a period in human history when so much hangs in the balance between what is and what might be, when so much depends on the choices we make as individuals, when it is so clear that we are, each of us, 'decision-makers' in deciding the destiny of humankind. It is a time, then, that offers so much meaning. And yet, because of the pressures, preoccupations and priorities of life today, we don't sense the significance of this moment—or sensing it, seem unable to hold it and be inspired by it. This is one of the most profound paradoxes of our times. Recognising this can help us make the right

choices—and so find more meaning in our lives and improve our well-being.

This book is about all these things—about progress and how we define and measure it, about wellbeing and what influences it. It is not a linear narrative; nor is it comprehensive. Rather it examines progress and wellbeing from several different perspectives and scales. It is mainly about rich Western nations because we in the West tend to assume we represent the leading edge of progress. It is also mainly about the more intangible, cultural dimensions of life such as meaning, values, goals, identity and belonging, because we tend, in Western societies, to manage our affairs as if material things matter most.

The importance of these cultural contributions to wellbeing provides the common theme that I attempt to weave through the chapters that follow, and which deal variously with modern Western culture, happiness, quality of life, health, young people's wellbeing, science, religion, the media, the future, economic growth, social justice and equity, the environment, and politics. The chapters range from the very broad—global growth, equity and sustainability—to the very specific—youth suicide. If the choice seems idiosyncratic, it reflects the shifting emphasis of my work over the past twenty years. However, I believe this eclectic approach also serves an important purpose: it demonstrates the connectedness of things, that whatever the approach and for all the complexity and contradiction, there emerges an underlying coherence in the picture of life today that can help us understand what we need to do. I have included a fair few cross-references between chapters, indicating where specific issues are discussed in more detail or from another perspective, both to strengthen the thematic connections and to allow each chapter to be read as a stand-alone essay.

There are two purposes behind this book: intellectual curiosity and social advocacy. I find the topic of how our species and the Earth are faring endlessly fascinating. Research literature remains heavily

fragmented, even within disciplines, so there is the excitement of stumbling across a new vein of work that informs the larger view. There is also the frustration of trying to make sense of contradictory evidence and conflicting opinions on critical issues. And finally there is the challenge of trying to piece the picture together, to make sense of it all. In all this, I try to be as objective and as open-minded as possible.

But this is also an exercise in changing the world. I am constantly surprised by how limited the public and political agenda is, how many things we assume or take as given. Despite the uncertainties, I believe the evidence demonstrates that we are not managing our affairs nearly as well as we could; that we deal more crudely and clumsily with complex matters than we should; and that, while the course we are taking may not necessarily lead to catastrophe (although it might), it is not the way to make the most of our potential and opportunities.

Implicit in this dual purpose is an admission that while the content of the book is mainly scientific and scholarly, the inspiration behind it is personal. Three experiences stand out as influencing my interest in this area of work: the first, which I'd forgotten until I re-read some diaries I'd kept as a young man, was attending as an undergraduate a series of lectures on the ecological crisis facing the Earth; the second was returning home, to the West, after two years travelling through Africa, Eastern and Western Europe, the Soviet Union and Asia when I was in my twenties, and being struck by the powerful cultural myths that underpin our way of life; and the third was when I was working at the Australian Commission for the Future, and came across, almost by accident, several studies that revealed children's and teenagers' bleak expectations of the future of the world and the fate of humanity. All left a deep impression, and convinced me that we needed to rethink where we were going as a civilisation and a species.

The perspective of this book is part of a different way of doing science. Rather than constantly refining the questions asked and the methods used to obtain more certain answers, it involves trying to

improve our understanding of the world by drawing together knowledge from many areas of research and scholarship. Science emphasises the creation of new knowledge, but we can also combine existing knowledge to produce new understanding. I do empirical research, but I am mainly interested in synthesis. Synthesis means striving for coherence, rather than precision. American biologist Edward O. Wilson, in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, says it is the key to the future: 'We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesisers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.'

Synthesis is especially important in dealing with the uncertainties and limitations of scientific research in understanding things such as societies and ecosystems. These are complex adaptive systems which, to cite one definition, are characterised by many different entities, most of which are more or less weakly interacting, and with interactions that are diffuse and non-linear. As systems they show openness, fuzziness, messiness, individuality, novelty, learning and adaptation. They blur the distinction between object and environment. Their dynamics show surprise and emergence, and it is not clear in what sense they are determined, or if they are inherently predictable.

Scientists are divided about the usefulness of the new field of complexity; there are true believers, doubters and agnostics. Although my reading in this field is limited, I've found descriptions of complex systems useful in grappling with the relationships that constitute the causal patterns and pathways of health and wellbeing, including specific problems such as youth suicide, one area in which I work. Keep this point about complexity always in mind in reading this book. While I have simplified some matters to suit a lay audience, I have tried not to paper over the contradiction and ambiguity that characterise many areas of research.

Systems thinking is another, related area of research that offers

useful insights. A psychologist working in the field once told me that two particular points emerging from systems thinking were relevant to my work: if you work hard to optimise one aspect of a system without paying attention to the rest, you will sub-optimise overall; and tampering without understanding in systems often produces unanticipated side-effects. These principles might sound like common sense, but we largely ignore them in managing our lives, personally and socially.

All the same, synthesis has its occupational hazards. While I have a fair grasp of the research literature on some of the subjects I write about, on others I don't. My reading is often opportunistic, based on colleagues' recommendations, following a citation trail in journal papers, or being alerted by a newspaper report. The danger here is that what I read and draw on is not representative of the literature in a particular field, and may not be generally accepted by those working in it. This is why I say I am striving for coherence in the larger picture, rather than precision in every detail. While I try to be accurate in discussing the research, my case does not hang on the truth or reliability of any single fact or finding, but on the way these come together to provide a picture of life today. This can lead to another hazard, to which I am sometimes accused of falling victim: the temptation to select the facts that fit the story you want to tell. It is a temptation that is hard, perhaps even impossible, to resist (as any postmodernist will tell you). But it is also an easy accusation to make, often levelled by those unwilling or unable to engage in a debate that reaches beyond their own expertise or area of knowledge.

I have been criticised by journal reviewers for being too speculative, for going beyond the data. But for me, trying to make sense of the information, to place it in a wide context, is the most stimulating part of the exercise. I'm sometimes struck in my reading by the way the most sophisticated technical analysis of a problem can produce the narrowest, most superficial intellectual interpretation. I don't know

whether this is a product of training, or different intellects, or both; qualitative researchers, less absorbed in manipulating figures, are less likely to suffer from this problem. Writers, freed from the requirement to stay with the evidence and relying on their wit and intelligence rather than experimental technique, can show more insight into an issue than scientists. I often find myself straining against the limitations of the data, and drawn towards the more refined, complex reasoning of writers and philosophers.

Language is another formidable challenge in synthesis. Much of the research is highly arcane, based on different theoretical constructs and using elaborate statistical analyses and technical terminology. Even qualitative research uses its own languages, which vary from discipline to discipline. In some areas—for example, the sociological writing on postmodernity—I could be thrilled at the insights scholars revealed or have no idea what they were saying—often within the same work. Scientific language can be extraordinarily abstruse; but it can also have its own poetry. I have quoted extensively to show this, and to use voices other than my own.

I also want to be open about the extent to which I am drawing on the knowledge, expertise, authority and opinions of many other scholars and researchers—and not hide this fact in notes at the end of the book. I should add that many of these 'other voices' are American, reflecting both the United States' cultural role and dominance, and that it does so much of the world's scientific research. Americans have data on psychological qualities and public attitudes spanning decades— sometimes fifty years or more—that Australians cannot match, and which are crucial in charting deep changes in societies.

Another point to bear in mind is that, in many areas, the data used in analyses can be crude—especially the statistics on global conditions and trends. A colleague, a world authority on population estimates, recently remarked to me that he was dismayed to read in a book by a world authority on international income estimates that the income

estimates were considerably less reliable than the population estimates.

More importantly, some research fields are moving rapidly, and core ideas are strongly contested. What researchers believe this year is not necessarily what they believed a year or two ago—and probably not what they will think in a few years' time. Issues that are currently being fiercely debated include global income distribution, how social factors affect health, and the nature of psychological wellbeing. For the synthesiser, the discomfort of trespassing on others' turf is offset by the comfort of not having a professional stake in conflicts over ideas and theories to which researchers may have devoted their life's work. This position also reduces what is otherwise a powerful source of bias: a tendency to consider the 'big picture' in the context of the small research findings—in other words, to over-state their significance—rather than to place the small in the context of the large, as the synthesiser does.

The science in many key areas is quite young and undeveloped. For example, many of the associations between social conditions and health and wellbeing are statistical correlations. As any statistician will tell you, correlation is not causation. If two factors—say, income and life expectancy, or age and life satisfaction—are correlated, this only means that when increases occur in one, we often see increases in the other (if they are positively correlated) or decreases (if they are negatively correlated). It says nothing about whether the rise in one causes the rise or fall in the other. The relationship could be causal, with the factors acting on each other either directly or through one or more mediating variables. But the relationship could also be due to other variables that act separately on both factors—or to pure coincidence. And even where a causal relationship exists, its direction can be unclear; in complex systems it can often be two-way. Are materialistic people less happy because they are materialistic, or are unhappy people more likely to be materialistic? (It's probably a bit of both.) While researchers are developing increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques to tease out the causal pathways in such associations, in many

areas we have not yet done the studies over time necessary to prove that one factor is causally linked to another.

Questions of causation become trickier as you move away from immediate causes of individual health to more distant social, economic and cultural causes of population health, and from physical diseases to states of mind. Consider how long it took to establish conclusive evidence that smoking cigarettes caused lung cancer and heart disease (a situation where there are two distinct groups of people—smokers and non-smokers—and a direct biological link between the behaviour and the outcome), and so how much more difficult it is to establish that increasing individualism is a factor in the rise in youth suicide (which I have tried to do). As you move from proximal personal factors upstream to the more distal social factors in studying health and well-being, the science becomes fuzzier and the politics sharper. But the potential population health benefits are greater. A challenge for health research is to accept that standards of evidence applied to proximal associations are inappropriate in exploring distal links.

In doing this work, I have been struck time and again by the realisation that we are beyond my comprehension; that, however hard I try, I am just not intelligent enough to grasp what is happening; that the world is both simple and complex, fragile and robust; that, in some vague social parallel with quantum physics, the very act of trying to measure subjective qualities changes those qualities; and that any attempt to explain the world—to impose any logical 'story' upon it—inevitably distorts its nature or reality. I often feel I am skating on thin ice—the thin ice of available evidence and my capacity to understand that evidence, and so of my own convictions about these things.

Science often struggles with those aspects of life that are subtle, intangible, tenuous, abstract, subjective. Yet these aspects make up a big part of the human condition. In *Biology and the Riddle of Life*, the Australian biologist Charles Birch says there is an enormous gap

between what science describes and what we experience, between the mechanisms of life and what it is to be alive. 'There are two points of view—the inside and the outside, the subjective and the objective, from within and from without…[T]he solution to the riddle of life is only possible through the proper connection of the outer with the inner experience.'

Given all this, it may well be that science will never give us clear-cut and objective recipes for making life better. Nevertheless, it is contributing to a growing willingness to question and discuss what, all things considered, makes a good life. For me—and this is a radical view in science—it is preferable that we obtain imperfect knowledge about the important issues of our times than precise answers to what are, in the overall scheme of things, trivial questions.

1>   the ultimate question

Is life getting better or worse?

The question will strike many as so broad as to be unanswerable, even meaningless. Surely, they will say, life is getting better in some respects, worse in others; or better for some people, but worse for others. Yet I think it is the defining question of our times. There are good reasons why we should take it seriously.

One reason is social. Our societies are not static, but changing rapidly, especially through economic growth and technological development. While change may affect some individuals adversely and others beneficially, it also has a pervasive influence on societies as a whole. We assume the direction of change is, all in all, making life better. Also, the bluntness of the question matches the crudeness of the indicator with which we measure this 'improvement': GDP or Gross Domestic Product. Another reason is personal. Our lives may well be improving in some ways, and not in others. But life is not lived in impermeable compartments. What happens in one area of life flows through to others. We live a life, not a collection of bits of it.

So the question reflects a coherence in our lives, socially and personally, that needs greater acknowledgment. How we answer the question bears on almost every issue on the public and political agenda.

However, public and scholarly debates rarely reflect this connected-ness. In fragmenting our consideration of life into separate issues, policies, portfolios, sectors and disciplines, we dodge the hard questions of how all these things interact with each other to shape the life we lead and the societies we live in.

A central tenet of modern Western culture is the belief in progress, the belief that life should get better—healthier, wealthier, happier, more satisfying and interesting. Is this the case? If our answer is 'yes', we can continue to assume that human history (or more accurately, Western civilisation) is on the right trajectory, and needs nothing more than periodic course corrections—the task of governments. If the answer is 'no', then the most fundamental assumptions about our way of life—assumptions that have long been broadly agreed and taken for granted—must be reassessed. The task we face goes far beyond the adjustment of policy levers by government; it demands an open and spirited debate about how we are to live and what matters in our lives.

The question is difficult to answer objectively on the basis of current trends, patterns and prospects. Every relevant issue is contested; experts continue to argue over whether our future will be bleak or rosy, nationally and globally. There are pessimists and optimists about economic prospects, the state of the environment, population growth, technological change, social justice and equity, war and peace. Some commentators believe that if we are resolute and continue on our present path of economic and technological development, humanity can overcome the obstacles and threats it faces and enter a new golden age of peace, prosperity and happiness. Others foresee an accelerating deterioration in the human condition leading to a major calamity, even the extinction of our species (along with many others).

I suspect our individual temperaments incline us one way or the other. But at a more rational level, one reason we remain divided is that the data are incomplete, or open to differing interpretations. We lack a full understanding of what constitutes 'the good life'; we do not have

good measures of many aspects of it. Furthermore, most analysts view the question through the prism of their own particular expertise, giving a distorted or incomplete picture. To the *economist*, we are consumers making rational choices to maximise our utility or personal satisfaction; to the *psychologist*, we are self-actualising beings who seek to fulfil basic needs such as autonomy and belonging; to the *physician*, we are individuals who want to be free of disease and disability; and to the *ecologist*, we are one of millions of species whose existence depends on our interactions with other species and our physical environment.

However, the issue goes deeper than even this. Essentially, we are seeing a clash of paradigms, a confrontation between beliefs that are fiercely held and worldviews to which people are deeply committed. Thus the question is one about which it is impossible to be wholly dispassionate or objective. It is also so broad as to be beyond the expert grasp of any one individual. Any discussion of the question must be partial—in both senses of the word.

The protagonists in this clash of paradigms are usually divided into optimists and pessimists. They might better be labelled linear optimists and systemic optimists. Linear optimists believe we are 'on track' to a better future, and that the problems we face are mere 'glitches' we can iron out of the system. Systemic optimists, on the other hand, argue that we are straying ever further off the track and that our troubles are symptoms of a deeper problem that must be addressed through fundamental change.

Among futurists, who do not attempt to predict the future so much as study alternative futures, the belief that our problems are systemic has wide currency. Leading American futurist Willis Harman argues for what he calls 'whole-system change' because the assumptions on which our current systems are built are incompatible with the goals we now need to pursue. Whole-system thinking suggests that current social and environmental problems are symptoms of a

deeper-level condition that we must deal with, he says. Pressures towards whole-system change are intensifying. 'The critical issue is whether that change can be smooth and non-disruptive, or whether it will involve some disintegration of present structures.'

Harman says that the modern worldview, which is characterised by materialism, exploitative attitudes and faith in manipulative technology, is being challenged by an emerging worldview that reinstates the spiritual and holistic view. He frames the central question we must address in terms of meaning: 'What is the central purpose of highly industrialised societies when it no longer makes sense for that central purpose to be economic production—because that is no longer a challenge and because in the long run focusing on economic production does not lead to a viable global future?' His answer is: '…to advance human growth and development to the fullest extent, to promote human learning in the broadest possible definition'.

The other major groups of systemic optimists are scientists, notably biologists, and environmentalists. Addressing the question of humanity and its future from an evolutionary perspective, American biologist Edward O. Wilson differentiates the two views in this way: the *naturalistic* self-image holds that 'we are confined to a razor-thin biosphere within which a thousand imaginable hells are possible but only one paradise'; the *exemptionalist* self-image, which is the guiding theme of Western civilisation, is that 'our species exists apart from the natural world and holds dominion over it'.

Wilson provides whimsical descriptions of the two images. For the exemptionalist, humanity has effectively become a new species, *Homo proteus*, or 'shapechanger man':

> Cultural. Indeterminately flexible, with vast potential. Wired and information-driven. Can travel almost anywhere, adapt to any environment. Restless, getting crowded. Thinking about colonisation of space. Regrets the current loss of Nature and all those vanishing

species, but it's the price of progress and has little to do with our
future anyway.

The naturalistic, and correct, description, Wilson says, is of *Homo
sapiens*, 'wise man':

> Cultural. With indeterminate intellectual potential but biologically
> constrained. Basically a primate species in body and emotional
> repertory…Huge compared to other animals, parvihirsute,
> bipedal, porous, squishy, composed mostly of water. Runs on
> millions of coordinated delicate biochemical reactions. Easily shut
> down by trace toxins and transit of pea-sized projectiles. Short-
> lived, emotionally fragile. Dependent in body and mind on other
> earthbound organisms. Colonisation of space impossible without
> massive supply lines. Starting to regret deeply the loss of Nature
> and all those other species.

Mainstream political and intellectual debate is not concerned with
whole-system change. It is much more narrowly focused and issue-
based and, whatever the rhetoric, any need for a 'new order', a
transformation, remains largely rejected or ignored. In the worlds of
politics and business, linear optimists prevail. Linear optimism is
framed by the conviction that economic growth equals progress, that
more means better. Progress is a pipeline: pump more wealth in one
end and more welfare flows out the other.

So Prime Minister John Howard declared in a speech to a World
Economic Forum dinner in Melbourne in 1998 that 'the overriding
aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual [economic] growth
rate of over 4 per cent on average during the decade to 2010'. The
government's strategic economic objectives were pursued not as ends
in themselves, he said, but as the means for achieving more jobs, higher
living standards and an effective social safety net. Nevertheless, the
prime minister clearly set the rate of economic growth as the primary
benchmark by which to judge his government's performance. At a

Liberal Party conference in April 2000, Howard said of the government's 'great record of [economic] reform': 'That reform program has not been pursued because we want to get an A-plus in the exam for economic rationalists. Economic reform is about satisfying human needs. Economic reform is about making people feel more secure, happier, more able to care for their families.'

This belief in the primacy of economic growth is typical of governments the world over, and crosses ideological divisions (such as they are). The former Labor treasurer and prime minister, Paul Keating, who prided himself on his deft manipulation of the 'levers' of policy, once said that if you couldn't grow the Australian economy at over 4 per cent a year, 'you might as well give the game away'. Whether the leader is Paul Keating or John Howard, Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair, linear optimism rules.

In this context, the 2001 book *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* by Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish academic, is important for two reasons, one scholarly, the other political. At first glance it is probably the most comprehensive and convincing case for 'go for growth' linear optimism; and it has appeared at a time when linear optimists, faced with growing opposition to their prescriptions for a better world, need evidence that they are right. The book has been praised by the *Economist* as 'right' on its main points and 'just' in its criticism of much green activism, and damned by *Scientific American* as a 'failure' in its purpose of describing the state of the world.

Lomborg says he used to be 'an old left-wing Greenpeace member' who had long been concerned about environmental issues. He was provoked to begin his analysis by an interview in *Wired* magazine with the American economist the late Julian Simon, whose words are quoted at the front of his book:

> This is my long-run forecast in brief: the material conditions of life will continue to get better for most people, in most countries, most of the time, indefinitely. Within a century or two, all nations

and most of humanity will be at or above today's Western living standards. I also speculate, however, that many people will continue to *think and say* that the conditions of life are getting worse.

Lomborg ends up essentially agreeing with Simon's position. Like Simon, he targets for criticism what he calls 'the Litany' of environmental doom propounded by environmentalists, some scientists and the media: the global environment is in poor shape and getting worse because of the depletion of natural resources, overpopulation, pollution and species extinction. Instead, he says, energy and other natural resources have become more abundant; food production per person is increasing and fewer people are starving; the rate of global population increase is falling and the world's population will stabilise by about 2100; most forms of pollution are either exaggerated or transient (associated with early industrialisation and best cured by accelerating economic growth, not restricting it); species extinction is occurring but greatly exaggerated; and global warming is unlikely to be devastating (and, in any case, fixing the problem could be more costly than the problem itself).

Lomborg concludes that mankind's lot has improved vastly in every significant measurable field and that it is likely to continue to do so: '…children born today—in both the industrialised world and developing countries—will live longer and be healthier, they will get more food, a better education, a higher standard of living, more leisure time and far more possibilities—without the global environment being destroyed. And that is a beautiful world.'

The debate between 'optimists' and 'pessimists', in the terms discussed here, is part of the history of progress. The rise of concerns about the global environment since the 1960s and about globalisation in the 1990s has given the debate its current form. Lomborg's book is the latest in a long line to argue that these concerns have been exaggerated and that, all things considered, life is improving for rich and poor alike.

While the intellectual gulf between the two camps is wide, it is not totally unbridgeable. Linear optimists focus on material wellbeing. They may remark on people's discontent and disillusion, but blame the ill mood on the message of 'pessimists'. Coaxed beyond this explanation, however, concerns emerge amongst them.

A few years ago, I exchanged emails with the American writer and (optimistic) futurist Kevin Kelly over a book review he had written. The book, *Myths of Rich and Poor—Why We're Better off than We Think*, argues that poor American households of the 1990s in many cases compare favourably with an average family in the early 1970s in owning the trappings of a middle-class life. Almost half of the poor households had air-conditioners in 1994, compared to less than a third of the country as a whole in 1971. This pattern also holds true for dryers, refrigerators, stoves, microwaves and colour televisions.

Kelly said the authors, a business reporter and an economist, demonstrated that 'rationally measured…most Americans have more leisure time, more disposable income, and vastly higher standards of living than ever before'. Our notions of rich and poor are antiquated, he said. Kelly, the founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine, renowned for its optimistic take on the future, and himself the author of books such as *Out of Control* and *New Rules for the New Economy* that present positive views of where humanity is going, concluded his review by saying: 'Life really, really is getting much, much better.'

Kelly defended his judgment to me by saying that while 'the happiness index' is not changing much, 'the wealth index' is. 'So one parameter is static, while the other parameter is improving—therefore things are getting better.' But he agreed that something was lacking: if we were so rich why were we 'so aimless, so incoherent, so jaded and full of doubt about everything'? He acknowledged a lack of meaning in people's lives:

> I read a lot of history and I don't have the feeling that people are less happy now. They are less certain who they are, less centred,

and less prepared for death, but in a funny way, no less happy. My image of the modern person is someone who has no idea who they are; all they know is that they are very important, above average in intelligence, and mostly happy. And they are increasingly rich, or at least richer.

In an interview with Australian futurist Richard Slaughter, Kelly used the metaphor of a balloon. The ego keeps growing but identity and meaning get stretched ever thinner, and 'at any moment the whole thing could just pop', he said. 'I think there is a total absence of meaning in general in our society right now.'

2〉   costs and benefits: global economics, equity and ecology

To make progress we have to be able to measure it. The accuracy, validity and comprehensiveness of these measures—or indicators—are important because they influence community perceptions and political priorities. They provide the main means of getting feedback on what is happening in the world around us, especially the world beyond our personal experience. Good indicators are a prerequisite for good policy.

How we measure progress depends, in turn, on how we define it. Progress can take many forms: better health and education, greater equality and freedom, more choice and opportunity, less conflict and suffering. However, progress in the modern era is principally defined in material terms—a rising standard of living—and measured as growth in per capita income, or Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Per capita GDP is widely used as a measure of how well we are doing as individuals and as a nation, relative both to the past and to other countries. Yet GDP, an aggregate measure of the value of economic production in a nation in a given period, was never intended as a general measure of economic welfare, let alone quality of life. Despite this, growth is pursued in the belief that, overall, it makes life better. Is this the case?

Most of the debate about progress revolves around this question. This chapter is my attempt to make sense of the debate and the claims and counter-claims about the patterns and trends in global economic growth, population increases, income inequality and environmental degradation—and their implications for human health and wellbeing. As well as summarising the issues, the chapter gives a global context to later chapters, which focus on rich Western nations such as Australia and the United States. It also provides a framework of 'objective' measures of our situation, while much of the following discussion emphasises more intangible cultural matters. The chapter, then, is full of facts and figures, how they relate to each other and the ways in which they are contested. If this puts you off, feel free to skip it.

On the face of it, there are good grounds for equating progress with economic growth. Many aspects of human development appear to be closely associated with material progress. For example, American psychologists Ed and Carol Diener studied 32 indices of quality of life, chosen to reflect a wide range of universal human values including happiness, equality, human rights and social justice, in 101 nations. They found that wealth was significantly and positively correlated with 26 of the 32; only two—suicide rates and carbon dioxide emissions (an environmental indicator)—were adversely associated with wealth. The correlation between per capita GDP and 'total quality of life' (the mean value of the 32 quality-of-life variables) was very high and highly significant. Almost two-thirds of the variance, or difference, in the total quality of life of nations could be explained by income. In another study, Ed Diener and a co-researcher noted that per capita purchasing power of nations was so closely related to a composite Advanced Quality of Life Index that many would be inclined to 'accept the notion that economic indicators are sufficient and that we do not need any further indicators'.

By the standard of material progress the world has done extraordinarily well over the past two centuries. Economic growth has been a global phenomenon since the early nineteenth century, raising living

standards in all continents. According to British economic historian Angus Maddison, an authority on global numbers, average world GDP per capita barely changed in the first millennium CE (AD)—it was US$435 in 1000—but increased thirteen-fold in the second, rising more than eight-fold between 1820 and 1998 to US$5700. Australians are, on average and in real terms, about five times richer now than at the turn of the last century. If we maintained economic growth at over 4 per cent a year—the current government's stated 'overriding aim'—in about twenty years' time we would be twice as rich as we are now, and so ten times richer than we were one hundred years ago.

But correlation is not causation, and despite the strong associations between growth and welfare, there are other issues that we need to take into account in explaining trends in quality of life. These include: the role of other factors; income distribution; diminishing returns and environmental sustainability.

On the first point, not all the gains in wellbeing over the past two centuries are a product of increasing wealth. Other social changes have accompanied economic growth, but have not necessarily been a consequence of growth, or have had impacts independent of growth. These include the growth of scientific knowledge, technological innovation, advances in social justice and equality, and an expanded role of government in improving living conditions—in health, hygiene, education and welfare support, for example.

Take the case of health, measured as life expectancy, which is perhaps the next most common measure of progress after per capita income. Its rise parallels the rise in income. In the year 1000, life expectancy for the world was about 24 years. (Note that this is *not* a measure of how long most people lived; it is an average figure that takes into account, for example, the large numbers of infant deaths; about a third of people died in the first year of life in 1000.) By 1820, life expectancy was 26, and by 1900, 31. It has since more than doubled

to 67 years. However, American medical historian Jim Riley says in *Rising Life Expectancy: A Global History* that income is an unsatisfactory measure of the quality of the human condition. People living in high-income countries enjoy advantages over those in low-income countries, 'but the advantages have a particularly uncertain relationship to life expectancy'. For example, in 1997, life expectancy in Jamaica was 74.8 years and in the United States 76.7 years, yet Jamaica's per capita GDP was little more than a tenth of America's: US$3440, compared with US$29,010.

The Indian state of Kerala is an often-cited example of how countries can achieve high life expectancies without first becoming rich. Kerala, on India's southwestern coast, is one of the poorest states in India, densely populated and rural, yet has the country's lowest fertility and highest life expectancy. The Keralan model is based on social rather than economic development: high male and female literacy, greater female participation in the workforce, later marriage and earlier family planning, readily accessible health clinics and fair-price food shops. Within India as a whole, the decline in mortality has been much more strongly associated, geographically, with institutional factors such as girls' education than with rising incomes. One analysis of the improvements in mortality and life expectancy in low and middle-income countries during the latter half of the twentieth century found that 35 per cent of the improvement could be attributed to increases in literacy, 45 per cent to the application of new knowledge, including public health and medical services, and 20 per cent to increased income.

Indeed, periods of rapid economic growth can be associated with diminished quality of life, even in early stages of development when the potential benefits of growth are greatest, a point I'll come back to later. A study of England during the Industrial Revolution demonstrates that economic growth, far from leading inevitably to development, can result in the 'four Ds' of disruption, deprivation, disease and death, because of its impact on social and political

stability and order. In some respects, institutional adaptations have been essential to securing the health gains from economic development—for example, by countering the increased risks of infection in the growing cities that economic development was itself creating.

William Easterly, an economist at the World Bank, recently analysed 81 quality-of-life indicators covering seven areas—individual rights and democracy, political instability and war, education, health, transport and communication, class and gender inequality, and 'bads' such as crime and pollution—over the period from 1960 to 1990. He wanted to see if, as he expected, 'life during growth gets better'. Consistent with other research, virtually all the indicators showed quality of life across nations to be positively associated with per capita income. Easterly then analysed the data further to take account of various 'country effects'. As he says, 'We do not want to know if life improves when Togo becomes Denmark; we want to know if life improves when a poor Togo becomes a richer Togo.' To his surprise, he found growth had an impact on quality of life that was significant, positive and more important than other influences for only a few of the 81 indicators. Easterly speculates that the most plausible explanations are that there are long and variable time lags that prevented the detection of the 'true' relationship between growth and improvements in life, or that global growth is more important than home-country growth for many aspects of quality of life. Nevertheless, he admits disappointment: for the large majority of indicators, he was unable to detect a medium-run improvement in life due to growth.

The United Nations' *Human Development Report 2001* says that development is about 'expanding the choices people have to lead lives they value'. It is about 'much more than economic growth, which is only a means—if a very important one—of enlarging people's choices'. Fundamental to doing this is building human capabilities, the report says, and the most basic capabilities are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent

standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. The report's summary measure, the Human Development Index, combines life expectancy, educational attainment and per capita income. A country's ranking according to the index can be quite different from its GDP per capita ranking, showing that, with the right policies, countries can advance faster in human development than in economic growth. 'And if they ensure that growth favours the poor, they can do much more with that growth to promote human development.'

The second aspect of the relationship between growth and progress concerns the distribution of wealth. If a striking quality of global economic growth over the past two centuries has been its rapidity, there is another—its inequality. Between 1820 and 1998, per capita income increased more than fourteen-fold in Western Europe, almost twenty-two-fold in its Western offshoots (the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), almost nine-fold in Latin America, over six-fold in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (where income fell after the collapse of communism), five-fold in Asia (excluding Japan), and over three-fold in Africa. Africa's average per capita income was about the same in 1998 as that in Western Europe in 1820.

It is in this pattern of growth that a fundamental problem with material progress emerges. Global income inequality has increased over the past 200 years, and probably for 200 years before that. The economic 'edge' in per capita income developed nations had over the rest of the world was about 2:1 in 1820 and it has continued to grow since then to almost 7:1 in 1998. The ratio of incomes between the richest and poorest regions was less than 3:1 in 1820, and grew steadily to 19:1 in 1998.

While there is general agreement about the long-term trend of rising inequality, there is currently an intense debate going on about what has happened in the past twenty years or so—intense because of its implications for 'globalisation', and whether it has favoured the rich

over the poor. The trends depend critically on factors such as the measure of inequality used; whether countries are treated equally or their population size taken into account; whether countries' average incomes are used or within-country income distribution included in the calculations; and how currencies are converted into a common measure. For example, taking population into account affects the trends because China and India, which together have about a third of the world's population, have experienced high growth rates over this period. If exchange rates are used to adjust incomes, inequality has continued to increase; if we use another conversion based on 'purchasing power parity' (PPP)—that is, what people's money actually buys in each country—then inequality has not increased and may have declined. Using exchange-rate conversions and country-average incomes, the ratio of the income of the richest fifth of the world to the income of the poorest fifth grew from 34:1 in 1970 to 70:1 in 1997; using PPP, the ratio fell from 15:1 to 13:1. Both measures show increasing inequality between the richest and poorest tenths of the world, although using exchange rates produces a much greater rise in inequality.

There is probably no single, right way of measuring global income distribution. Adjusting income for PPP may be best for comparing real living standards (although it requires further development to improve its accuracy). Reflecting this, ratios based on PPP correspond closely to differences in energy consumption between rich and poor nations. Converting incomes using exchange rates is probably better for comparing nations' international clout, especially their ability to participate in the global economy. Taking population into account makes sense, but the resulting domination by China and India's economic performance makes it easy to lose sight of the smaller developing countries—notably many of the African states—that are falling further behind.

Finally, we need to bear in mind that, even if global inequality is declining because many developing countries' economies are growing

faster than the developed nations', the actual dollar gap in incomes between the two is continuing to widen, and will for some time: the rich nations' rate of growth may be lower, but the absolute income level is much greater, producing a larger dollar increase. For example, between 1975 and 2000, per capita GDP (based on PPP) in the fast-growing East Asian and Pacific region rose by about 350 per cent, or US$3500; in the richer OECD nations, it increased by about 75 per cent, or US$12,000.

What about income inequality within nations? Allowing once again for the uncertainties about the reliability of the data, the overall picture is one of increasing inequality. In one study of 77 countries with over 80 per cent of the world's population, inequality rose between the 1950s and 1990s in 45 countries and fell in sixteen, while in the remaining sixteen it showed no clear trend or initially declined then levelled off. Many of those countries with rising inequality were Eastern European nations or former members of the Soviet Union, which experienced low or negative growth in the 1990s. Inequality increased in many OECD nations between the mid- to late-1980s and mid- to late-1990s. The longer-term trend for these countries appears to be U-shaped, with inequality declining before the 1970s, but increasing since. In line with these trends, inequality has increased in Australia over the past two decades (although, once again, the income measure used has a bearing on the results).

The third important matter concerning growth relates to its diminishing returns to wellbeing. The evidence shows that material progress continues to have much to offer poorer nations, but appears to be increasingly irrelevant to wellbeing in rich nations. For example, the Diener study of wealth and quality of life mentioned earlier found a 'ceiling effect' with many of the quality of life variables: increasing income conferred large benefits at low income levels, but little if any benefit at high income levels. Both health and happiness show this

pattern. Life expectancy levels off at a per capita GDP of about US$5000, and happiness at about US$10,000. Much the same happens with energy consumption: wellbeing, measured with the Human Development Index, ceases to rise beyond an annual per capita electricity consumption of about 4000 kilowatt hours, well below the usage of countries such as the United States and Australia.

In the late 1980s, the Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef and his colleagues undertook a study of nineteen countries, both rich and poor, to assess the things that inhibited people from improving their wellbeing. They detected among people in rich countries a growing feeling that they were part of a deteriorating system that affected them at both the personal and collective level. This led the researchers to propose a threshold hypothesis, which states that for every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in quality of life, but only up to a point—the threshold point—beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate.

American sociologist Ronald Inglehart makes a similar observation on the basis of the results of the World Values Surveys, conducted in 1981, 1990 and 1995. Economic development eventually reaches a point of diminishing returns, he says, in terms of both life expectancy and happiness, leading to a gradual but fundamental shift in basic values and goals. Societies at the early stages of development tend to emphasise economic growth at any price. 'But as they move beyond a given threshold, they begin to emphasise quality-of-life concerns such as environmental protection and lifestyle issues.'

The threshold hypothesis has been supported in recent years by the development of indices, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, that adjust GDP for a range of social, economic and environmental factors that GDP either ignores or measures inappropriately. These include income distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and

pollution. These 'GDP analogues' show that trends in GDP and social wellbeing have diverged, especially since about the mid-1970s, in all countries for which they have been constructed, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. The reasons for this divergence may vary between nations, but include: the growing costs of environmental damage and resource depletion, including greenhouse gas emissions; increasing income inequality; unsustainable foreign debt; the rising cost of unemployment and overwork; the failure to maintain capital investment; and the transfer of (unpaid) household production to the market.

The American non-profit public policy organisation Redefining Progress, which developed the Genuine Progress Indicator, points out that GDP regards every expenditure as an addition to wellbeing, regardless of what that expenditure is for or what effects it has:

> By this reasoning, the nation's economic hero is the terminal cancer patient going through an expensive divorce, whose car is totalled in a twenty-car pile-up. The economic villain is the healthy person in a solid marriage who cooks at home, walks to work and doesn't smoke or gamble. The hero borrows and spends; the villain pays cash and saves for the kids' education. What economists call 'growth', in other words, is not always the same as what most Americans would consider 'good'.

Obesity provides another example of harmful growth, a parable of the excess that characterises our times. Growing obesity has become a serious public health problem in developed countries, including Australia, and, increasingly, in developing countries. For the first time in human history, the number of overweight people in the world now rivals the number of underweight people—there are an estimated 1.1 billion of each. Obesity is associated with increased risks of high blood pressure, heart disease, osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, some cancers and other health problems. It contributes to the economy in many ways:

the excess food people eat; the marketing and advertising to encourage this over-consumption; the diet programs and liposuction procedures to deal with the consequences; the health campaigns to try to counter the trends; the demand on health services created by the disease and illness obesity causes; the necessary 'upsizing' of public seating (already under way in the United States) to cater for bigger backsides, and litigation over both causing obesity and discriminating against the obese.

At each stage of this process, the consumer may well be making a rational choice to maximise his or her utility or satisfaction, as economists are wont to argue, and the market responding to consumer demand. Taken together, however, this sequence of events represents diminished quality of life, a clear case where 'more' does not mean 'better'. The same is true of other forms of consumption, including gambling, pornography and drugs, which may be relatively harmless in moderation but not in the excess that marketing promotes. The result is that we end up creating 'wealth' through trying to fix social problems that wealth itself is creating.

In contrast to this situation of developed nations, UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, points out that for at least one billion people in the developing world, material progress holds out the hope of adequate food, clean water, safe sanitation, decent housing, reliable health care and at least a basic education. 'This is a definition of progress which remains entirely valid,' it says. 'And it is one with which the rest of the world must keep faith.' UNICEF says efforts by governments to meet basic human needs have been less than all-out. And yet by any realistic standard the progress made in the developing world has been remarkable. The task to meet minimum human needs is more achievable now than ever before.

The United Nations *Human Development Reports* for 2000 and 2001 show that in developing countries over the past thirty years: average incomes almost doubled in real terms to US $2500; life

expectancy rose by eight years to 65 years; adult literacy rose from 47 per cent to 73 per cent; the infant mortality rate fell from 110 per 1000 live births to 64; and the proportion of rural people with access to safe water increased more than five-fold from 13 per cent to 71 per cent. The United Nations acknowledges the magnitude of the remaining challenges—about 1.2 billion people live on less than a dollar a day, and 2.8 billion on less than two dollars a day (although the accuracy of such figures is contested, like so much else in this area). Nevertheless, the impressive gains in the past thirty years 'demonstrate the possibility of eradicating poverty', the 2001 report says. The 2003 report echoes this sentiment, saying that today the world has an 'unprecedented opportunity' to meet this goal.

Linked to the mainly material advances, there have also been impressive gains in democracy and human rights over the past few decades. According to the United Nations, 81 countries 'took significant steps towards democracy' in the 1980s and 1990s, and today 140 of the world's nearly two hundred countries hold multiparty elections. In 1990 only 10 per cent of the world's countries had ratified all six major human rights instruments, covering issues such as civil and political rights and gender and racial discrimination; by 2000, nearly half of all countries had.

However, we should qualify these broad measures of human advancement. There can be a big difference between the ratification and the reality of human rights, and between multiparty elections and genuine democracy. The United Nations says the spread of democratisation appears to have stalled, 'with many countries failing to consolidate and deepen first steps towards democracy and several slipping back into authoritarianism'. Hidden behind the aggregated figures are stories of continuing, and even increasing, suffering on a large scale. Some countries are going backwards as a result of HIV AIDS, protracted civil war, corrupt leadership, militant fundamentalism and resource pressures. The globalisation that has facilitated world

economic growth has also made easier the trade in illicit drugs and arms and the spread of organised crime. Human trafficking, particularly of women and girls for prostitution, is widespread.

The 2003 *Human Development Report* acknowledges the 'daunting challenges'. For many countries, it says, the 1990s were 'a decade of despair'—54 countries are poorer now than in 1990; in 34, life expectancy has fallen; in 21, a larger proportion of people is going hungry; in 14 countries more children are dying before the age of five; and in 12, primary school enrolments are shrinking. The director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization, Jacques Diouf, warned in 2002 that progress towards the goal of halving the number of hungry people by 2015, set at the 1996 World Food Summit, 'has virtually ground to a halt'. At the current pace, he said, the goal would be reached closer to 2150 than to 2015.

Finally, there is the matter of growth's impact on the global environment. Advocates of economic growth argue it is good for the environment. As countries grow richer, consumer preferences and the structure of the economy change, technology becomes more efficient and cleaner and the countries can afford to invest more in environmental improvements. The proposition has been supported by empirical evidence of an 'inverted U' relationship between per capita income and some measures of environmental quality: as income increases, so does environmental degradation, but only up to a point, after which environmental quality improves.

In late 1994, a small international group of ecologists and economists met in Sweden to consider whether an interdisciplinary consensus existed on the issue of economic growth, carrying capacity and the environment. The report of the meeting, published in the leading journal *Science*, states that the inverted U-shaped curves need to be interpreted cautiously. So far, they have been shown to apply only to a selected set of pollutants. These have local, short-term costs (for

example, urban air and water pollution). The curves do not apply to the accumulation of stocks of waste or pollutants such as carbon dioxide that involve long-term and more dispersed costs. The relationship is also less likely to hold for resource stocks such as soils and forests. It ignores system-wide consequences of emission reductions, such as transfers of pollutants to other countries. Finally, where emissions have declined with rising income, the reductions have been due to local institutional reforms such as environmental legislation. Where environmental costs are borne by the poor, by future generations or by other countries, the incentives to correct the problem are likely to be weak.

The report notes that it is important to be clear about the conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical findings of the inverted U-shaped relationship between growth and the environment. 'While they do indicate that economic growth may be associated with improvements in some environmental indicators, they imply neither that economic growth is sufficient to induce environmental improvement in general, nor that the environmental effects of growth may be ignored, nor, indeed, that the Earth's resource base is capable of supporting indefinite economic growth.' More recent analyses have supported this assessment.

It is easy to overlook the physical scales of economic activity. There is a lot of talk about increased resource efficiency and the 'dematerialisation' of economic growth—and some evidence that it is occurring—but economic activity continues to place a huge demand on natural resources. In Australia, according to CSIRO researchers, it takes about 10 million joules of energy—the equivalent of a quarter of a litre of petrol—to generate one dollar of GDP. Australia's total material flow—the amount of natural resources excluding air and water that get dug up, cut down, transported, processed, transformed and discarded in the production of goods and services—now stands at about 200 tonnes per person per year, compared to about 80 tonnes fifty years ago. In some developed countries, total material flows have stabilised,

even fallen, but the CSIRO researchers say this is at least partly because these countries are exporting a growing part of their flows to developing countries and primary producing countries like Australia.

The United Nations Environmental Program's second Global Environment Outlook report, *Geo-2000*, states that 'the continued poverty of the majority of the planet's inhabitants and excessive consumption by the minority are the two major causes of environmental degradation'. The report acknowledges that environmental management is moving in the right direction and that there have been some remarkable environmental successes, but says efforts are too few and too late. Both it and the third report, *Geo-3*, published in 2002, confirm the overall assessment of the first 1997 report, *Geo-1*, which said, 'Significant environmental problems remain deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of all societies in all regions.' The environment is still 'at the periphery of socio-economic development', *Geo-3* says, and sustainable development remains largely theoretical for the majority of the world's population. The level of awareness and action has not been commensurate with the state of the global environment, which continues to deteriorate.

Confirming such assessments, World Wide Fund for Nature's Living Planet Index, based on an evaluation of the health of forest, freshwater, marine and coastal ecosystems, has declined by a third since 1970. Humanity's ecological footprint, a measure of the ecological pressure of people on the Earth, has increased by a half over this period. Some time in the 1970s, WWF says, we passed the point of living within the regenerative capacity of Earth. Such broad, composite indicators are new, still developing and contestable. But they are at least broadly consistent with the weight of scientific evidence on global environmental trends. A major scientific research initiative, the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program, has concluded that global change is more than climate change and is real; it is happening now, and in many ways it is accelerating. A 2001 program report states

that the Earth's dynamics are characterised by critical thresholds and abrupt changes. Human activities could inadvertently trigger such changes with catastrophic consequences. In some cases, it says, global, systemic changes are already overtaking local pressures as the dominant drivers of change; they are interacting with local stresses, pushing systems across thresholds and leading to local disasters:

> At the global scale, there is only one ultimate bottom line: maintenance of the Earth's life support system (for humans). If critical thresholds are crossed and the Earth System shifts to another state much less amenable to human life, then everyday life as we know it—social systems, economics, politics—ceases to have meaning.

A new book on sustainability and quality of life in 180 countries, *The Wellbeing of Nations*, which is based on several new indices of wellbeing and sustainability, states that no country is sustainable, or even close to sustainable. Written by Robert Prescott-Allen and sponsored by the World Conservation Union, the book warns environmental degradation is widespread. Countries with a poor or bad ecosystem wellbeing index cover almost half (48 per cent) of the planet's land and inland water surface; those with a medium index, 43 per cent. Countries with a fair rating occupy a mere 9 per cent. No country has a good ecosystem wellbeing index. The book says that the main reasons why no country combines high levels of both human and ecosystem wellbeing are that it is inherently difficult to do and, more importantly, that no country is committed to doing it. It notes that conflicts between human and ecosystem wellbeing can be reduced, and a high quality of life obtained for a low environmental price. Much of the relationship between the two is a matter of choice. Large differences in ecosystem stress occur between countries with similar standards of living, due in part to different degrees of material consumption and ecological vulnerability. Ecosystem stress is a product not so much of the level of human wellbeing as of the way it is pursued.

The environmental sustainability of economic progress, like its equity, is important to long-term quality of life. The link between the quality and sustainability of life—between human wellbeing and environmental health—is pervasive and multi-layered, involving matters spiritual, cultural and aesthetic. But even on the more straight-forward physical level, the implications for human health of environmental changes such as global warming, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, pollution and deforestation are complex and far-reaching, ranging from disrupted food production through increases in infectious diseases and cancers to the loss of potential new food and medicinal material.

Overarching these issues, and impacting on all of them, is global population growth. Here is a thumbnail sketch of how the human population has grown: during the first millennium CE (AD) the world population increased by only one sixth, probably from around 230 million to 270 million; during the second millennium, it grew twenty-two-fold, passing one billion in the early 1800s and six billion in 1999. While the growth rate is now falling, the human population is still increasing rapidly and is expected to reach almost nine billion by 2050 before peaking at about ten billion some time after that.

Most of this future growth will occur in the developing world, where people have most to gain from continuing material progress but where environmental resources are already often severely stressed. Population growth, welcomed by the likes of American economist Julian Simon because it adds to the quantum of human resources and ingenuity, is more commonly seen as having a 'multiplier' effect on the social, economic and environmental challenges discussed in this chapter. It makes the management of problems that much harder, and that much more critical to address.

Growth in GDP is our dominant measure of progress; but it is also a broad measure of environmental degradation. Over the past

millennium, world GDP has increased almost three hundred-fold. According to the Earth Policy Institute, an American environmental research organisation, given the way the world now does business, 'the size of the economy is the best single measure of the mounting pressure on the Earth's environment', combining the effects of both population growth and rising individual consumption. For example, China's rate of economic growth since 1975 has averaged 8 per cent a year, raising incomes and living standards for its people. Yet China is also suffering worsening environmental problems. The institute says shrinking forests, deteriorating rangelands, eroding croplands and falling water tables are converging to expand deserts and create a dust-bowl of historic dimensions. 'The weight of 1.3 billion people and their livestock on the land and the rapid pace of economic expansion has put China on the frontline of the deteriorating relationship between the global economy and the Earth's ecosystem.'

The interactions and relationships between wealth, health, equity and sustainability discussed in this chapter are important to understanding and assessing progress and how we define and make it. In demonstrating how critical—and potentially catastrophic—these issues are to our future, they also reveal something else that is important, and directly relevant to the cultural theme of the book: that our narrow equation of more with better, of economic growth with progress, is not a law of economics or history; it is an assumption, even a fallacy. It is a cultural myth.

3>   modern western culture and its values

In the 1970s, I spent two years travelling overseas, through Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and Asia. Like many long-term travellers, I found that the most difficult cultural adjustment I had to make was on my return home. My first reaction on flying into Sydney from Bangkok was one of wonder at the orderliness and cleanliness, the abundantly stocked shops, the clear-eyed children, so healthy and carefree. However, my initial celebration of the material richness and comfort of the Western way of life soon gave way to a growing apprehension about its emotional harshness, social 'distances' and spiritual desiccation.

In a way I hadn't anticipated, the experience allowed me to view my native culture from the outside; and in ways I hadn't appreciated before, I realised ours was a tough culture. I became acutely aware that the Western worldview is just one of many, defined and supported by myths like any other. We tend to see material poverty as synonymous with misery and squalor; yet only with the most abject poverty is this so. We see others as crippled by ignorance and cowed by superstition; we don't see the extent to which we are, in our own ways, burdened by our rational knowledge and cowed by our lack of superstition—of spiritual beliefs.

Culture is a system of meanings and symbols. Canadian psychologist and anthropologist Ellen Corin says that this system shapes every area of life, defines a worldview that gives meaning to personal and collective experience, and frames the way people locate themselves within the world, perceive the world, and behave in it. Humans do not live in a purely objective world in which objects and events possess an inherent and objective significance, she says; instead, these things are imbued with meanings that vary with individuals, times and societies, and which emerge from a network of associations. There is a complex interaction between the objective and subjective worlds and between reality, expectations and values. Values play an important role within these interactions, shaping the effects of an experience by regulating its meaning and its importance. 'Every aspect of reality is seen embedded within webs of meaning that define a certain worldview and that cannot be studied or understood apart from this collective frame.'

As reflected in my own experience, Corin notes that cultural influences are always easier to identify in unfamiliar societies. 'As long as one remains within one's own cultural boundaries, the ways of thinking, living, and behaving peculiar to that culture are transparent or invisible; they appear to constitute a natural order that is not itself an object of study. But this impression is an unsupported ethnocentric illusion.'

A vast literature exists on the nature of modern Western society and its culture, ranging from the works of the great nineteenth-century social philosophers and sociologists such as Tocqueville, Weber, Marx and Durkheim to contemporary social theorists such as Habermas, Bourdieu, Beck and Giddens. I am not going to attempt to discuss Western culture within the context of this literature. While drawing partly on this work, I am basing what follows largely on my own analysis and observations, and on popular debate about modern life.

Several cultural qualities are widely considered to characterise Western culture, although they are not necessarily confined to it, and are, in fact, becoming increasingly global in their influence. I am not suggesting these qualities exert a uniform effect on everyone, regardless of gender, class and ethnicity; or that individuals passively absorb cultural influences rather than interacting actively with them; or that there is not a variety of subcultures marked by sometimes very different values, meanings and beliefs. Nevertheless, I believe the trends in these qualities are historically important and their effects pervasive, including on the health and wellbeing of populations. Here are a few 'isms' of modern Western culture:

- *Consumerism*: Consumerism (often equated with materialism) refers to a lifestyle characterised by the acquisition and consumption of goods and services produced in the market economy. The trend in consumerism is broadly reflected in growth in per capita Gross Domestic Product, about 60 per cent of which is derived from private consumption. GDP per capita has increased about five-fold in Australia and many other Western nations in the past one hundred years. (A more appropriate measure is real per capita household consumption, which has increased about four-fold.)

- *Individualism*: Individualism is a defining characteristic of Western nations, often contrasted with the collectivism of Eastern societies. Individualism places the individual, rather than the community or group, at the centre of a framework of values, norms and beliefs, and celebrates personal freedom and independence.

- *Economism*: Many might equate economism with capitalism, economic rationalism or neo-liberalism. However, I use the term to embrace more than an ideological faith in free markets. It refers to a tendency to view the world through the prism of economics: to regard human society as an economic system, and to believe that

choice is, or should be, based primarily on economic considerations. (Economism is akin to 'materialism', when used in a different sense from consumerism, in that economics is concerned with material wellbeing.) Again, GDP growth probably provides some sort of proxy measure of the trend in economism.

- *Postmodernism*: This includes a suite of related cultural qualities that characterise contemporary society. Postmodernity, or late modernity, is marked by the loss of grand narratives, universal truths and unifying creeds. Its characteristics include relativism, pluralism, ambiguity, ambivalence, transience and contingency. Postmodern life is fragmented, episodic, uncertain, flexible and reflexive. (So let me be clear: by postmodernism, I mean much more than what happens among consenting adults in university humanities departments.)

All these cultural qualities are interrelated, and interact: economism with consumerism, consumerism with individualism, and individualism with postmodernism. There are other cultural factors and trends besides these: for example, *secularism*—not so much the decline of religious belief, but its exclusion from large parts of private and public life; and *pessimism*—the foreboding many people feel about humanity's future, even while they remain optimistic about their own lives.

Yet other trends might be described as countervailing: *feminism*—not just the movement for gender equality, but also the greater recognition and expression of the 'feminine' in human nature; *environmentalism*—the shift from an ethic of ignorance and exploitation of the natural environment to one of awareness and conservation; *universalism*—the growing consciousness of other peoples, our effects on each other, and our obligations to each other; and *spiritualism*, the increasing appreciation of the spiritual side of life, countering secularism but not necessarily expressed through religion. These 'isms' are, like the first group, closely interrelated. So there is profound conflict as

well as powerful synergy between contemporary cultural forces in Western societies.

All these cultural trends have benefits to health and well-being: consumerism has contributed to making our lives safer and more comfortable; individualism has enhanced human rights, self-determination and political participation; economism has increased economic efficiency and productivity; postmodernism is associated with greater tolerance and diversity; secularism has helped to loosen the chains of bigotry and dogma; feminism has enhanced the status of women and given them more control over their lives; even pessimism, if it does not destroy hope, can be an incentive to change. Environmentalism, universalism and spiritualism are prerequisites for a sustainable and harmonious planetary existence.

Yet taken too far, too fast, and together, the cultural forces I have discussed also present risks to health and wellbeing. This is especially true of the first group, as we shall see, but problems arise even where the essential cultural direction is positive. For example, feminism, in the transitional stages, creates a conflict of roles and goals for both women and men, and can be influenced by other cultural forces such as economism and individualism, which affect how we define the equality feminism seeks. Our awareness of global deprivation, conflict and environmental damage, pitted against the cultural power of consumerism, can produce a sense of despondency and futility, so fuelling the global pessimism that, in turn, reinforces an ethic of individualism and hedonism.

These cultural qualities, while pervasive, can show gender and class differences in their expression and impact. Thus while Western culture promotes a view of the self as individualistic, autonomous and independent of others and social influences, this may be truer of men than of women, for whom the self is more likely to be construed as interdependent, with others considered part of the self. (This gender difference in self-construal might, however, be narrowing under the

influence of contemporary cultural trends.) The stresses of consumerism are likely to be felt most intensely among low-income groups, who find it hardest to meet the demands of consumer lifestyles.

Less obvious is the evidence of a social gradient, or difference, in postmodern qualities, which also illustrates how culture can accentuate disadvantage. Belgian sociologist Mark Elchardus has shown that the attitudes associated with the 'cultural flexibility' that characterises postmodernity—religious and philosophical indifference, a 'here-and-now' hedonism and an individualism that extends well beyond emancipation from traditional restrictions—are negatively correlated with education and occupation. Cultural flexibility is related to low educational levels, high risk of unemployment, low occupational status and a lack of autonomy on the job.

Elchardus criticises the linking of cultural flexibility to a 'progressive vision of individualisation', saying it has resulted in 'a somewhat shameful legitimation of increases in uncertainty and unpredictability in the life of the poor and socially weak':

> Cultural flexibility…seems to be a form of withdrawal of commitment and emotion from a social order in which one is losing out. Such a reaction cannot really be considered a form of resistance, let alone revolt, for its very form makes organised action unlikely. Cultural flexibility rather seems to be the meek acceptance of the flexibilisation of one's life for the purposes of economic efficiency and organisational control.

Making a somewhat similar but broader point, Australian sociologist Anthony Elliott says that while postmodernism is identified with the political left, it is less obvious that it is a radical concern:

> What has happened in so-called postmodern society is the collapse of core community values and ethical foundations, and the reorganisation of everyday cultural life within the ideological structures of the globalised capitalist economy itself. From this

angle, the advent of postmodernism—with its deconstruction of metaphysical foundations, its dazzling globalisation of social institutions, its reifying of high-tech, and its cult of hedonism—fits hand in glove with the imperatives of a market logic in which everything goes but nothing much counts.

One critical consequence of the dominant cultural trends I have discussed has been their effect on moral values. Values provide the framework for deciding what we hold to be important, true, right and good, and so have a central role in defining relationships and meanings. Most societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. 'We define virtue almost exclusively as pro-social behaviour, and vice as anti-social behaviour,' science writer Matt Ridley observes in his analysis of human nature and society, *The Origins of Virtue*. This is not to argue that other societies have always been paragons of virtue, or that they did not often deal brutally with 'out' groups, or that 'pro-social' values such as conformity and deference to authority do not have costs when they, too, are taken too far and become blind obedience. There is also an important distinction to be made between abstract values and the often highly prescribed and proscribed behaviours into which they are socially translated.

Social virtues serve to maintain a balance—always dynamic, always shifting—between individual needs and freedom, and social stability and order. The thirteenth-century theologian St Thomas Aquinas listed the seven deadly sins as pride (self-centredness), envy, avarice (greed), wrath (anger, violence), gluttony, sloth (laziness, apathy) and lust; the seven cardinal virtues as faith, hope, charity (compassion), prudence (good sense), temperance (moderation), fortitude (courage, perseverance) and religion (spirituality). The French philosopher André Comte-Sponville says in *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues* that politeness is a starting point in discussing virtues as

it is the imitation of virtue that paves the way for true virtue to be learned. Other virtues in his list are fidelity, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, humility, simplicity, tolerance, purity, gentleness, good faith, humour and, finally, love, which transcends virtue.

Love is not a word used widely, if at all, in the scientific literature on health and happiness, which does, however, emphasise belonging, support and meaning, things that love provides. Its absence may be because love can take so many forms: romantic, platonic, parental, filial, patriotic, religious. I wonder sometimes if the cognitive equivalent of love is duty (or responsibility), which isn't used much anywhere these days. Duty is a neglected, outdated virtue, perhaps because it implies doing what others say you should, which is contrary to modern notions of personal freedom and autonomy. But in an era of moral autonomy a sense of duty can come from within and be defined according to our personal values, not imposed from without by social institutions. Both love and duty are about connections; they bind us to others.

Virtues, then, are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. Vices, on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires or capitulation to human weaknesses. Comte-Sponville observes that a virtuous life is not masochistic or puritanical, but a way of living well and finding love and peace.

Modern Western culture undermines, even reverses, traditional (or universal) values. Individuals are encouraged to make themselves the centre of their moral universe, to assess everything from personal relationships to paying taxes in terms of 'What's in it for me?' This promotes a preoccupation with personal expectations that keep rising and with wants that are never sated because new ones keep being created. As consumerism reaches increasingly beyond the acquisition

of things to the enhancement of the person, the goal of marketing becomes not only to make people dissatisfied with what they have, but also with who they are. Once we have met our basic needs, most consumption today is located within the vices, little within the virtues—feeding off envy, to say nothing of greed, lust and other moral hazards. We cannot quarantine other aspects of life from the moral consequences of ever-increasing consumption.

Economism is important to values because economics is amoral—that is, it is not concerned with the morality of the choices consumers make to maximise their satisfaction. The more economic choices govern people's lives, the more marginalised moral considerations become. Money itself becomes the dominant value. Social status is ever more narrowly defined in terms of income and wealth, and the 'opportunity costs' of spending time on things other than making money grow. The risks of postmodernism include an 'anything goes' morality: a belief that values are just a matter of personal opinion, and that one set of values is no better or worse than another. Values cease to require any external validation or to have any authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment.

The results of this cultural shift include not so much a collapse of personal morality as its blurring into ambivalence and conflict. We are not all wallowing in moral degradation and vice, but without appropriate cultural reinforcement we find it harder to do what we believe to be 'good'; it takes more effort. And, conversely, it becomes easier to justify or rationalise bad behaviour.

Public attitude surveys suggest a deep tension between people's professed values and the lifestyle promoted by modern Western societies. Traditional sources of moral guidance such as religion, although weakened or adapted to modern social requirements, no doubt fuel this tension, as would other cultural trends such as environmentalism and universalism. Many people are concerned about the greed, excess and materialism they believe drive society today, underlying social ills and

threatening their children's future. We yearn for a better balance in our lives, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, we don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

People also sense a widening gulf between private and public morality, between their own standards and those reflected by institutions such as the media, government and business, even religion. This is a critical feature of our times and way of life. Societies usually try to maintain a public standard of ethics that is higher than the private, so as to set an example, to inspire people to try harder. Yet today the reverse is true. This produces a growing sense of alienation and disengagement from social institutions, a deepening cynicism that excuses us from doing anything about behaviour—ours or others'—that we know to be wrong. The problem may be as much perceived as real. For example, the mass media give an exaggerated impression of the extent of the decay, which then risks becoming self-fulfilling. The distorted image of society that we see reflected in the mirror of the media is too often of a mire of selfishness, sleaze and greed that decent people feel they have to struggle to escape, or are naive to resist.

While we tend to see this blend of cultural influences on moral values expressed most vividly in violent crime, the sexual abuse of children, and drug and other addictions, the impacts are also apparent in many other facets of social life—celebrity incomes; chief executive salaries, bonuses and payouts; hidden cash-for-comment payments to influential media personalities; and accounting fraud and corporate collapses. Recent instances reveal astonishing degrees of hubris and greed, which those involved appear to see as quite moral and socially acceptable. That these people are role models compounds the social costs of their behaviour.

The royal commission into the collapse of the Australian insurance company HIH laid bare this lack of ethical awareness, citing case after case where HIH directors failed to take seriously fundamental

notions of openness, integrity and accountability. The commissioner, Justice Neville Owen, observed that from time to time as he listened to the evidence, he found himself asking: 'Did anyone stand back and ask themselves the simple question—is this right?' The same thing is happening in government, where we are seeing actions taken and decisions made on the basis of an ethic of 'whatever it takes'. Increasingly, our leaders, public and private, are at best doing what is legal, not what is ethical.

Associated with these moral changes (probably as both cause and effect) is the decline in Western societies in social capital—the shared values and norms, trust, cooperation, civic engagement and association which are the glue that holds societies together. The loss of social capital has been most famously argued and documented by American sociologist Robert Putnam, notably in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In reviewing the book, social analyst and writer Francis Fukuyama challenges a core thesis that Americans are associating less with each other, but agrees there has been a decline in the 'average radius of trust', a 'moral miniaturisation', over successive generations. 'The grandchild's more numerous social connections are shallower, more transient and imbued with less moral content than the grandfather's,' he says. 'The transformation of American civil society has been more qualitative than quantitative.'

The moral effects of cultural changes are apparent in many survey findings; they are discussed in chapter 6, but I will cite just a few examples here. In a 1989 study, *Young Australians*, Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay said young people believed moral values were declining and often found it hard to identify an accepted moral framework within the community. The result was that the social roots of their ethical sense were very limited, transient and fragile. 'Lacking a broader sense of "the community", many young people have difficulty in establishing an ethical framework which has any application beyond the boundaries of their own immediate circle of friends.' A 1992 survey by

Mackay, *What Do I Believe In?*, reveals Australians to be morally confused, feeble, ambivalent and complaining, wanting clearer rules by which to live because they can't bring themselves to live as they believe they should.

The Australian charity group the Brotherhood of St Laurence abandoned in 2002 a major research project on values and civic behaviour because a trial study found Australians struggled to name their values and to discuss 'values' at a personal level, partly because they had rarely reflected on the concept and how it related to them. Despite their discomfort with talking about the subject, however, they felt values were changing, generally for the worse, and that Australia was becoming too selfish and materialistic. People felt a disconnection between personal and national aspirations; few believed Australia would become their ideal society, and they had distanced themselves from this goal and led 'self-focused' lives.

I'm all too conscious that discussing morality in this way sounds quaint, even outrageous, in this free-wheeling era of moral relativism, pluralism and personal choice. I am not that comfortable about doing it. After a public lecture I gave in New Zealand, a minister of the church remarked that he was glad I could talk about virtues and vices because he couldn't. And I heard that a minister in Canberra, where I live, had used a newspaper article I'd written on the topic as the basis of his Sunday sermon. But I don't resile from the view that values are the foundations of social organisation, and that any discussion of progress and wellbeing must begin there. The sounder the foundations, the less we need to rely on elaborate, and often too-rigid, supporting structures of legislation and regulation. As the eighteenth-century political philosopher Edmund Burke said, the less control there is from within, the more there must be from without. Societies are complex systems and the management of complexity requires rules that are generic, diffuse, pervasive, flexible and internalised; in other words, societies need a strong framework of values.

In a presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1975, Donald Campbell chided his colleagues for their 'epistemic arrogance' towards religious teachings and their 'excessive and unjustified iconoclasm' in preaching self-gratification over traditional restraint and recommending we 'seek pleasure rather than enchain ourselves with duty'. He argued that 'scientific reasons exist for believing that there can be profound…wisdom in the belief systems our social tradition has provided us with'. Campbell qualified this by noting that this wisdom was about past worlds, not ours. Aspects of those worlds might have changed in ways that made the traditional moral norms wrong, so their relevance to our times needed to be evaluated (I'd emphasise that this is particularly true of how values are socially translated into desirable or undesirable behaviour). Still, he recommended that as an initial approach 'we assume an underlying wisdom in the recipes for living which tradition has supplied'.

Campbell was right, as the evidence gathered over the past two decades shows. But let me stress that my intention is not to call for a return of the Old Testament prophets. Subtle distinctions have to be observed; as the British writer and poet G. K. Chesterton said, civilisation is suspended in a web of fine distinctions. Civil society does not require all people always to behave morally. It does require that we expect people to try to behave morally most of the time. If we become too zealous in rooting out every moral transgression, then the expectation will crumble under their weight, and the purpose will be defeated. Balance is the key. We may never return to moral absolutes based on religion, but research in a wide range of areas seems to me to support what societies have generally tried to do, usually through religion: to promote values that maintain a balance between social cohesion and harmony and personal freedoms and desires, and to guide us in trying to live according to what is important in life.

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim observed in his seminal study of suicide a century ago that a crucial function of social

institutions such as the family and religion was to bind individuals to society, to keep 'a firmer grip' on them and to draw them out of their 'state of moral isolation'. 'Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs,' Durkheim wrote. 'To free him from all social pressure is to abandon him to himself and demoralise him.' Durkheim saw clearly the distinction between material and moral causes of despair, noting (in the language of an earlier time): 'If more suicides occur today than formerly, this is not because, to maintain ourselves, we have to make more painful efforts, nor that our legitimate needs are less satisfied, but because we no longer know the limits of legitimate needs nor perceive the direction of our efforts.'

The cultural path we follow—the choices we make as societies between the dominant cultural trends of consumerism, individualism, economism and postmodernism, and the countervailing trends of feminism, environmentalism, universalism and spiritualism—will have a decisive bearing on our global futures. An early 1990s UNESCO project on the futures of cultures had as its hypothesis that 'cultures and their futures, rather than technological and economic developments, are at the core of humankind's highly uncertain future'. A project report notes: 'Some of the participants expressed the view that culture may well prove to be the last resort for the salvation of humankind.'

    The project considered some critical questions about culture. Will economic and technological progress destroy the cultural diversity that is our precious heritage? Will the 'meaning systems' of different societies, which have provided their members with a sense of identity, meaning and place in the totality of the universe, be reduced to insignificance by the steamroller effects of mass culture, characterised by electronic media, consumer gadgets, occupational and geographic mobility and globally disseminated role models? Or, on the other hand,

will the explosive release of ethnic emotions accompanying political liberation destroy all possibility of both genuine development founded on universal solidarity and community-building across differences? Will we witness a return of local chauvinisms, breeding new wars over boundaries and intercultural discriminations?

Background papers for the UNESCO project proposed two scenarios—one pessimistic, one optimistic. The pessimistic scenario is that cultures and authentic cultural values will be, throughout the world, bastardised or reduced to marginal or ornamental roles in most national societies and regional or local communities because of powerful forces of cultural standardisation. These forces are technology, especially media technology; the nature of the modern state, which is bureaucratic, centralising, legalistic and controlling; and the spread of 'managerial organisation' as the one best way of making decisions and coordinating actions.

The optimistic scenario is that humanity advances in global solidarity and with ecological and economic collaboration as responsible stewards of the cosmos. Numerous, vital and authentic cultures flourish, each proud of its identity while actively rejoicing in differences exhibited by other cultures. Human beings everywhere nurture a sense of possessing several partial and overlapping identities while recognising their primary allegiance to the human species. Cultural communities plunge creatively into their roots and find new ways of being modern and of contributing precious values to the universal human culture now in gestation.

Participants in the UNESCO project appeared to see the pessimistic scenario as the more likely, as things stand; the optimistic scenario was more an ideal to guide policy. Thus with culture, as with so many other areas of modern life, our destiny hangs in the balance: a dominant culture that is deeply flawed is nevertheless spreading throughout the world, while at the same time, ethnic and other 'tribal' feelings are becoming more fervent and exclusive, often fanatical. The

events of the past decade or so—notably the end of the Cold War and the rise of global terrorism and the war waged against it—could not have demonstrated more clearly both trends. Yet through these same processes, there is also the hope for a world where rich cultural diversity underpins a new and vital cultural universality.

4>   the social origins of health

The American town of Roseto in Pennsylvania has a special significance among health researchers. Roseto was settled by Italian immigrants in the 1880s. In the 1950s, researchers became aware that it had a mortality rate from heart attacks that was about half the national rate. The low rate could not be explained by the usual risk factors such as smoking, diet or exercise: the diet was pretty rich Italian fare, and people also smoked heavily. A sociologist, Stewart Wolf, believed the secret of the people's good health lay in the quality of their social life. Compared to neighbouring towns, Roseto was marked by close family ties and cohesive community relationships; it was difficult to distinguish rich from poor by their dress, behaviour, houses or cars.

Things began to change in the 1960s and 1970s with an emerging preoccupation with materialistic values that came with increased education and growing affluence. More young people moved away. The better-off built larger houses, walled off their gardens, bought Cadillacs and no longer invited relatives to move in. As the researchers had predicted, Roseto lost its health advantage: by 1985 the heart-attack mortality rate was the same as that in surrounding towns. The only thing that changed, according to Wolf and his co-researchers, was the

degree of social cohesion. Roseto had become a lonelier place; people cared less about each other.

It will surprise many people that such intangible qualities can influence people's health to this extent. We have become conditioned to think of health in personal, biomedical terms. We probably accept that extreme poverty and deprivation affect health, but for the most part we see it as a product of a person's genes and constitution, behaviour and lifestyle, and exposure to pathogens and toxins. However, there is much more to health than these individual qualities.

Although it has never been an explicit goal of government, the dramatic rise in life expectancy is arguably one of humanity's greatest achievements. In Australia, life expectancy (at birth) has increased by over 25 years over the last hundred years. At current mortality rates, a male born today can expect to live, on average, to about 76, and a female to 82. Other developed nations have experienced similar rises. In these countries, the increased longevity was initially due to a rapid fall in infant mortality; more recently, with infant mortality rates very low, it has resulted mainly from declining mortality among the elderly.

Developing countries have tracked the developed world in life expectancy. One thousand years ago, there was no difference in life expectancy between today's developed nations and the rest of the world; for both groups it stood at about 24 years. By 1820, a gap of 12 years had emerged: it was 36 years in the West and Japan, 24 elsewhere. By 1950, the gap had grown to 22 years (66 and 44), but it is now narrowing (78 and 64 in 1999).

The increases in life expectancy have coincided with growth in income; but as we saw in chapter 2 the relationship between wealth and health is neither simple nor linear. Life expectancy rises rapidly with increasing per capita income at low income levels, but begins to level out at about US$5000 per capita income, which is about twice the

average per capita GDP in developing countries and less than a quarter of that in developed nations. Above this level, absolute standard of living ceases to have much impact on health. At the same time, however, there are marked differences in health between different income groups within nations, even rich nations. In some countries, these disparities have widened in recent decades.

The 1990s saw a resurgence of scientific interest in socio-economic inequalities in health—the inequalities associated with income, education, occupation, residential area and class. This focus is perhaps not surprising. Against an historical background of improving health, especially as measured by mortality rates and life expectancies, and the clear evidence of persistent and even increasing socio-economic differences in health, it is logical to concentrate on inequality as a means of further improving population health.

While some things are clear about the relationships between inequality and health, others are not. As one researcher has commented, it takes considerable skill to tiptoe through the minefield of conflicting evidence. In attempting to do this, it is worth splitting the topic into two separate issues, each with two components: firstly, the level at which inequality affects health—population or individual; and secondly how it affects health—whether through material conditions or psychosocial factors (which involve interactions between social conditions and individual psychology and behaviour).

Before I elaborate on these issues, I should first note that it is possible, of course, that health determines socio-economic status—by affecting education and earning capacity, for example. While most researchers regard the effects of this 'reverse causality' as small, even negligible, others are less certain, pointing out that disability is a major cause of low income and poverty. The evidence that poor health can be transferred between generations and established in the early years of a person's life strengthens this possibility. Still, this is in no way to deny that socio-economic status affects health.

The clearest evidence we have concerns the effects of socio-economic inequality on individuals. People on lower incomes die younger and suffer more serious illness than those on higher incomes. The same is true of people who are less educated compared to those who are well educated, and of other differences in socio-economic status. The risk of early death for those in the lowest social groups is about twice that of those in the top groups, but can be as much as four times higher for some causes of death. This higher risk exists for most, but not all, major causes of death and for ill health more broadly.

The difference in risk is not simply between the poor and everyone else, although poverty is itself a cause of poor health. The health gradient is relatively uniform: at any point on the social scale, people have, on average, better health than those below them and worse health than those above. Among the most famous research projects demonstrating this health gradient are the Whitehall studies of health among British civil servants, conducted by epidemiologist Michael Marmot and his team. The studies showed a strong trend of increasing risk of death and ill health with declining rank. Some other research suggests that health improves most as you move away from the bottom of the social scale, and levels off towards the top.

In Australia, men and women aged 25–64 in low-income families are about four times more likely than those in high-income families to assess their health as only fair or poor. If we group people into one of five grades of disadvantage based on where they live (taking into account things like income, occupation, education, unemployment and public housing), males living in the most disadvantaged areas have about a 60 per cent greater chance of dying before the age of 15 than males in the least disadvantaged areas, an 80 per cent greater chance of dying between 15 and 24, and a 65 per cent greater chance of dying between 25 and 64. For females the differences in risk are smaller— about 45 per cent, 40 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.

To cite a couple of examples to illustrate these health inequalities,

the annual mortality rate from coronary heart disease in the mid-1990s for Australian men aged 25–64 in the highest of the five socio-economic groups was 43.0 per 100,000, and for men in the lowest group it was 80.7 per 100,000. For suicide the figures were 22.2 and 33.8, respectively. This means a man in the lowest group had an 88 per cent higher risk of dying of heart disease and a 52 per cent higher risk of committing suicide than someone in the highest group.

Other research has focused on the effect of inequality, mostly income inequality, on entire populations rather than individuals, and here the results have been less conclusive. Some of the earlier research in this area showed that more unequal places (countries, states or cities) had poorer average health than more equal places. The claim here is that inequality has a contextual or ecologic effect on people's health, beyond any direct effect on the individual: something about inequality is bad for everyone, regardless of their individual situation. Some of the strongest evidence for this population effect came from American research that showed a clear association between income inequality in United States cities and their mortality rates: more unequal cities had higher overall mortality.

However, more recent research has often not confirmed this view. Canadian and Australian cities, for example, do not show the same association between inequality and mortality found in the United States. It's been suggested that the American results reflect racial, not income, differences, and that the better provision of public services such as education, housing, schools and health care in Canada and Australia counters the effect of inequality. Another explanation is that Canadian and Australian cities exhibit a far smaller range of both income inequality and mortality, and are clustered at—or beyond— the low mortality/low inequality end of the United States range.

In an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* in 2002, Johan Mackenbach, a leading Netherlands researcher, suggests that 'the evidence for a correlation between income inequality and the health of

the population is slowly dissipating'. However, Richard Wilkinson, a British epidemiologist who is a prominent advocate of population effects, insists the evidence is there and accumulating, warning that 'those who wish to pull the plug out, should at least watch for the baby'.

Part of the problem may be that the research has focused on income as a measure of inequality; other inequalities such as in education may be more important to health. A report for the World Health Organization on health, inequality and economic development by American economist Angus Deaton concludes that there is no direct link from income inequality to ill health: 'Individuals are no more likely to die if they live in more unequal places.' Correlations sometimes found between income inequality and health are likely to be the result of other factors, some of which are intimately linked to broader notions of inequality and fairness. This is not to deny, he says, the importance for health of other inequalities, nor of the social environment.

In a study of health differences between wealthy nations, Australian epidemiologist John Lynch and his colleagues also found little evidence that income inequality was a key factor (although it was strongly associated with infant mortality). They conclude that explanations for the national differences require an appreciation of 'the complex interactions of history, culture, politics, economics, and the status of women and ethnic minorities'. What seems clear from the recent literature is that the picture of the health of populations is more complicated than it first appeared.

The second major issue in the literature on the social determinants of health concerns how income and other socio-economic inequalities 'get under the skin' to affect health. It is not just a matter of the quality of medical care. Do health inequalities derive primarily from material deprivation and disadvantage—from getting less of the material resources necessary for optimal health—or result mainly from

the psychosocial consequences of inequality? Put another way, are health inequalities a matter of absolute deprivation or relative deprivation? These different perspectives are labelled 'materialist' (or 'neo-materialist') and 'psychosocial', respectively.

Materialists emphasise, at the population level, investment in physical, economic and social resources. For people of lower socio-economic status, this translates into poorer quality housing, food, working conditions, neighbourhoods and access to services such as health care, education and transport. While affecting the poorest most, these absolute differences in material conditions can also affect health across the social spectrum. Advocates of the psychosocial perspective argue that the fairly uniform gradient in health, even among people who are not poor, indicates material deprivation is not the most important factor. They emphasise the significance of people's social status, their relative position in the social hierarchy.

How people's social position translates into health outcomes remains uncertain. At the population level, inequality is thought to weaken social cohesion and increase social fragmentation and tension. At the individual level, inequality affects qualities such as social support, personal control or mastery, optimism, hostility, coping style and parenting. One way these factors affect health is through behavioural risk factors: poorer people are more likely to smoke, smoke more, drink more, exercise less and have a poorer diet, for example. Some researchers argue these patterns in risk behaviour are enough to explain health inequalities. Some European studies have shown that the most equal countries don't necessarily have the most equal health because they can have larger socio-economic differences than less equal countries in risk behaviours such as smoking. But most researchers believe there is more to health gradients than lifestyle issues.

The stresses associated with inequality can affect health by impacting directly on neuro-hormonal and immune systems, and by influencing moods and emotions. Depression, hopelessness, anxiety

and anger have been associated with higher risks of death and disease (the evidence is strongest for coronary heart disease, weaker for cancer). Conversely, happiness appears to be associated with good health. All these affective states tend to show a social gradient, making them a plausible pathway from social inequality to ill-health. However, the causal links remain to be clearly established and understood. For example, the National Heart Foundation of Australia released in 2003 a new position statement on psychosocial risk factors and coronary heart disease, which states that there is no strong and consistent evidence for a causal association with work-related stresses (job control, demands and strain), hostility or anxiety and panic disorders—although many researchers believe the link exists. Nor, contrary to earlier research findings, did such evidence exist for a causal link between heart disease and 'Type A' personality (driven, competitive, impatient, intolerant). Perhaps more significant, however, given the foundation's traditional emphasis on lifestyle factors, is its conclusion that there is strong and consistent evidence for a causal association between depression, social isolation and lack of social support and heart disease. It says the increased risk posed by these factors is of a similar order to that of more conventional risk factors such as smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

The materialist and psychosocial perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and the debate between them is about relative emphasis or importance. Recent contributions focus on issues of causality and intervention: what comes first and how do we best tackle the problem? John Lynch, a prominent neo-materialist, acknowledges psychosocial factors are involved, but argues that 'there are real-world living conditions that should be the basis for understanding and analysing inequality'. It is hard to see, he says, how a psychosocial theory of health inequalities 'can form the basis for an effective policy agenda to improve overall levels of population health and reduce health inequalities'. Similarly, Gavin Turrell, an Australian sociologist, says that material factors are

'the most fundamental determinants of health, and psychosocial processes, health behaviours and social cohesion, while representing important mediating mechanisms and pathways, are ultimately a product of these more primary factors'.

But Richard Wilkinson and other researchers challenge this view, emphasising social status and hierarchy. Wilkinson says that in rich nations, 'the predominant position of material factors as determinants of health has given way to social factors'. The importance to health of relative income suggests health 'is less a matter of the immediate physical effects of the inferior material conditions than of the social meanings attached to those conditions and how people feel about their circumstances and about themselves'. Similarly, Michael Marmot concludes—tentatively—that above the poverty level, 'income is important as a predictor of ill health because it is a measure of where a person is in the social hierarchy, rather than because of pounds, dollars, or euros in the pocket'.

Despite all the uncertainties about causal processes and pathways, the 'social determinants' research shows that inequality matters to people's health. It suggests that even to the extent that behavioural factors such as smoking, drinking and diet explain health inequalities, addressing the problem at the level of the individual is not enough. In recent decades, public health campaigns have emphasised the individual lifestyle approach. Yet interventions at this level have been less successful with disadvantaged groups, resulting in even wider health disparities. Risky and unhealthy behaviour can be a way to cope with a hard and disappointing life. Richard Wilkinson explains that people can't keep to good intentions about healthy eating, giving up smoking and taking exercise unless they feel on top of life. 'When we feel unappreciated, stressed and [with] no way out, we are more likely to eat for comfort and resort to alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and to become more sedentary.'

There is another important dimension to consider in thinking

about health inequalities: time and the life cycle. A growing body of research shows that developmental pathways and life transitions are crucial to later health. What happens in early life has an important influence on later mental and physical health and development. This includes what happens before birth, during foetal development. For example, small babies have a higher risk of adult cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Low birth weight is linked to low socio-economic status. Part of this link can be attributed to mothers' smoking, which is more common in lower social groups, but other factors, such as poorer maternal nutrition, are also thought to be involved.

Early childhood is also very important, a vulnerable time when disadvantage can have lasting effects. This may be through a process of 'biological embedding', in which a child's experiences affect its 'neural sculpting' and so contribute to lasting differences in health, coping and competence. Early adverse circumstances may affect adult health and wellbeing through latent or cumulative effects—that is, the impacts may be delayed, a time bomb set during early life, or they may be the result of a continuing and cumulative pattern of disadvantage. The quality of parenting—and especially poor attachment between young children and their parents (or other primary caregivers)—is particularly important, with growing evidence that this affects early brain development. New evidence that, contrary to earlier beliefs, adolescents' brains are still developing in areas such as self-control, judgment, emotions and organisation would appear to extend this period of developmental vulnerability.

The impact of adverse events and conditions—such as problems with family, friends or school—depends on their number. Risk increases geometrically, not arithmetically, with the number of risk factors an individual has. One study of children's adjustment difficulties found that whether a child had one risk factor or none made no difference to the likelihood of experiencing problems; but having four to six risk factors increased the risk twenty-fold. Timing is also important, both

in terms of when harmful circumstances occur in a child's life and how close together they come.

Ultimately, we need to tackle health inequalities at all levels— from individual lifestyles, neighbourhood conditions and community services through to national policy and even global development. Gavin Turrell says: 'Public policy and health policy need to work in concert, to inform one another, and be directed at countering the life circumstances that generate poor health, and promoting those that give rise to good health.' This strategy should include, he says, fundamental changes such as narrowing socio-economic differentials and improving the economic and material conditions of the less advantaged sectors of the population. Angus Deaton adds that income redistribution and education are important means of achieving this.

While the focus of research has been on socio-economic inequality, there are other ways to slice the 'health inequalities' cake. The most obvious is the inequality between genders: in Australia, women's life expectancy is almost six years longer than men's. Race and ethnicity can also be important, even beyond the differences associated with poverty and inequality: Aboriginal Australians have death rates about three times higher than other Australians, and their average life expectancy is twenty years lower. Religious affiliation offers a distinct health advantage, as does marriage. Mortality among people who are socially isolated is two to five times higher than for those with strong ties to family, friends and community. These health factors may be interrelated. Part of the benefits of being married, religious and female may accrue from better lifestyles and social relationships. Women, for instance, tend to be more religious than men (at least among Christians), to look after their health better and to be better connected socially.

The question of how social conditions influence health goes beyond the issue of inequality, however. There are important factors

that are not primarily expressed as health inequalities within populations at any one time, but which exert important effects over time across whole populations. Two such influences are cultural change and environmental degradation.

My own interest has focused on the role of culture. Epidemiology understands 'culture' mainly in terms of 'difference', especially ethnic and racial difference. Recent research on the social determinants of health has largely excluded culture, in the broader sense used in this book, from detailed consideration; its impact has been seen as distant and diffuse, exerting a pervasive but unspecified influence on health. Of the many books and reports on the subject published over the past decade, few give cultural determinants more than a passing mention. None offers a comprehensive account of the health implications of the cultural characteristics of modern Western societies such as individualism and consumerism.

Yet if psychosocial factors are important in explaining health inequalities, then culture must be an important part of the equation. Once we allow a role in health for perceptions, expectations and emotions, then cultural factors have to be taken into consideration because culture powerfully influences these things.

A recent American study by psychologist Becca Levy and her colleagues (reported in the psychological, not health, literature) shows how important attitudes, in this case attitudes to ageing, can be to health. The researchers looked at a group of older people whose attitudes to ageing had been measured up to 23 years earlier. They found that those with more positive self-perceptions of ageing lived an average 7.5 years longer than those with less positive attitudes. The advantage remained even after age, gender, socio-economic status, loneliness and functional health were taken into account. The researchers say this effect on longevity is greater than the survival advantages associated in other studies with low blood pressure and cholesterol, not being overweight, not smoking, and exercising. The researchers note

one likely cause of poor self-perceptions of ageing: 'socially sanctioned denigration of the aged'. This is a cultural characteristic of modern Western societies, with their worship of youthfulness (if not youth).

It seems to me that the cultural realm is likely to have a bigger influence than socio-economic inequality on psychosocial factors such as social support, personal control, optimism, coping skills, depression, anxiety and anger—both directly and through its impact on social institutions such as marriage and religion. These effects, while pervasive, are unlikely to be uniform across society, and would interact with socio-economic and other factors to modify their impacts on health. Put another way, the values and meanings we carry in our heads matter more than the external structures of our lives.

Cultural effects on health can be positive or negative. Canadian epidemiologist Clyde Hertzman lists several factors that he suggests might explain why health is continuing to improve despite adverse changes in income distribution and social cohesion. These include growing social tolerance, diversity, pluralism and flexibility: 'An end to the social respectability of religious, gender, ethnic, and racial discrimination…a general loosening of social norms and behavioural expectations and an increase in the range of lifestyles which are considered socially acceptable.' These changes, he says, may increase the level of 'psychosocial equality' in society.

However, cultural changes can also jeopardise health and well-being. Trends such as increasing individualism can create universal risk factors that multiply the effects of other, more specific or personal risks—for example, amplifying the loss of personal control or social support associated with poverty, inequality or family breakdown—while also making such risks more likely. Indeed, one of the more curious aspects of the current situation is that the neglect of culture exists despite long-standing evidence of its importance.

For example, in the 1970s Michael Marmot and his colleagues examined the health of Japanese people in Japan, Hawaii and

California to see if varying degrees of exposure to Western influence affected the rate of coronary heart disease. They found a clear gradient of increasing heart disease from Japan to Hawaii to California. Conventional individual risk factors did not fully explain the trend. Marmot later measured the degree of exposure to traditional Japanese culture during people's upbringing and found that more traditional Japanese had lower rates of heart disease than non-traditional Japanese, even after controlling for individual risk factors such as diet.

In the Stirling County Study, a classic study in psychiatric epidemiology that began in the 1950s, Alexander Leighton and his colleagues looked at the relationship between mental health and social 'integration' in remote rural Canadian communities, as measured by the degree of consensus about values, meaning and shared sentiments. The researchers showed that social disintegration was directly related to the prevalence of psychiatric disorders, and proposed that people forced to live in an environment characterised by disorder and chaos had to strive to maintain their inner equilibrium and that this striving would be associated with more mental illness.

In a different field—human ecology—Stephen Boyden and his colleagues found in a major 1970s study of Hong Kong that perceptions were important in determining how people responded to high population density: whether people *felt* crowded appeared to be by far the most important determinant of psychological maladjustment—more important than actual physical density. Significantly, exposure to Western influence was associated with greater intolerance of crowding. Finally, while the story of Roseto is often cited as an example of the psychosocial basis of health inequalities, the researchers' accounts indicate that it was the erosion of the cultural qualities of social cohesion and egalitarianism, rather than growing inequality, which lay behind the town's loss of its health advantage.

Despite the evidence that aspects of Western culture may be hazardous to health, life expectancy continues to rise. Why? We need

to bear in mind that death, however much social epidemiology focuses on it, represents only one dimension of health and wellbeing. Vaccines save infant lives; cardiac bypasses delay death. Medical technologies lengthen life, but this increase says relatively little about the quality or richness of the life we lead. For example, a person might develop heart disease because he has smoked and has been depressed, stressed and socially isolated for much of his life—but drugs and surgery can now give him the lifespan of a healthy, happy person.

The second area of broad and growing importance to health is environmental change. Environmental health is usually considered a separate field from the social determinants of health, but I am including it here because environmental effects, like those of inequality and culture, are socially produced. According to the United Nations Environment Program, poor environmental quality is directly responsible for some 25 per cent of all preventable ill-health, especially diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory infections (diarrhoea killed more children in the 1990s than all the people lost in armed conflict since World War II). As with culture, the environment can contribute to health inequalities associated with socio-economic factors: for example, poor people are more likely to be exposed to toxic pollution and contamination. Historically, most environmental health problems have been of this type, entailing specific risks within a local context.

However, over the past two decades the focus of environmental concerns has shifted from local and regional impacts to the way humans are now changing planetary systems and processes, possibly with huge consequences for health. Australian epidemiologist Tony McMichael says we have begun to alter the conditions of life on Earth, even as we remain largely ignorant of the long-term consequences. 'We must now extend our environmental health concerns, and research, to include the sustaining of natural systems that are the prerequisite to human survival, health and wellbeing.'

McMichael describes these concerns in a broad evolutionary and historical context in *Human Frontiers, Environments and Disease: Past Patterns, Uncertain Futures*. There are two main categories of large-scale environmental changes, he says. The first is the truly global, such as the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the lower atmosphere, stratospheric ozone depletion, disruption of the global cycles of specific elements such as nitrogen, phosphorus and sulphur, and the worldwide spread of persistent organic pollutants. In the second are those changes that are local in scale but have become so widespread they are now global problems: biodiversity loss, introduced 'alien' species, land degradation, over-fishing and the depletion and contamination of fresh water.

While some health impacts of global climate change as a result of the enhanced greenhouse effect would be beneficial (such as milder winters), most are likely to be adverse. These include more frequent and more intense extreme weather events such as heatwaves, storms and floods; the altered range, seasonality and intensity of vector-borne infectious diseases, including malaria, dengue fever, viral encephalitis, schistosomiasis and yellow fever; changes to food yields, especially of cereal crops, which are likely to increase in temperate zones but decline in the tropics and subtropics; and inundation and salination resulting from rising sea levels. Ozone depletion is increasing ultraviolet radiation, which is expected to increase sunburn, skin cancers and various eye disorders; it could also impair our immune systems and affect global food production. The changes to global nitrogen and sulphur cycles through the increased use of synthetic fertilisers, burning fossil fuels and other practices are affecting the acidity and nutrient balances in soils, and so could impair global food production.

The loss of biodiversity poses hazards to human health through restricting supplies of food and pharmaceuticals, both of which benefit from access to new plants and animals and their genes. Another potential hazard, less appreciated, is the risk of unravelling functional

ecosystems, affecting processes such as pollination and pest control. Introduced 'alien' or 'invasive' species can affect food yields and storage, produce food-borne toxins and spread infectious disease. Land degradation, over-exploitation of fisheries and the depletion and contamination of fresh water all have implications for human health through their impacts on food production and nutrition.

The environmental health literature has focused on the more direct physical health implications of environmental change—famines, natural disasters and epidemics of infectious disease, for example. However, the social consequences of environmental change and degradation also include growing flows of environmental refugees and escalating conflict over diminishing resources. Australian epidemiologist Colin Butler and his colleagues go further, warning there is a risk that ecological losses, 'embedded in a mosaic of social, economic and political factors', could cause the failure or collapse of entire societies—on a local, regional, continental or even global scale—so magnifying hugely their health costs. The nature of these complex systems means we are unlikely to see even, linear changes; interactions between different components could be self-correcting (negative feedback)—or intensify to produce 'runaway' change (positive feedback).

There is another dimension to the implications of environmental degradation for human health and wellbeing: the psychosocial effects that global environmental problems may be having, especially on children and adolescents, by fuelling global pessimism and reinforcing an individualistic, consumerist lifestyle which then compounds the problems.

The broader view of the social determinants of health presented here has profound political significance. The implications of socio-economic inequalities in health are serious enough, but they are relatively easily addressed through, for example, conventional policies for correcting or compensating for these inequalities. Acknowledging important cultural

and environmental influences on health and wellbeing, on the other hand, means we need to re-evaluate the entire Western worldview and its values, goals and priorities. British epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose ends *The Strategy of Preventive Medicine* with these words: 'The primary determinants of disease are mainly economic and social, and therefore its remedies must also be economic and social. Medicine and politics cannot and should not be kept apart.'

5> the wellsprings of happiness

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Through the centuries sages have offered us advice on happiness and how to find it. The pursuit of happiness is not only enshrined in the United States Declaration of Independence, it is a dominant feature of modern Western culture and the driving force of national economies. Yet for a long time science paid little attention to happiness. One electronic search of the psychological literature over a period of more than one hundred years revealed more than 70,000 articles on depression and almost 58,000 on anxiety, but less than 6000 mentioning life satisfaction and 3000 happiness. Scientifically, happiness has been regarded as 'soft', even a bit wacky.

Scientists are not the only sceptics. When I told a friend who asked what I was up to these days that I was trying to work out if people were getting happier, he retorted: 'Do you mean to say you get paid to do that?' Not very much, I thought defensively. He likened me to the medieval scholars who counted angels on pinheads (but admitted later he'd lain awake that night thinking about what made people happy).

Over the past couple of decades, however, researchers have become increasingly interested in happiness, and who has it and why. In psychology, happiness is part of what is called subjective wellbeing. The two are often loosely equated, but subjective wellbeing is not a single entity. It is made up of three distinct and to some extent independent dimensions: a cognitive aspect (life satisfaction); pleasant moods and emotions (positive affect); and unpleasant moods and emotions (negative affect). Most surveys of subjective wellbeing simply ask people to rate their happiness or satisfaction with life. Rating scales vary; the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, a national wellbeing index that I developed with colleagues, uses an eleven-point scale ranging from completely dissatisfied (0) to completely satisfied (10), with group averages expressed as percentages.

What makes for a happy person? Marriage, religion, friends, work, leisure, health and money all enhance wellbeing. In terms of personality traits, being extroverted (sociable, outgoing, assertive, energetic) helps, while being neurotic (anxious, moody, easily upset) hinders. Happiness tends also to be associated with personal control, self-esteem and optimism, although the strength of these associations varies with culture (they are stronger in individualistic societies than collectivist ones). Adaptability, the ability to set goals and progress towards them, and a sense of coherence—viewing the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful—also matter.

Some researchers have focused on the importance of intrinsic motivation or 'flow': spending time being unselfconsciously absorbed or engrossed in an activity that is worth doing for its own sake, not for any rewards or praise it might bring. American psychologist Ed Diener and his colleagues note that the central elements of wellbeing are based on people's most important values and goals: subjective wellbeing 'is most likely to be experienced when people work for and make progress towards personal goals that derive from their important values'. Having conflicting goals or being ambivalent about

them, on the other hand, is associated with diminished wellbeing.

A sense of belonging is important. American psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary argue that a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation: humans have 'a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships'. There are multiple links between the need to belong and cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavioural responses and health and wellbeing, they say. 'The desire for interpersonal attachment may well be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature.'

Meaning in life is strongly related to wellbeing. Australian researchers Bruce Headey and Alex Wearing say in their book *Understanding Happiness*: 'A sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with life satisfaction.' Meaning is, in turn, related to self-transcendent values, strong religious beliefs, membership of groups, dedication to a cause and clear life goals. So meaning is closely linked to belonging, in a social and spiritual as well as personal sense. 'A sense of place' is another form of belonging—in this case physical or geographic—that is also attracting growing attention, but in a different field of research. We can see, then, that there are different ways of looking at what contributes to happiness, with researchers focusing on different qualities and perspectives; many of these are interrelated.

Many of the sources of happiness, including personal control, social support, optimism, marriage, religion and money, are also sources of good health, as we saw in the previous chapter. The relationship between wealth and happiness shows similarities to that between wealth and health, but also at least one important difference. As with health, there are income gradients, or differences, in subjective wellbeing between and within populations. Average wellbeing is higher in rich countries than in poor. As with health, the biggest gains in wellbeing

with rising income come at low income levels, and taper off at higher levels. Increased income appears to matter when it helps people meet basic needs; beyond that the relationship becomes more complex.

Also, the relationship between income and happiness may reflect the influence of other factors. For example, the American sociologist Ronald Inglehart has compared subjective wellbeing and life expectancy with income for a large number of countries and, like others, has found clear evidence of diminishing returns at higher average income levels. With happiness, scores levelled off at per capita incomes above about US$10,000. There are peoples who are relatively poor but happy and long-lived, suggesting that factors other than income are affecting outcomes. An important influence may be democracy and what this means for overall social conditions and processes, including political and civic participation. Inglehart found a more linear relationship when he compared nations' subjective wellbeing scores with a measure of democratic freedom. Diener and his colleagues showed in a study of 55 nations that not only income but societal equality and human rights correlated strongly with wellbeing.

The relative contributions of such factors to wellbeing were examined in a recent study that compared life satisfaction amongst East and West Germans since reunification in 1990. It found East Germans had lower satisfaction over the decade, but that their satisfaction had increased steadily during the 1990s (after an initial drop as their elation passed), while West Germans' satisfaction had changed little. Only about 12 per cent of the increase in satisfaction experienced by the East Germans could be attributed to rising household income, with most of the improvement explained by 'better average circumstances', such as greater political freedom and improved public services.

Another recent study has added a new dimension to explaining national happiness levels: personality differences. It found that neuroticism and extroversion, measured as national averages, correlated significantly with national subjective wellbeing (neuroticism negatively

and extroversion positively). The correlations of these personality traits with national income were negligible. The study suggests, the authors say, that 'national happiness does appear to be partly due to the personality of its people'.

When we turn to differences in wellbeing between individuals within countries, only in the poorest nations is income a good indicator of wellbeing. In most a positive correlation exists but it is generally small; even the very rich are only slightly happier than the average person. As in the case of health inequalities, the income gradient in happiness in rich nations could be due to material and psychosocial factors. For the poor, especially, material deprivation and the social isolation that can come with it are probably at least part of the explanation, a view supported by evidence that the relationship appears strongest at the lower end of the income range and weaker over the rest. But the effect of income could also be a result of social comparison—how well we are doing compared to others—especially among those who are not seriously disadvantaged. In other words, income is serving as a measure of social status, and it is this that influences how happy people are. (The distinction is to some extent blurred in that material deprivation is itself a relative condition.) This means the rich will continue to score higher than the poor, whatever happens to average income levels. Overall, the findings suggest that reducing socio-economic inequality, especially by improving the lot of the poor, would do more to improve population happiness than maximising economic growth to raise average income.

Income is not, in any case, the most important determinant of individual wellbeing. For example, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index showed that marital status produced the largest difference in life satisfaction: measured on a percentage scale, married people scored an average 13 percentage points higher than the separated (and 7 more than the never-married). In comparison, the wealthiest scored 8 points more than the poorest, the elderly 6 points more than the young, women 3 points more than men, and the religious 2 points higher

than the irreligious. British economists have even attempted to put a monetary value on various life events based on the contributions they make to happiness compared to income: on average, marrying increases happiness by about the same amount as having an extra £70,000 ($170,000) a year; separating costs about £130,000 ($320,000) a year; losing your job or your health costs even more in lost happiness. These high 'prices' illustrate the relatively small contributions income makes to happiness.

A major difference between health and happiness, in their association with money, is that while health, as measured by mortality and life expectancy, has improved steadily over past decades, wellbeing has not, at least not in rich nations. The proportion of people in developed societies who are happy or satisfied with their lives has remained fairly stable over the past several decades (fifty years in the United States), despite people having become, on average, much richer. Some studies suggest average happiness may even have declined in some countries. Indeed, one of the most striking findings of research into subjective wellbeing is that the correlation with objective resources and conditions is often very small. One recent estimate is that external circumstances explain only about 15 per cent of the variance, or the differences between people, in subjective wellbeing. The reasons lie in the nature of happiness.

We all know people who always seem to be happy—or unhappy—no matter what their situation. So it is not surprising to learn that there is a substantial hereditary component to happiness, associated in particular with personality traits such as extroversion and neuroticism. Some research suggests that how good someone feels at any particular time is about equally determined by their genes and their circumstances, but how good they feel on average over, say, ten years is fully 80 per cent determined by their genes. These estimates vary between studies, however, and much remains to be learned about the heritability of happiness.

In a recent review of research on subjective wellbeing, Ed Diener and his co-researchers conclude that there is no simple answer to what causes happiness. Instead, there is a complex interplay between genes and environment—between life events and circumstances, culture, personality, goals and various adaptation and coping strategies. The evidence suggests that people adjust goals and expectations and use illusions and rationalisations to maintain over time a relatively stable, and positive, rating of life satisfaction and happiness. This does not mean that social, economic and political developments do not affect subjective wellbeing, but that, as already noted, the relationship between the objective and subjective realms is not straightforward and linear.

While it is generally agreed that subjective wellbeing demonstrates this dynamic equilibrium (a 'hedonic treadmill', as some call it), Australian psychologist Bob Cummins has gone further in developing a theoretical model of the mechanisms involved. It remains to be seen whether this model will win general acceptance, but supporting evidence is mounting. Cummins has shown that when people's life satisfaction scores are converted to percentages, the population average for Western nations is about 75 per cent, with most countries falling within the range of 70–80 per cent. For countries across all major geographic regions, the average is about 70 per cent, with most in the range of 60–80 per cent. In other words, if 100 per cent represents complete and total satisfaction with life, people rate themselves, on average, 60–80 per cent satisfied. Cummins argues that the uniformity of population measures of life satisfaction suggests that it, like blood pressure and body temperature, is held under homeostatic control. This control attempts to maintain individual life satisfaction in the positive range—that is, above 50 per cent.

Cummins and his colleagues have proposed that this homeo-static system involves interactions between personality traits, especially extroversion and neuroticism; a set of cognitive 'buffers' involving

personal control, self-esteem and optimism; met and unmet needs; and processes of habituation and adaptation. This system holds subjective wellbeing within a narrow, 'set-point' range that varies among individuals, but usually not by much. However, under sustained or severe adversity, homeostasis can break down and wellbeing fall below the set-point range, leading to increased risks of depression and other mental health problems. Usually, homeostasis is restored. Even people made paraplegic in accidents generally recover to near-normal levels of wellbeing. A similar process also operates with positive events and experiences: people who win the lottery, for example, experience initial elation, but then return to their set-point range of life satisfaction and happiness.

The theory of subjective wellbeing homeostasis has been supported by the results of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, which Bob Cummins and I developed in partnership with the financial services and healthcare company Australian Unity. We believe it is the first of its type in the world. It allows people's life satisfaction to be tracked over time and compared across demographic groups, and also permits the study of the effect on wellbeing of specific aspects of life, issues and events. The index is based on quarterly telephone surveys of about 2000 adult Australians, and consists of two main values: the Personal Wellbeing Index, which is the average level of satisfaction with seven aspects of people's personal lives—standard of living, health, achievements in life, personal relationships, safety, community connectedness and future security; and the National Wellbeing Index, the average level of satisfaction with six aspects of national life—the economic situation, social conditions, the natural environment, government, business and national security.

In seven surveys between 2001 and 2003, the personal wellbeing scores have been between 73 and 76 per cent. Most population subgroups fall in the range of 70–80 per cent, but not all. People who were separated or divorced, for example, had average scores of only 65 and

68 per cent, respectively (compared to 78 per cent for the married), suggesting marriage or relationship breakdown has caused homeo-static failure for a significant number of people in this group. One of the paradoxes of wellbeing is that personal events such as a marriage break-up (or the death of someone close, or losing a job) diminish well-being, but events like the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 or the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002 appear to increase it (even while they shock and sadden most people). The Personal Wellbeing Index rose by up to 2 percentage points in the months after both events. The reasons could be that tragedies like these bring communities together and draw people closer to their families and friends, jolting them out of the rut of everyday life and making them appreciate more what they have and the preciousness of life. At another level, however, these calamities also contribute to a bleak outlook on the world and its future that can depress wellbeing. Major life events can have several, 'layered' effects on our psyche, reflecting the complexities of the impacts of the external world on our subjective wellbeing.

What role does culture play in wellbeing? If qualities such as meaning, belonging, goals and values are important to wellbeing, then so is culture. Drawing on cross-cultural studies of happiness, Diener and his colleagues conclude: '…culture can have a profound effect on the causes of happiness by influencing the goals people pursue as well as the resources available to attain goals'. What is true of cultural differ-ences between societies is also true of cultural changes in the same society over time. As the novelist L. P. Hartley says in *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'

In *The High Price of Materialism*, American psychologist Tim Kasser draws on his own and others' research to describe how values—specifically materialism, the pursuit of money and possessions—affect our wellbeing. He demonstrates that materialism breeds not happiness

but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation. Materialistic values go hand in hand with poor psychological health. Human needs for security and safety, competence and self-esteem, connectedness to others, and autonomy and authenticity are relatively unsatisfied when materialistic values predominate, he says. These values also work against the wellbeing of other people, society and the planet. In short, the more materialistic we are, the poorer our quality of life.

Kasser and colleague Richard Ryan have shown that people for whom 'extrinsic goals' such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall wellbeing than people oriented towards 'intrinsic goals' of close relationships, self-acceptance and contributing to the community. People with extrinsic goals tend to have shorter relationships with friends and lovers, and relationships characterised more by jealousy and less by trust and caring. Referring to 'a dark side of the American dream', they say that our culture in some ways seems to be built on precisely what turns out to be detrimental to mental health.

Not much research in this area has been carried out in Australia, but two recent studies confirm the negative association between materialism and wellbeing. Psychologists Shaun Saunders and Don Munro found consumerist and materialist values were positively correlated with depression, anxiety and anger; materialism was also negatively correlated with life satisfaction. Lisa Ryan and Suzanne Dziurawiec, two other Australian psychologists, have also shown that more materialistic people tended to be less satisfied with their lives as a whole, and less satisfied with several 'life domains' including family life, standard of living, amount of fun and enjoyment, their place of residence, accomplishments in life, and health and physical condition (that is, materialism was negatively correlated with satisfaction in these areas).

The correlations revealed in most of this research do not prove that materialism and related values cause a deterioration in wellbeing;

it could also work the other way, with unhappier people drawn to materialistic pursuits as a distraction or antidote—'retail therapy'. However, the associations do suggest the cultural promotion of materialism is not conducive to happiness. The causal relationship is likely to be complex and reciprocal. As well as having broad significance for how we define and promote 'the good life', the research has particular relevance to the role models and success stories with which we seek to inspire young people. The vast majority of these reflect material or extrinsic accomplishment. This quality, together with the fact that the examples, by definition, focus on exceptional people—exceptionally talented, driven or lucky—makes them of dubious merit.

Individualism is another cultural quality with profound significance for wellbeing, but it's not clear whether it promotes or diminishes it. The evidence is confused and contradictory. Frustrated by not being able to resolve the contradictions, I contacted an international group of researchers for help. The general response was that I had raised important issues and that a lot of work remained to be done to understand them. It might be that individualism is multidimensional and interacts with other cultural characteristics such as materialism and social orientation (egalitarian or hierarchical), so accounting for its complex effects. But there was a common perception that we in the West now had too much individualism and/or the wrong sort. Because of its status as a defining feature of modern Western culture and its importance to wellbeing, let me elaborate a little.

In cross-national studies, individualism is one of the strongest correlates of happiness, and some researchers believe this finding reflects real differences in wellbeing rather than cultural differences in survey responses. And as we have seen, wellbeing is associated with several qualities that we might expect individualistic societies would encourage, including personal control, self-esteem and optimism. On the other hand, research also suggests individualism has adverse

impacts on other qualities that enhance wellbeing, including intimacy, belonging and meaning in life. American psychologist Martin Seligman, who links rising depression to increasing individualism, says hope for the future lies in striking a better balance between commitment to the self and to the common good. Likewise Barry Schwartz, another American psychologist, says that freedom, autonomy and self-determination can become excessive, and be experienced as 'a kind of tyranny', resulting in increased dissatisfaction with life and depression.

Can we reconcile these findings and positions? Maybe to some extent, but probably not fully. Firstly, the positive associations found between individualism and wellbeing in comparisons across nations may, in fact, reflect cultural differences in response. People in individualistic societies may tend to rate their happiness comparatively higher because it is important to be a 'winner', not a 'loser'. We can't test this possibility objectively with happiness but we can with health. Self-reported health is positively correlated with both happiness and individualism at the national level—but not with actual life expectancy. In one international survey, for example, 79 per cent of people in the United States rated their health as good or very good; in Japan, only 44 per cent did. Yet the Japanese have a life expectancy about four years longer than Americans, placing them at opposite ends of the life-expectancy spectrum of developed nations. This suggests that how we rate our health—and by implication our happiness—is influenced by cultural norms and expectations.

Secondly, it is possible that individualism might be good for some and bad for others, especially those who can't handle the freedom and choice; or it might be good when things are going well, but bad when they aren't. Ed Diener said it was great to be doing well in individualistic cultures because we were free to 'follow our bliss without too many pressures', but it was hard to be a failure because everything was attributed to the individual and there was less social support. Yet the evidence does not suggest we are seeing some sort of polarisation in happiness,

a clearer distinction between winners and losers. The seriously disturbed represent one end of a spectrum or gradient of distress and suffering, not a small minority clearly separate from a healthy, happy majority. Long-term trends in the proportion of Americans who say they are 'very happy' (the winners) show little change, perhaps even a slight decline.

Thirdly, the role of self-esteem in wellbeing is culturally variable, being more important in individualistic than collectivist societies. Its role may, in any case, be greatly over-stated, even in individualistic populations. Especially in the United States, it has been seen as pivotal to mental health. Some researchers are, however, sceptical about the emphasis placed on self-esteem as protective armour against psychological problems. People with high self-esteem can be obnoxious, narcissistic, aggressive, disparaging and inclined to take excessive risks. 'The enthusiastic claims of the self-esteem movement mostly range from fantasy to hogwash,' says Roy Baumeister. 'The effects of self-esteem are small, limited and not all good. My conclusion is that self-control is worth ten times as much as self-esteem.'

Fourthly, Richard Ryan and his colleagues argue that, in discussing individualism and related issues, many researchers confuse autonomy, which is good for wellbeing, with independence, which is bad. Autonomy is a matter of volition, the ability to act according to our internalised values and desires. Its opposite is not dependence, but heteronomy, where we feel our actions are controlled by external forces regardless of our own values and interests. So autonomy, unlike independence, is not hostile to the need for relatedness. It can be achieved in both collectivist and individualistic societies, although expressed through different cultural practices.

It follows from this, I think, that a fundamental flaw in modern Western culture may be that individualism confuses autonomy with independence, or separateness, affecting other qualities important to wellbeing such as relatedness or belonging and meaning in life—and,

ultimately, autonomy itself. In other words, autonomy is culturally expressed as independence. The *Macquarie Dictionary*, for example, defines autonomy as 'independence, self-sufficiency, self-regulation', while the *Oxford* equates it with 'personal freedom, freedom of the will'. This interpretation might 'work' up to a point, but beyond this point individualism could well lead to less autonomy, not more, because there is less perceived congruence or connection between the self and others, between our values and theirs. The more narrowly and separately the self is defined, the greater the likelihood that the social forces acting on us are experienced as external and alien. This could be a major dynamic in modern life, impacting on everything from citizenship and social trust, cohesion and engagement, to the intimacy of friendships and the quality of family life.

The trends over time in wellbeing and illbeing don't help us settle this issue of individualism's net cost or benefit. If individualism is good, why hasn't happiness increased in Western societies as they have become more individualistic? On the other hand, while it is widely believed that depression has increased in modern societies, the research evidence is contradictory, with some studies finding increased prevalence, but not others. However, the evidence is compelling for diminished wellbeing among the young—which is where we would most expect to see the effects of social and cultural changes.

New research in the United States by psychologist Jean Twenge throws fascinating light on just how deeply social factors shape who we are. In a series of studies drawing on psychological tests conducted with children and college students over periods of up to fifty years or more, she has found large shifts in a range of personality traits and qualities. She says her findings show that broad social trends—not just genes and the family environment, as psychologists have assumed—are important influences on personality development. She quotes an Arab proverb: 'Men resemble their times more than they resemble their fathers.'

Twenge found large increases in trait anxiety (or neuroticism), self-esteem, extroversion and, in women, assertiveness. In her most recent research, she shows social desirability (the need for social approval) declined up until 1980, after which it increased slightly but not significantly; young people's sense of control over their lives has also declined (that is, their locus of control has become more external). To give just two examples of the extent of these shifts, she says that the average American child in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s, while the average college student in 2002 felt less control over their lives than 80–90 per cent of college students in 1962. Using a range of indicators, Twenge links most of these trends to rising individualism through declining social connectedness and increasing environmental threat (for the anxiety study these indicators included divorce rate, birth rate, women's age at first marriage, proportion of people living alone, crime rate and youth suicide rate). Economic factors such as unemployment and poverty seem not to be involved.

Now we can see from what I've said that these trends are a mixed bag as far as wellbeing is concerned. Increasing extroversion is good; increasing anxiety and loss of control are bad, while the effect of higher self-esteem is uncertain. With respect to the negatives, anxiety has been associated with depression, suicide attempts, alcohol and drug abuse and poorer physical health; an external locus of control is associated with lower wellbeing, depression, anxiety, poor school achievement, helplessness, ineffective stress management and decreased self-control. The strength of these associations with something like depression can be greater than the effects of social factors such as parental divorce, domestic violence, relationship break-ups, unemployment and financial hardship. Twenge's research, in demonstrating the extent of the changes in these personal attributes over time, indicates how important they may be to understanding the trends in young people's wellbeing.

How these changes in personal qualities interact also poses interesting questions and fascinating possibilities. For example, we might have expected individualism to increase both self-esteem and control. But diminished control can be part of a defensive strategy to maintain self-esteem. The modern individual displays extraordinarily high self-esteem, Twenge says, and one way to maintain that high self-esteem is to believe that the things that threaten it are beyond one's control. Twenge's finding that Americans feel less control over their lives is also consistent with the point I raised earlier—that individualism, by defining and expressing autonomy as independence, might actually reduce autonomy. The measure of locus of control used in Twenge's research includes the perception that people can shape and influence their social environment (including government) as well as control their own lives, reflecting a social dimension of control that is also part of genuine autonomy, but is weakened by independence. So we have two possible, and related, mechanisms by which increased individualism might reduce control over life: it encourages a perception that we are separate from others and the environment in which we live; and it demands of the individual a high level of self-esteem, which a diminished sense of control helps to maintain. The complexities and scales of modern life, accentuated and distorted by media representations of it, would reinforce these tendencies.

This cognitive juggling or trading off might be evidence of the homeostatic system at work, and it might be effective over the short term or in response to specific adverse events. But when things get too out of balance for too long, and the adjustments constitute a response to sustained changes in our way of life rather than temporary shifts, this strategy may not work so well. When I asked Tim Kasser about Twenge's work, he said the personality changes sounded like a recipe for narcissism or 'contingent' self-esteem. 'Both involve a concern for external validation, and when that validation doesn't come, psychic pain increases. And the good feelings validation produces only last a

short while anyhow, and so don't really do much to heal the inner pain of the narcissist.'

We can glimpse in these psychological changes how individualism came to represent not authentic autonomy, but self-centredness: the satisfaction of personal wants, a preoccupation with entitlements, an abrogation of responsibilities and a withering of collective effort. Broadly speaking, it would seem that cultural trends like individualism and materialism have shifted the focus of our lives from the internal to the external, the intrinsic to the extrinsic, the subjective to the objective, so creating an 'empty' or 'separate' self: socially and historically disconnected, discontented, insecure; pursuing constant gratification and external affirmation; prone to addiction, obsession and excess; with much of this disguised by a show of self-confidence and gregariousness.

Note that I am talking about tendencies, not necessarily pathologies, and that we see these qualities more readily in others than in ourselves, for reasons I discuss later. In other words, it is hard to discern shifts in the population mean or average of a characteristic because this represents the norm; changes are more apparent when we look at the extremes, or tails, of the population distribution. We sense there are, these days, fewer really good men and women, and more bad ones—the vain, greedy and self-serving. The icons of excess are the Hollywood-style celebrities, whose glamour, fame and wealth so often hide deep insecurities, addictions and self-absorption—their personas like empty cans crumpling under the pressure of the public's and their own expectations and adulation.

It is also important to recognise that we are not talking about a deviation from the one way of life that optimises wellbeing. As I've said, how we seek and find happiness depends on our culture; there may be many paths we can follow in meeting human needs. This is the source of our extraordinary diversity and versatility, but it is also the source of danger: we can lose the path altogether, run off the rails. In a culture

that promotes personal freedom, we will seek this freedom and feel better when we have it—yet also sense that something is missing. We can strive for independence and, at the same time, crave belonging and intimacy. We can be lonely in company or in relationships; out of regard for 'privacy'—our own and others'—we may fail to seek support when we need it, or hesitate to offer it to others when we should. These are the sorts of tensions and imbalances that dysfunctional cultures create.

Historically, individualism began as a celebration of human dignity, equality and self-determination—genuine autonomy—but it has become subverted, through its interaction with materialism and other cultural characteristics, into an ethic of self-interest, self-gratification—and solitariness. The impacts of cultural factors such as materialism and individualism on wellbeing—and on the resilience we need to maintain it—revolve around how they affect things like social support (belonging) and personal control (autonomy), the importance of which emerges again and again in a diverse range of literatures.

For example, writing in the field of drug addiction research, Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander argues that psychosocial integration—the individual's experience of belonging, and being accepted and understood—is what makes life bearable, even joyful. Modern, free-market societies systematically promote its opposite, and 'dislocate' individuals from traditional sources of psychological, social and spiritual support. Dislocated people struggle to find or restore psychosocial integration—to somehow 'get a life'—and eventually construct lifestyles that substitute for it, he says. Substitute lifestyles frequently centre on addiction, in which our lives are given over to one or a few pursuits to the detriment of a broader, more balanced life. '(A)ddiction to drug use or to other substitute lifestyles within Western societies is not the pathological state of the few, but, to a greater or lesser degree, the general condition.'

In *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*, Australian scholar David Tacey also draws attention to the

role of substitution and addiction in our lives today. The addictive society cannot access the spiritual life that would bring creativity and originality, and this lack of connection to our invisible, life-sustaining roots exhausts us, he says. Parody and imitation constitute the dominant cultural style of our period; many of our activities are copies or reproductions of impulses that are hard to discern and poorly described by the word 'spirituality'. The copy can be worked up in a jiffy, but 'the deeper impulse has not been satiated, just temporarily relieved by vicarious displacement, by a stop-gap or addictive behaviour'. The new communication technologies of the Internet, email or mobile phone, for example, offer a substitute connectedness, not the authentic experience. Tacey says that we need to overcome our obsession with imitations and substitutes and try to catch hold of the real thing, baffling and elusive as it is: 'The deep real, from which surprising, alarming and transforming things emerge.'

The picture emerging from recent psychological research is remarkably consistent with public perceptions of modern life, which are discussed in the next chapter. It is also consistent with much contemporary social commentary about the 'culture of complaint' that marks our times, our 'victim' mentality, characterised by the need to blame someone or something else for our sense of failure or inadequacy and whatever set-back we experience. Hence the paradox that the more we make the individual the focus of our culture, the more impotent and insecure we feel; and the more diminished we feel as individuals the more precious we become in the face of slights and insults and the more stridently we defend our personal 'rights'—to happiness, a risk-free life, compensation for the wrongs that befall us, and even our own opinions.

However, some of the most recent evidence suggests we may be moving beyond this condition towards a greater degree of personal and moral autonomy, a greater acceptance of responsibility for our own lives. While this is in many ways a positive and necessary

development, the dangers include a weakened sense of collective efficacy and identity. This development, if real, may involve a cultural redefinition and reconstruction of our notions of autonomy and control in ways that are not yet clear—or at least, that I don't yet understand. To my mind, it may be one of the most critical aspects of contemporary cultural change, one which could have far-reaching consequences.

So far in this chapter I have focused mainly on the concept of subjective wellbeing, which currently dominates psychological research. Some psychologists challenge its emphasis on the hedonic, which equates wellbeing with happiness and results from maximising pleasure and minimising pain. They argue instead in favour of a concept of eudaimonic wellbeing, which focuses on meaning and self-realisation: wellbeing consists of fulfilling one's daimon or true nature, of being 'fully functioning'. Daimon is an ideal of excellence, of striving towards a perfection, which gives meaning and direction to one's life. American psychologist Carol Ryff argues in a 1989 paper that the early research on wellbeing was not strongly guided by theory, having been undertaken for purposes such as measuring the effect of social change. She even suggests psychology's focus on hedonic wellbeing rested on a mistranslation of the Greek word 'eudaimonia' as happiness. 'Had Aristotle's view of eudaimonia as the highest of all good been translated as realisation of one's true potential rather than as happiness, the past twenty years of research on psychological wellbeing might well have taken different directions.'

Reflecting the views and teachings of many philosophers and religious masters, the eudaimonic view embraces an implicit sense of virtue, a requirement to distinguish between those needs (desires) whose satisfaction produces momentary pleasure and those needs that are rooted in human nature and whose realisation leads to human growth and true wellbeing. Not all desires yield wellbeing when they

are achieved, even though the experience may be pleasurable. As for the basic psychological needs that do underpin wellbeing, one approach posits three—autonomy, competence and relatedness; another nominates six—autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery and positive relatedness. Put another way, wellbeing is happiness plus meaningfulness.

The two views are in some respects divergent, in others complementary. As is clear from the above discussion, many factors are common to both constructs, but one important difference is whether such factors are seen as sources of happiness, or important criteria of wellbeing in their own right. Personally, I'm attracted to the eudaimonic notion that there is more to wellbeing than happiness, and that meaning is important beyond any contribution it makes to happiness. My work gives me meaning; I can't say it always makes me happy (in fact it can be downright depressing). And as a parent, I've done things out of love and duty that gave me—and no doubt my children—anything but pleasure. As eudaimonic researchers such as Carol Ryff stress, realising one's goals or purpose in life is not always easy; it requires effort and discipline, which can be at odds with short-term happiness.

While subjective wellbeing research does not define happiness simply in terms of pleasure, it does emphasise happiness. There is often an assumption, explicit or implicit, in the subjective wellbeing literature that happiness is an unqualified good, and the more happiness the better. Researchers note that very happy people still respond appropriately to life events, both positive and negative. Social psychologist Dave Myers says that, compared to the depressed, happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, less vulnerable to disease, and more loving, forgiving, trusting, energetic, decisive, creative, social and helpful. All in all, happiness has a lot going for it, for both individuals and societies. But is there a downside to happiness?

While the desire for happiness seems to be part of human nature, the importance attached to happiness, what we believe it to be and how

it is found are shaped by culture. And modern Western culture tends to equate happiness with pleasure, gratification, indulgence. The Greek philosopher Epicurus and later philosophers such as John Locke stressed the importance to happiness of prudence (one of the cardinal virtues). Today, American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observes, our notion of a happy life 'amounts to little more than a thoughtless hedonism, a call to do one's thing regardless of consequences, a belief that whatever feels good at the moment must be worth doing'. Even if this is not the path to 'true' happiness, there can be no denying the power of the deception—indeed, as the ingredients of real wellbeing become harder to find, more of us discover that all we are left with is pleasure. And even if we accept that the pursuit of happiness is a legitimate goal, we should still question the extent to which we focus on maximised happiness (like maximised wealth) as the bottom line of progress, the supreme good.

Part of the conflict inherent in modern notions of progress concerns the social contract on which all societies rely—the ever-present tension between individual and social goals, between freedom and order, private and public good. From a social perspective, for example, is the individual pursuit of happiness compatible with the preservation of liberty—the price of which, the proverb tells us, is eternal vigilance? Are we seeing today a dangerous erosion of democratic freedoms and rights because we are too intent on being happy? While individualism can be personally liberating and socially invigorating, taken far enough it can also be personally isolating and socially fragmenting. Balance is crucial for optimal personal and social functioning: individual freedoms, rights and privileges, however much they might contribute to personal happiness, need to be balanced by social bonds, obligations and responsibilities.

The tension between happiness and other qualities is also apparent at the species level. From an evolutionary perspective, if happiness is the goal towards which we strive and has the advantages attributed

to it, and if it is as closely related to extroversion as research suggests, why aren't we all highly extroverted? Conversely, given that neuroticism makes us unhappy, why wasn't it selected out of human nature long ago, especially given that the happier, more gregarious extroverts would almost certainly enjoy greater reproductive success? The reason would seem to be that neuroticism gives a truer, more sensitive view of things—and this is biologically advantageous, collectively if not individually. This talent is taken to an extreme in many creative people. Marcel Proust said neurotics were altruists, pondering problems of existence that the well-adjusted could afford to ignore. A neurotic if ever there was one, Proust essentially retired from life and took to his bed to produce one of the great works of modern literature, *In Search of Lost Time*.

And this might be why societies tend to value and treasure such people: they keep us in contact with our true selves and the realities of life. As one participant at the 2002 national Art of Dissent conference commented in the conference evaluation: 'Neurotics are better in touch.' Australian novelist and poet Antoni Jach says melancholy has gone out of fashion; in a time of busyness, we need reminding of its contemplative power. 'Melancholy's sadness is often emphasised but not its consolation (which lies in its deep thoughtfulness).'

Self-esteem, optimism and control—all associated with happiness—can become counterproductive or dysfunctional when they become too detached from an individual's abilities and circumstances; they need to be kept in check. The depressive phase of bipolar disorder is undoubtedly debilitating; but the mania, with its wildly exaggerated self-regard, can be even more destructive to individuals and those close to them. Australian researchers Bruce Headey and Alex Wearing argue that a 'sense of relative superiority' appears to be a normal and important aspect of human psychology, crucial to well-being. However, they note that it can have costs as well as benefits in that people might filter out information about poor performance and

consequently fail to take corrective action. They point out that research has found that depressed people are more realistic in assessing their own performance than people who are not depressed. Other research has linked subjective wellbeing to positive illusions such as self-deceptions, excessive optimism and over-estimated personal control. Illusions are, then, intrinsic to happiness; but life demands we maintain a balance between a realistic and fantastic view of ourselves.

These matters help to explain why we have evolved a homeostatic mechanism to maintain wellbeing, and why the set points are where they are. Having resilient, positive wellbeing makes evolutionary sense in that it keeps us going in the face of adversity and hardship. But why is the upper limit set at about 80 per cent? One explanation is that it allows 'room' for motivation, for seeking positive and rewarding experiences. But another is that, as subjective wellbeing increases, the costs of the 'divorce from reality' that high wellbeing requires may become too great, in evolutionary terms. So perhaps we should be sceptical of any notion that doing 'the right thing'—for oneself, for others, or for society as a whole—is compatible with wanting always to be happy. As the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu advised, 'Seek not happiness too greedily, and be not fearful of unhappiness.'

The nature of subjective wellbeing presents an important limitation to the use of standard measures of happiness or life satisfaction as a way of deciding whether or not life is getting better: the measures represent a 'buffered' view of reality and so present a false, or at least incomplete, picture of social conditions. In a sense, we are measuring the illusion of happiness that we use to maintain our happiness. It may even be that the act of interviewing people about their happiness introduces a positive bias to their responses, perhaps in some way stimulating the homeostatic mechanism. Furthermore, the homeostatic nature of subjective wellbeing means our emotional system is designed primarily to respond to short-term changes in our personal situation

and circumstances—to loss and reward—not the more sustained, long-term shifts of the sort we have experienced over the past few hundred years and especially the last fifty years. (Again, this makes evolutionary sense in that for most of human history, life did not change a great deal over time beyond the rhythm of the seasons, the cycles of birth, reproduction and death, and the irregular occurrence of natural disaster and war.)

That happiness surveys give a rosy view of life is evident when we compare the results with other evidence and assessments. So while most people might say they are mostly happy and satisfied, sales of self-help books on finding happiness and beating depression have soared. The Dalai Lama, revered in both West and East and himself the author or inspiration of a few of these books, says we all want to be happy, but his impression of people living in materially developed countries is that they are less satisfied and more anxious. 'A sense of community and belonging has been replaced by loneliness and alienation, competitiveness, envy and a need to keep up appearances.'

Only about 5 per cent of people, or less, say they are unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives, yet in other research, about 20 per cent of Australians agreed their lives were 'coming apart at the seams'—a rather stronger statement about life than admitting to dissatisfaction, you would think. Mental health surveys show that, in any one year, almost 20 per cent of Australians experienced mental health problems. This suggests we may need to regard as being psychologically vulnerable not just those who are unequivocally unhappy or dissatisfied, but also the 10–20 per cent of people who score in the middle of wellbeing scales—those who are, say, 40–60 per cent satisfied. Doing this brings the proportions roughly into line.

A recent American study casts an even less rosy light on our wellbeing. The study drew on a range of measures to construct a mental health continuum for a large sample of Americans aged 25–74. Mental health was seen not just as the absence of mental illness, but as 'a

syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life'. It found that only 17 per cent of people were 'flourishing'—that is, they enjoyed good mental health; 57 per cent were moderately mentally healthy—neither mentally ill nor fully mentally healthy; and 26 per cent were either 'languishing', depressed, or both—that is, mentally unhealthy. (Consistent with other research, older, well-educated, or married people were more likely to be flourishing and less likely to be languishing or depressed.)

Also, while Australians' overall life satisfaction has remained relatively stable over the past two decades, their satisfaction with many of the life domains that are important to life satisfaction—standard of living, friends, family, community, freedom—appears to have declined. The theory of subjective wellbeing homeostasis explains this by proposing that the homeostatic system operates mainly on the global assessment of satisfaction with life as a whole, and more weakly on satisfaction with specific domains, which are therefore freer to fluctuate as people's circumstances change.

Another consideration is that there is a marked contrast between how people assess their own lives and how they see others' lives, an important point in interpreting survey responses that I take up in the next chapter. For example, Australian sociologist Michael Pusey asked 'middle Australians' in a 1995 study who were the winners and losers from 'the economic change that Australia has experienced over the last fifteen years or so'. People were more likely to say 'people like me' were winners—and less likely to say they were losers—than 'ordinary people generally', 'people in the middle' or 'wage and salary earners'. In other words, people responded more positively when classifying *themselves* as winners or losers.

Beyond—or perhaps part of—the illusions and other cognitive devices we use to maintain life satisfaction is the 'mask' we all present to the outside world—the public face which hides a different private person. None of the people I know well is as they present themselves

to most other people. If I think about how I would rate my own life satisfaction or happiness on a 0–10 scale, I know my response would represent only a small part of my being, and almost nothing of the complexity, subtleties and contradictions of my psyche. The public mask may conceal most in those individuals who outwardly appear happiest and most successful, those whom modern society most celebrates and holds up for admiration.

A review of a biography of the famous American entertainer Danny Kaye described the book as 'a thorough study of a cruelly mean-spirited, sadly insecure manic depressive who came across to the world at large as a generous, outgoing, happy and well-adjusted fellow'. Sue Erikson Bloland, in a study of her famous father, the celebrated psychologist Erik Erikson, contrasts the public man—charismatic, confident, concerned, compassionate, an authority on the psychological development of children and adolescents—with the private person—insecure, vulnerable, plagued by feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, stricken by his inability to soothe and comfort his own children. She notes how often fame and success hide a sense of personal failure and isolation, and are driven by a longing for human connection and intimacy—a view consistent with the research findings discussed earlier in the chapter. The difference between the public and private person raises an interesting question: if we measured, say, Danny Kaye's or Erik Erikson's subjective wellbeing or happiness, which person would we be measuring?

In some respects, then, standard measures of happiness or life satisfaction might seem laughably simplistic and inadequate (a counsellor once told me that most people wouldn't know whether or not they were happy). But my intention in raising these matters is not to argue that they are invalid or meaningless. In our work with the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, I have been impressed by its ability to distinguish between groups and circumstances, and perhaps individuals, in ways that appear legitimate and useful. Note, however, that

these comparisons involve using the index as a relative, not absolute, measure of life satisfaction. It can tell us about differences between groups and by how much different factors affect wellbeing, and that a score of about 75 per cent is average. But to say that the average person is therefore flourishing and fulfilled is another matter.

So measures of subjective wellbeing do not present a complete and accurate picture of the relationships between social conditions and quality of life. While surveys show that most people are happy and satisfied with their lives and, in Western nations, have not become less happy and satisfied over time, other research on the causes and correlates of wellbeing does indicate why our worldview and culture are hostile to wellbeing. These reasons include diminishing returns from the increased wealth which our culture celebrates; the promotion of materialistic and other anti-social values; the emphasis on extrinsic goals; the heightened risk of goal conflict and ambivalence; the focus on the self; and the tendency towards personal isolation and social alienation.

I once read through a compilation of what the wise and famous have said about happiness. A couple of common themes stand out. One is that happiness is not a goal but a consequence: it is not something to be sought or pursued, but a result of how we live; related to this, it is not found by focusing on ourselves, but on others. A second theme is that happiness comes from balancing wants and means, from being content with what we have. Our materialistic, individualistic culture does not reflect this sage advice.

6>   quality of life

If I were to ask you how satisfied you were with your own life, and how satisfied with life you thought people were in general, I could safely bet that the two answers would be very different. Surveys of attitudes to life almost always frame the questions in personal terms and, as we saw in the last chapter, most people say they are pretty happy and satisfied with their lot. However, if they are asked about how they think people generally, or on average, are faring, the response is much more negative.

Since I became interested in the topic of whether or not life is getting better, I have put the question to many taxi drivers—a favourite source of public opinion among journalists because they talk to a lot of people from a wide range of backgrounds. Only a few said it was; most thought life was getting worse. They often offered different reasons. Growing financial pressures and the widening gap between rich and poor were probably the most common, followed by drugs and crime. But with a bit of probing, they sometimes revealed deeper concerns. One began by blaming the new Goods and Services Tax for making it harder for people to make ends meet, but went on to talk about the frustrations people felt, the loss of life skills, their heightened and mistaken expectations of life, their lack of appreciation of 'what really matters'.

Another replied succinctly: 'Materially, yes; spiritually—for want of a better word—no.' A third said, 'The quality of life is getting better, but the quality of people is getting worse.' He explained that while people today had more opportunities than ever before, they seemed more stressed and demoralised. I asked a few who had been driving for many years if people had changed over that time. A twenty-year veteran replied without hesitation that people today didn't think of others. Another, a woman who had been driving for 36 years, said she felt people today had no dignity; 'They have nothing to look forward to.'

I've also been more scientific about the question. I first asked about trends in national quality of life in 1997 for a conference I was organising on measuring progress. The same question has been asked another four times since—most recently in November 2002—each time by the same market research company, Newspoll, using a random telephone survey of 1200 Australians aged 18 and over in all Australian states and in both city and country areas. People were asked whether they thought 'the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends' was getting better or worse, or staying about the same.

Overall, the polls show about twice as many people think life is getting worse as think it is getting better. However, the results have fluctuated: at best, 31 per cent thought life was getting better and 34 per cent thought it was getting worse; at worst, only 13 per cent said life was getting better, while 52 per cent thought it was getting worse. The public mood improved from 1997 to 2000, then fell in 2001, a pattern consistent with what social and political commentators have said about the national psyche over this period. Note that the question is framed to identify trends, not states: we are not attempting to measure how full the glass of wellbeing is, but whether the level is rising or falling. This is what matters in seeking to evaluate progress.

In a follow-up question in the 1999 poll, people were also asked, 'In about what decade do you think overall quality of life in Australia

has been at its highest?' Only about a quarter (24 per cent) chose the 1990s. A similar percentage opted for the 1980s or the 1970s, with the vote then declining for earlier periods. When we looked at the effect of age on people's choices, it was clear they tended to choose a decade they had personally experienced (rather than nominating the time of their youth, which is a common assumption). For example, the young (aged 18–24) almost all opted for the '80s or '90s, while those over 50 ranged over the '60s to the '90s. This means the results favour recent decades, through which everyone has lived.

There was a good fit between the responses to the two questions. Most of those who chose the 1990s as the best decade also thought life was getting better; those who chose the 1980s as the best decade were most likely to think quality of life was staying about the same; and most of those who thought the 1970s or earlier were the best time believed quality of life was declining. So the question does appear to be measuring what we want it to—perceptions of long-term trends in national quality of life—although these perceptions vary over the short term as the public mood changes.

In the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index described in the previous chapter, people rated their satisfaction with national conditions at around 60 per cent, about 15 percentage points below their satisfaction with their personal lives. A 2003 survey by market research company NFO Australia found that while most adult Australians were generally content with their lives, 47 per cent agreed 'the world is going in the wrong direction'—twice the proportion that disagreed. In most countries, people express greater satisfaction with their own lives than with the state of their nation, and greater satisfaction with national conditions than with the state of the world. Almost all national publics view the fortunes of the world as drifting downwards, says the Pew Research Center in the United States about the findings of its 2002 global attitudes survey of 44 nations. 'A smaller world, our surveys indicate, is not a happier one.'

While measures of personal satisfaction are biased towards the positive it is possible that those of national or social quality of life are biased in the other direction. Some researchers are dubious about the social perspective. Objections include that: it reflects negative media images of life today; it is at odds with objective measures, which show life is getting better; and people know their own lives better than others' so the personal view is truer. But these claims fail to take into account that the media are only a part of the picture; material conditions and subjective wellbeing are only weakly linked; and the personal perspective is partly illusory. In addition, the wider worldview includes many elements, such as poverty and serious crime, that, for most people, are not part of the personal world that most influences life satisfaction and happiness, but are, nevertheless, important ingredients of national life.

So the social perspective may offer insights into social conditions that the personal perspective masks. We need always to bear in mind that our perceptions of the world around us are based on meanings and expectations, not mental 'photographic' images, and that these perceptions shape our responses and affect our health and wellbeing.

Still, it is true that sources of negative bias exist. Media images of life do emphasise the social negatives. It is possible that people tend, in this broader view, to take for granted past improvements, and to focus instead on aspects of life they believe have deteriorated, or at least have not improved or met their expectations—which keep getting higher. And people's judgments are probably rarely located consciously within a total historical context, according to which many aspects of life have improved. Reinforcing this tendency, Western culture is dominated by dystopian, rather than utopian, images of the future, which may taint people's view of progress.

Nevertheless, there is also evidence that perceptions of social quality of life are grounded in changes in the nature of modern life, both fundamental and specific, objective and subjective. The images

that dominate the view of a world growing meaner—images of social decline, division and alienation; family breakdown, conflict and isolation; and environmental depletion and degradation—do have a basis in reality, including in people's own experience of life. Even the dark visions many people have of humanity's future could be, in part, an expression of anxieties about the present that are projected into the future.

As we have seen, personal subjective wellbeing is closely tied to people's most important values and goals. Similarly, perceptions about social quality of life appear to be fundamentally about values, priorities and goals—both personal and national—and the degree of congruence between them. Quality of life is widely seen to be declining because moral values are perceived to be declining. Values provide the foundations and frameworks of social systems and functions. They determine how we get along together and manage our affairs; they define our relationships and shape our identities, beliefs and goals. Some research makes explicit this link between social and moral decline; more usually it is implicit in people's unease about the moral state of modern society.

In 1988 I managed a survey for the Australian Commission for the Future that included the question, 'What do Australians need to do, either as individuals or as a nation, to manage change better and improve future prospects?' We made it an open question (that is, people could answer in their own words) because we couldn't agree on what options to offer. As it happened the results surprised us. After grouping the responses, we found that by far the most common response, given by 42 per cent of respondents, related to the need to change personal values and behaviour. The sort of things people mentioned were the need to work harder, work together, work for the good of the country, be less greedy, less selfish, and raise moral standards. This category was followed by the need for better

government, mentioned by 29 per cent, which covered both the desire for stronger leadership and the need for greater participation in the political process. After these came improving the economy (22 per cent), better education (19 per cent) and protecting the environment (13 per cent).

A decade later, the deeply moral nature of Australians' concerns about their country and its future had, if anything, intensified. The 1997 Clemenger/BBDO Group report, *The Silent Majority III: The Everyday Problems of the Average Australian*, found that, in contrast with a decade or two earlier, the issues of greatest concern in the late 1990s were 'big' topics embracing moral, ethical and economic issues within our community. The report documents 'the distress of a nation divided, deeply anxious about its children and its future':

> The trivial problems that beset Australians twenty years ago in the first *Silent Majority* study—the length of the cord on electrical appliances or the short life span of school textbooks—have disappeared. In their place are concerns about perceived inequities in the delivery of welfare, the behaviour of the mass media, the operation of the criminal justice system and the betrayal of trust by community leaders.

Social researcher and commentator Hugh Mackay says that his qualitative research reveals growing community concern in Australia about the gap between people's values and the way they live. People crave greater simplicity in their lives, yet continue to complicate them. They would like to be less materialistic, but seem to acquire more and more things. People are concerned that 'we don't seem to know where to stop': many developments which are motivated by positive and worthwhile aspirations often turn out to be excessive. No matter how much we might want to be moderate and balanced, we seem incapable of it. Mackay says there is growing sympathy for the 'simplicity' movement. 'Underlying such attitudes is the widespread belief that,

although we are all attracted by material comfort and prosperity, here again we may not have known when to stop.'

Since the mid-1980s, Mackay's reports have charted Australians' growing concerns about the rate and nature of the changes reshaping Australian society. Feelings of 'pessimism', 'uneasiness' and 'tension' have marked this period. While continuing to affirm that Australia was 'the best country in the world', we saw it as 'a nation in trouble', 'a tougher, less compassionate place'. The new millennium and the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games provided a lift in the national mood, but it was superficial and short-lived. In his 2003 *Mind & Mood* report, Mackay says that, against a background of anxiety about 'the state of the world' and relentless 'bad news', Australians are disturbed by the many signs of 'degeneration' in the Australian way of life. (Over this recent period, however, Mackay and his co-researchers have also detected a degree of adaptation, a process of adjustment, to social change, which includes both positive and negative features, as I'll discuss later in this chapter and in chapter 13.)

The Australian findings are echoed in American research. A 1995 study, *Yearning for Balance*, underscores Americans' deep concerns with their way of life. Based on focus group discussions and a national survey, the study was undertaken to examine patterns of consumption in the United States and the consequences for society and the environment. The report says that Americans believe their priorities are 'out of whack', with materialism, greed and selfishness increasingly dominating American life and crowding out more meaningful values based on family, responsibility and community. They are alarmed about the future, feeling the material side of the American Dream is spinning out of control. But they are ambivalent about making changes in their own lives and in society; their deepest aspirations are non-material, but they also want financial security and material comfort.

Yearning for Balance says Americans want to talk about values. People said in the survey and focus groups that they shared a deep and

abiding concern about the core values driving their society; they believed that materialism, greed and excess characterised the way they live and underlay many of their worst social ills. The report notes that focus group participants agreed firmly that there was a tension between their own priorities and those of society. 'They view this tension as underlying many of the other concerns they raised…When pressed on their views, people insist they are talking about a single core problem with many aspects, not a list of separate issues.' The phrase many people used was, 'Too much of a good thing,' with freedom and material abundance uppermost in their minds:

> The frenzied, excessive quality of American life today has left people yearning for balance in their lives and in their society. They feel that an essential side of life centred on family, friends and community has been pushed aside by the dominant ethic of 'more, more, more', and they are looking for ways to restore some equilibrium.

Compared to society as a whole, Americans saw themselves as attaching much greater importance in their lives to responsibility, family life, friendship, generosity and religious faith, and less importance to prosperity and wealth. They did not feel the same dissonance with respect to other important aspects of life including financial security, career success, pleasure and having fun, and freedom. Part of the ambivalence they felt about their society's preoccupation with materialism stemmed from a strong belief in freedom of choice and 'an aversion to tell or be told how to live'.

These results are supported by the results of other recent United States surveys. They found that three-quarters of Americans thought the country was 'pretty seriously off on the wrong track' when it came to values and moral beliefs; two-thirds said Americans were 'greatly divided' over the most important values; half of Americans believed there was a moral crisis in the United States, while most of the rest

believed there were major moral problems; two-thirds thought the changes in moral and cultural values since the 1960s had made the United States too permissive; and over 40 per cent were pessimistic about future moral and ethical standards in the United States (almost twice the proportion of optimists). Another survey found that, despite a prevailing sense that the past century had been one of economic and technological triumph for America and an optimism that this would continue in the century ahead, Americans also had their misgivings about the country's moral climate, 'with people from all walks of life looking sceptically on the ways in which the country has changed both culturally and spiritually'.

The moral qualms may not, however, be new. Moral pessimists have always outnumbered optimists, at least as far back as the 1970s, although the gap between them has widened. And while in one survey only a third professed to be satisfied with the honesty and standards of behaviour of Americans, and almost two-thirds were dissatisfied, the results do not reveal a marked shift in sentiment between the early 1960s and late 1990s. A distorting influence on these results is that most of us see ourselves as more moral than other people, as the *Yearning for Balance* findings show. We tend to hold others responsible for their moral lapses, but blame the circumstances when we transgress. This tendency might help to explain the historical tendency of most generations to see the world in a state of moral decline. This could be an important source of negative bias in perceptions of social quality of life.

On the other hand, our sense of moral superiority may well be another of the self-deceptions we use to maintain our subjective well-being, and our perceptions of others may be the truer picture. One of psychology's most provocative yet reliable phenomena, says American social psychologist Dave Myers, is 'self-serving bias': 'a scientific version of what for centuries has been called hubris, or pride'. We accept more responsibility for good deeds than for bad, and for successes than for

failures, and we rate ourselves better than average on any subjective, socially desirable quality. Furthermore, the moral trends that worry people, such as increasing consumerism and individualism, are also real and measurable. Another issue is that being subjective assessments, the benchmarks are likely to change over time: what was considered immoral in the past is not necessarily what is considered immoral today. Indeed, given the general trend towards greater moral autonomy, plurality and tolerance, we might have expected perceptions of moral standards to have improved; a continuing perception of moral decline despite greater moral tolerance today could point to a greater shift in moral standards than people perceive (as well as a shift in focus to different moral concerns).

Whatever the 'reality' of ethical standards and trends, people's concerns about quality of life today do not rest wholly on abstract moral qualms. They are closely linked to what is happening in people's lives. Hugh Mackay's reports, while noting the moral basis of Australians' concerns about society (especially that we have become less caring and more materialistic) also discuss other worries—about stress, drugs, crime, mistrust, the widening gap between rich and poor, financial pressures, growing job insecurity and work pressures, and, more recently, refugees and terrorism.

A major study of 'middle Australia', conducted between 1996 and 2000 by sociologist Michael Pusey, similarly found high levels of anger and moral anxiety about changes in Australian society, which reflected more specific concerns. While Pusey's focus was the impact of the neo-liberal economic reforms of the past twenty years, the study reveals broader social and cultural sources of Australians' unease. A majority felt quality of life was falling, with the most common reasons given being: too much greed and consumerism; the breakdown in community and social life; too much pressure on families, parents and marriages; falling living standards; and employers demanding too much. The study suggests Australians are experiencing economic

change as harmful pressure on the family. Over 90 per cent of people believed family life was changing. Of these, two-thirds said the negative aspects of these changes stood out most. These included: the breakdown of traditional values; too much consumerism and pressure to get more money and buy things; a breakdown of communication between family members; and greater isolation of families from extended family networks and the community. (The third who saw the changes as positive cited the more equal relationship between men and women, the sharing of housework and more freedom.)

The Newspoll surveys of quality of life in Australia found many more people rated as very important to improving their personal quality of life 'being able to spend more time with your family and friends' (75 per cent) and 'having less stress and pressure in your life' (66 per cent) than rated as very important 'having more money to buy things' (38 per cent). Most said there was more stress and pressure now than ten years ago (91 per cent), that people had less time to spend with family and friends (68 per cent), and that there was less caring for the needs of the community (51 per cent). Most Australians also said the distribution of wealth in Australia was less fair now than ten years ago (55 per cent) and that the rich were getting richer and the poor poorer (83 per cent); 70 per cent said they would prefer 'the gap between the rich and the poor to get smaller' over 'the overall wealth of Australia to grow as fast as possible' (28 per cent preferred growth).

These surveys and studies are consistent with other research showing falling levels of social trust and cohesion; they also confirm the links between concerns about quality of life and the political emphasis on growth. Mackay says of his research that Australians 'are troubled by the feeling that so much emphasis is placed on the need for economic growth—and personal wealth—that quality of life is often a casualty'. In a 1999 survey, 75 per cent of respondents agreed that 'too much emphasis is put on improving the economy and too little on creating a better society'. In a 2002 poll, 83 per cent agreed that

'Australian society is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter'.

These responses reveal a striking difference between political and personal priorities. In a 2000 survey, a third of Americans said they did not want to be wealthy, and three-quarters or more believed wealth was likely to make people insensitive, greedy and superior. Most believed money could buy freedom, excitement and less stress, but not health, self-fulfilment, family togetherness, self-esteem, happiness or love. Only 27 per cent of Americans regarded 'earning a lot of money' as absolutely necessary for them to consider their life a success—near the bottom of the list and well behind things like having a good relationship with your children, good friends, a good marriage, an interesting job and a good education, all of which were considered absolutely necessary by 79–94 per cent of people.

Similarly, in a 1999 Australian survey, 'having extra money for things like luxuries and travel' ranked last in a list of seven items judged 'very important' to success, well behind the top-scorer, 'having a close and happy family'. In contrast to government priorities, 'maintaining a high standard of living' ranked last in a list of sixteen critical issues headed by educational access, children and young people's wellbeing, and health care—things many Australians believe are being sacrificed to *increase* standard of living. While not directly comparable with these findings, a 1978 survey found 'a high rate of economic growth' and 'a stable economy' ranked highest as 'the single policy issue which Australians consider the most important'. Economic issues (44 per cent) easily outscored issues of personal and national safety (28 per cent), democratic and civil liberties issues (19 per cent) and humanitarian and aesthetic issues (10 per cent). The results might partly reflect different stages of the economic cycle between the two years—the economy was flat in 1978—but they also appear to indicate a deeper change in public sentiment. All these findings are consistent with the threshold effect discussed in chapter 2 and other survey results reported in chapter 13.

The perceptions that inform people's views about social quality of life often do reflect what is happening in society. For example, it is the case in Australia and many other countries that the rich are getting richer faster than the poor and so the gap between rich and poor is widening, although it is not true that the poor are getting poorer, and whether poverty is growing depends on how it is measured; long-term and hidden unemployment have grown; the proportion of part-time and casual jobs has increased; and more people are working either fewer or more hours than they'd like. In *Where to From Here? Australian Egalitarianism Under Threat*, economist Fred Argy describes the social consequences of some of these trends:

> In today's Australia, one sees confident, job-rich, knowledge-rich and asset-rich households, often with two incomes and childless, who thrive on the challenge of uncertainty. But one also sees a large number of households with unemployed, under-employed or low-paid workers who are under-educated, asset-poor and ill-equipped to compete in a capitalist jungle. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of Australian children are to be found in these latter households.

Argy captures well the growing social divide, but as an economist it is not surprising that he focuses on material conditions. A central theme of my argument is that our situation cannot be defined in just these terms, that the problems go beyond issues of economic opportunity and material advantage. Many of those whom Argy describes as confident and thriving feel stressed out and overwhelmed by the pressures of their work and lives. Many more are simply unfulfilled, feeling that their lives lack something, such as balance and meaning. A person with a background in marketing for a major investment bank and as a consultant in the information technology and e-commerce business emailed me in response to one of my newspaper articles, saying: 'These roles have been intellectually challenging and financially rewarding,

but spiritually unsatisfying…I am currently investigating forums and opportunities whereby I can contribute something back to the world in which we live.'

The perceived relationships between values shifts and more tangible problems in society are also supported by other research, including my own cross-country analysis of individualism and youth suicide. American sociologist Robert Putnam cites a range of research that shows that the 'moral cohesion' and 'collective efficacy' of neighbourhoods—for example, people's mutual trust and their willingness to intervene when they see children misbehaving—protect against social ills such as crime and drugs. Some of the research suggests these factors may be more important than the traditional risk factors of poverty and residential mobility.

In a cross-national study of the relationships between crime and values, social trust and inequality, British psychologist David Halpern found that tolerance for a set of 'materially self-interested' attitudes—such as keeping something you've found, lying in your own interest, or cheating at tax—was higher in men, younger people, larger cities, and had increased over time, mirroring patterns of criminal offending. These self-interested values were also found to be statistically associated with crime victimisation rates at the national level. The relationships of inequality and social trust with crime were conditional on the prevalent values of society. Thus inequality *per se* is only modestly associated with higher crime, Halpern says, but when it occurs in societies that are characterised by high levels of self-interested values its effects become more pronounced.

In summary, social quality-of-life measures appear to reflect social conditions and trends that personal measures of subjective wellbeing tend to mask. These broader issues are relevant to measuring national performance and progress. The marked difference between the personal and social measures does, presumably, tell us something important. The personal perspective may reflect people's personal

resilience, adaptability and capacity to find a measure of fulfilment and satisfaction whatever their circumstances; it can also reveal their tendency to 'edit' what they will admit about themselves—even to themselves. While people's perceptions of social quality of life may be distorted by media and other influences, the evidence suggests these perceptions are not distant and detached, but reflect deeply felt concerns about modern life. These concerns are consistent with what research tells us about what matters most to health and well-being.

The widespread perception that things are getting worse at the societal level is significant, regardless of whether it is 'factually' or 'objectively' true. The resulting erosion of faith in society and its future influences the way people see their roles and responsibilities, and their relationship to social institutions, especially government. It denies people a social ideal to believe in—something to convince them to subordinate their own individual interests to a higher social goal—and a wider framework of meaning in their lives. As the social vision fades the psychological 'load' increases on personal expectations. The implications and consequences for society of this loss of faith are serious, even if it does not show up in measures of personal happiness and life satisfaction. These consequences are apparent from both social surveys and historical accounts.

Hugh Mackay says Australians are becoming used to the ways things are; they are beginning to accept that life will not be different from the way it now is. There has been an 'outbreak of realism', he says; Australians seem less inclined to hanker after some idealised society than they used to be. One dimension of this adjustment is that Australians are becoming more insulated; there is a growing sense of disengagement from the national agenda:

> We are increasingly preoccupied with our personal lives—our
> families, our friends, our house and garden, our cars, our leisure

and entertainment. We are 'tending our own patch' and becoming
absorbed in our own concerns…our focus has narrowed to an
extent that allows us to exclude some of the 'nasty stuff' which has
become too unpalatable to think about.

As one participant in Mackay's group discussions put it: 'It's all
too hard…I talk to the dog.' Public attitudes to politics and politicians,
Mackay says, reflect a level of 'cynicism bordering on contempt' and
'despair bordering on disgust'.

Confirming what I said in the previous chapter about the tension
between the pursuit of personal happiness and contributing to social
wellbeing, Mackay says the pay-off for disengaging is to feel better. The
happiest participants in his 2001 *Mind & Mood* study were, without a
doubt, 'those whose horizons were most limited, and whose concerns
were unremittingly local, immediate and personal'. We all feel this pull.
But Mackay also warned in 1998, when the trend towards 'turning
inward' became apparent, that this was a vulnerable time for
Australians. 'Seeking to be insulated from issues which might
previously have stimulated debate can provide short-term emotional
relief, but, if this solidifies into a serious attitude of disengagement, it
will lead to the kind of political apathy which encourages the abuse
of political power.'

And this is just what has happened by 2003, which, according to
Mackay, has offered a new glimpse into the meaning of disengagement:
a government can be perceived as lying to the people and people, by
and large, won't care. 'When the national mood is like this, govern-
ments can get away with murder.' The Nobel Prize-winning writer
Günter Grass said the German Weimar Republic collapsed and the
Nazis took over in 1933 'because there were not enough citizens'. This
was the lesson he had learned. 'Citizens cannot leave politics just to
politicians.'

Mackay's reading of the political mood has been contested.
Political scientist Murray Goot says polls that have tracked political

attitudes over decades do not indicate a growing disengagement. There is evidence of increasing mistrust of politicians and rising political cynicism, but not declining interest in politics. But other recent surveys tend to confirm Mackay's findings, at least in broader social, if not political, terms. As noted in chapter 3, the Brotherhood of St Laurence trial project on values and civic behaviour highlights the sense of disconnection between the personal and the social, with people being aware that 'they manage, or control, their reactions to social issues so they can maintain a comfortable and self-focused life'. They could not see 'how achieving or failing to achieve one's personal aspirations related to achieving one's aspirations for society'.

Clemenger's fourth *Silent Majority* report, published in 2002, also emphasises that Australians are turning away from the big national and global issues, over which they feel they have no control, to focus on family, home and, especially, their children. It says there has been a 'concern collapse', with people now saying they feel 'very concerned' about fewer societal issues than ever before:

> Fed and frightened by the media, people carry more and more on their shoulders, with no buffers. They are exposed to everything. Their spheres of concern have grown, whilst their spheres of influence have not…In 2002, it seems our concern has been stretched to the limit. The issues are monumental, and there is nothing we can do. The elastic band has snapped and the inevitable result is 'concern collapse'.

People have lost trust in traditional institutions including government, media, church, school, police and the judicial system, and are resigned to the fact that things are unlikely to change, the report says. Paradoxically, however, this development has also contributed to a new self-reliance in that people feel they have to take control of virtually every aspect of their own lives. '[T]he less faith we have in authority, the more trust we place in our own judgment.'

There is an alternative to resignation and apathy, however. The pain of awareness that is driving the retreat to home and hearth comes from a sense of impotence and futility. Another response is to engage more actively, and benefit from being part of a group, believing in a cause and having clear life goals—all of which enhance wellbeing. A recent British study of almost forty activists who had participated in protests, demonstrations and campaigns found the actions were empowering, and gave participants a sense of collective identity, unity and mutual support. 'Empowering events were almost without exception described as joyous occasions,' says psychologist John Drury. 'Participants experienced a deep sense of happiness and even euphoria in being involved in protest events.'

Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo*, confirms this, saying that anti-globalisation demonstrations are reported as menacing confrontations but are often joyous events. The first time she participated in one of these counter-summits, she had a distinct feeling that 'some sort of political portal' was opening up, she says:

> This opening was a sense of possibility, a blast of fresh air. These protests—which are actually week-long marathons of intense education on global politics, late-night strategy sessions, festivals of music and street theatre—are all like stepping into a parallel universe. Urgency replaces resignation, strangers talk to each other, and the prospect of a radical change in political course seems like the most logical thought in the world.

It is being a bystander—stuck between being aware and concerned about issues and feeling we can't do anything about them—that hurts most. We can turn away—or join the fray.

Historical perspectives show what is at stake. British historian Kenneth Clark observed in his acclaimed BBC television series 'Civilisation' that civilisation, however complex and solid it seems, is really quite fragile. In the concluding episode, after reviewing

thousands of years of the rise and fall of civilisations, he warned, 'It's lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilisation. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs.'

Barbara Tuchman, in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, says that until recently historians have avoided the century because it could not be made to fit into a pattern of human progress. The Black Death, which killed a third of the population between Iceland and India, was only one of the century's problems. It was a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age—put simply, a bad time for humanity. Tuchman notes that in Europe a gulf had opened between Christian beliefs and conduct, not least within the Church itself, and between the ideal of chivalry and the behaviour of the nobility. 'When the gap between the ideal and real becomes too wide, the system breaks down,' she observes. 'Legend and story have always reflected this; in the Arthurian romances the Round Table is shattered from within. The sword is returned to the lake; the effort begins anew. Violent, destructive, greedy, fallible as he may be, man retains his vision of order and resumes his search.'

Tuchman is conscious of parallels with our modern age (her book was first published in 1978). Referring to the judgment of another historian, she says that after the experiences of the twentieth century, we have greater fellow-feeling for 'a distraught age whose rules were breaking down under the pressure of adverse and violent events'. We recognise with a painful twinge the marks of 'a period of anguish when there is no sense of an assured future'. Still, the lesson was ultimately consoling: 'If our last decade or two of collapsing assumptions has been a period of unusual discomfort, it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.'

Norman Cohn is another historian who has noted parallels between the late Middle Ages and the twentieth century. His book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* is a study of the revolutionary chiliastic or

millennialist movements which swept Europe between the close of the eleventh century and the first half of the fifteenth. These were groups of people, led by messianic leaders preaching the doctrine of the final struggle and the coming of the new age, who saw themselves as the elect and strove ruthlessly towards an end which by its very nature could not be met—the Millennium, when 'the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy'. Cohn sees the movements as representing a 'collective paranoiac fanaticism' that was also evident in the twentieth-century totalitarian movements of Communism and Nazism. He would no doubt see closer similarities with today's religious and national fundamentalism and cultism, which were less evident when his book was published in 1957.

Cohn argues that societies become vulnerable to revolutionary chiliasm when the existing structure of a society is undermined or devalued, and the normal, familiar pattern of life has undergone 'a disruption so severe as to seem irremediable'. The disintegration of traditional social groups and authority and rapid changes in the relative status and prosperity of different social strata are among the conditions that diminish the cohesion and stability of a social structure:

> And it is then that particular calamities will appear particularly calamitous. Above all, calamities caused by unseen or unknown agencies…may then produce an emotional disturbance so widespread and acute, such an overwhelming sense of being exposed, cast out and helpless, that the only way in which it can find effective relief is through an outburst of paranoia, a sudden, collective and fanatical pursuit of the Millennium.

All these ingredients exist in our times. Medieval life was ruled by religion; it is not surprising that social pathology was expressed through religion in the form of millennialist cults. Its modern expression may be found in today's fundamentalist cults and terrorist groups, especially

in more collectivist societies (for example, the Aum Shinrikyo sect and the al-Qaeda terrorist network). Some might see signs of millennialist fervour in America in the wake of September 11. But rampant individualism is also a hallmark of our age, especially in Western societies, and it may be that the same pathology now finds its most common expression in other forms: most tragically, in the massacres committed by alienated individuals but, more generally, in the personally and socially destructive preoccupation with the self.

All societies need visions or stories that embody their values and goals, and define who their people are, what they believe and where they want to go. Hugh Mackay said of Australia in 1997 that what seemed to be lacking was a 'guiding story' that connected leaders and people: 'A set of coherent values and beliefs, imaginatively couched, that gives us a framework for making sense of our lives and, indeed, for taking more confident steps towards control of our destiny.' This theme recurs in his 2001 report. Australia has been crying out for visionary, inspirational, national leadership, he says. 'We have yearned for a guiding story that would help us make sense of what is happening to us, and to our society. But no such story has emerged, because no such leadership has emerged.'

In the past, the quest for material progress and prosperity provided much of that 'guiding story' for Western nations, perhaps especially the newer nations such as Australia and the United States. It seems it no longer does. Progress needs to be redefined, the story rewritten, taking account of a new global context—social, economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual.

7>   media excess

Some years ago, in the summer of 1996–7, I was caught up in a passionate debate about obscenity in rock music lyrics. It began with an article I wrote for the *Australian* newspaper in which I argued that the extreme violence and obscenity in some rock music was perhaps—I was fairly tentative about this—one of the many ways in which the mass media were contributing to the creation of a culture of disillusion and demoralisation.

While I focused on one aspect of youth culture—rock music (which itself embraces several sub-cultures)—my purpose was to explore the role of the media in shaping popular culture, some of the culture's defining characteristics, and its impact on young people. In essence, my argument was that beneath the swirls and eddies of youth cultures runs the mainstream of modern Western culture; that this mainstream culture powerfully shapes youth culture and strongly influences young people; and that core elements of this culture threaten our wellbeing, especially that of young people, at both the personal and social level.

My interest in the issue of rock lyrics was aroused when my son, then aged 10, got into strife at school for telling another boy, in a heated exchange, to go suck a mate's cock. At about that time, a top-selling

song by Regurgitator went, 'I've sucked a lot of cock to get where I am'. I commented on it to my 16-year-old daughter. 'It's figurative, Dad,' she said with a smile. Did she find it offensive, I asked. No, because it wasn't said seriously, she replied, but there were some lyrics she didn't like, mentioning Nine Inch Nails. I asked her later to give me an example. This is a line from one of their songs: 'I want to fuck you like an animal.'

As I noted in the article, Nine Inch Nails' lyrics had featured in a stormy meeting the previous year in New York between executives of Time Warner, one of the world's largest media companies, and William J. Bennett, co-director of the conservative advocacy organisation, Empower America, and his liberal ally, C. DeLores Tucker, the chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women.

According to *New Yorker* magazine, when the history of the fracas over media violence in the United States is written, the meeting will be seen as pivotal. Tucker handed around copies of the lyrics of a song by Nine Inch Nails and asked Michael Fuchs, chairman of the Warner Music Group, to read them aloud. (At the time Warner Music half-owned the Interscope label on which Nine Inch Nails recorded.) Tucker asked three times and each time Fuchs refused. One of the Empower America delegates then obliged. This, in part, is what he read: *Got me a big old dick and I / I like to have fun / held against your forehead / I'll make you suck it / maybe I'll put a hole in your head / you know, just for the fuck of it / I can reduce you if I want.*

After the meeting, Bennett wrote to Time Warner's chairman and CEO, Gerald Levin (who had walked out of the meeting), saying: 'My recommendation is fairly straightforward. Time Warner should stop its involvement with and support of gross, violent, offensive and misogynistic lyrics. Anything short of that is, I think, an abdication of corporate responsibility.'

My first reaction on reading the *New Yorker* article was shock and dismay that this sort of music got airplay. I remembered a youth

researcher telling me several years earlier that parents would be outraged if they knew the lyrics of some of the songs their children listened to. Then I thought, well, you often get this language in films or books these days; how is this any different?

There is a powerful temptation just to accept the moral ambiguity and ambivalence of society's attitudes to obscenity, and to so much else, as part and parcel of the postmodern world we live in. We presume young people can learn to make some sense of a moral code which says that what is unacceptable at school and home is somehow okay in public broadcasting. But maybe we shouldn't yield to this temptation too readily. Maybe there are real costs—and important differences between film, literature and music.

First there is a question of access. Any child can tune in to this type of music on the radio. Film and television program classifications may be widely ignored, but they do give parents some control over what their children see. But a more important difference concerns the context of the language. In film and literature, the obscenity is part of a fictional narrative; it is easier to separate it morally from our personal lives and behaviour. This distinction may be harder to make in the case of music because it forms a more diffuse and integral part of our life, especially that of young people. Obscenity encourages disrespect and disregard for others. It is usually used in abuse, often to add emphasis and menace to what is being said. As the Nine Inch Nails' lyrics show, the line between obscenity and violence is often very fine.

I singled out rock music in the article because at the time it was often overlooked in the debate about the media and their impact, which has focused on television violence. It also demonstrates the extent to which our society now accepts the commercialisation and commodification of just about everything, from the most depraved act to the most intimate, from the most sublime joy to the most appalling suffering. Permitted in the name of freedom of artistic expression, this cultural debasement is driven by the pursuit of profit. Its costs include

a pervasive and corrosive cynicism and alienation.

Like many parents and teachers, I suspect, I have often felt I was waging an undeclared war against the media for influence over my children's development. Where we fight, I think we mostly win. But many adults have surrendered, worn out by the relentlessness of the struggle, the media's power, the many other demands on their time and energy, and their own moral confusion. It should not be this way.

In a lengthy discussion on ABC radio on the day the article appeared, Toby Creswell, then editor of the youth magazine *Juice*, implied I was a boring old fart tut-tutting about a bit of harmless rebellion by young people—just another re-run of the eternal conflict played out between conservative old fogies and spirited youth. I posted the piece on YARN, the youth affairs research network on the Internet, and invited comment. Many supported my position (most privately). But I also came under attack from some who stressed the importance of freedom of speech and artistic expression, the relative nature of values, the virtues of cultural pluralism and diversity, that people are not 'cultural sponges', and the legitimacy of youthful protest. A few noted that obscene and misogynistic lyrics have been part of commercial rock music for decades, so what was new?

These issues are part of the perennial 'culture war' about the impact of popular culture, and the mass media in particular, on our lives. While often focused on the issue of violence in the media, the debate goes beyond social specifics to the deeper issue of the nature of truth. It pits conservatives against progressives, traditionalists against postmodernists.

Some of the issues are easily dealt with. If obscenity is a protest, what exactly is it a protest against? Civility? Treating others with respect and courtesy? Perhaps it is against society's rules in general. But as obscenity is now mainstream and socially accepted, its use can hardly be considered as rebellion. If it is natural for youth to challenge social boundaries, there have to be boundaries to challenge. I get the

sense that children and teenagers want this, that they are reassured when adults demonstrate that the world is not as violent, anti-social and unruly as the media suggest. In doing this, it may be enough for adults just to object, and so provide a different point of reference. It is not their role to defend gratuitous obscenity and violence, much less promote it and profit from it. At a 2002 national conference on the Art of Dissent, in which I participated, a young writer recounted how the ABC had censored her work. Judging by her account of the episode, they did the right thing. What they cut was puerile, and she seemed proud to have been censored: it validated her gesture.

The claim that we are not 'cultural sponges' or 'passive automatons' is a classic straw-man argument. No sensible person would argue that there is a simple, direct relationship between media content and people's behaviour. But nor should any sensible person accept the proposition, implied by some cultural commentaries, that what we see, hear and read in the media has no effect on us. Maybe children today are savvy, sophisticated consumers of media—as we are often told—but this does not mean that we can be complacent about media influences.

More important and interesting in the debate about culture and the media are the questions of cultural relativism and pluralism. Obscenity was relative, I was told. The recent upsurge in bigotry and racial intolerance was obscene, as was the prime minister's capitalising on it. Who drew the line between political and social comment and obscenity? 'Obscenity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder': one set of values was no better or worse than another, they were just different and this was fine as long as one person or group did not attempt to impose their 'subjective idea of obscenity' on the rest.

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that I think we can make a categorical distinction between obscene and violent language and political opinion—the metaphorical 'obscenity' of certain government policies and practices. One is concerned with

civility, with how we behave and treat each other as individuals in daily life; the other relates to politics and governance, with how we manage our affairs as a society. The second point is that if we don't distinguish between politics and politeness, and if we believe that one set of values is no better or worse than another, we undermine the basis on which we seek to change things, to right what we perceive to be wrong. If we believe this, why discuss anything, do anything?

The relativist position is very different from Voltaire's famous comment that while he might disagree with another's views, he would defend to the death the other's right to express them. Voltaire is advocating free and vigorous debate, not that one viewpoint is as good as another. This is a very important point. If all sets of values are regarded as valid, then there is no discipline on people to examine critically their own position and justify it. In fact, if everything becomes just a matter of personal opinion, why bother having an opinion? While diversity of opinion is a good thing, there is a limit to which it can be taken. Values cannot be insulated and isolated from each other; they interact, compete. That's what a dynamic society is. Nine Inch Nails, Time Warner and Triple J are imposing on us a 'subjective idea' of what is obscene (or not obscene). Our society is defined by an imposed and dominant set of values that promotes rampant individualism, materialism and consumerism.

Uncertainties, ambiguities and trade-offs abound in deciding these issues. Things are not cut and dried, black and white. Plurality and diversity do enrich our culture. It's true we now accept, even appreciate, what once offended us. But the tests of personal and social benefits and costs must still be applied, and decisions made. And I believe there is growing evidence of the costs of some features of today's mass media.

Cultural relativism taken to the extreme is as wrong-headed as the other extreme—attempting to impose a single, uniform set of values on everyone—and, paradoxically, achieves a similar, dangerous result. The cultural authoritarian suppresses debate; the cultural relativist

makes debate pointless. We often appear to assume there are only the two options, ignoring the rich ground between them. It is important we have the right to express different points of view, but when we argue that all points of view are equally valid and, by implication, that all should allowed to prevail, then we are in deep trouble. Both extremes undermine meaning because they devalue values and beliefs, which define how we relate to each other and the society and world in which we live. 'Personalised' values become another means by which the individual and his or her 'rights' are elevated above all other considerations, and by which he or she is left isolated, cocooned in inviolate opinions.

A year after the debate on rock lyrics, I saw in a newsagency the 1997 *Juice Yearbook*. It included Toby Creswell's tribute to the late Michael Hutchence, lead singer of INXS, in which he tells of how the 'heroic optimism' of INXS and Michael's 'belief that by taking action things would get better' had helped him through a deep crisis in his own life. Quoting the lyric of one of their songs, he says: '…I heard in its delivery a man whispering hope, promising that there would be excitement, pain, surprises, and adventure down the track, and that no matter how hopeless and desperate it seemed, life was worth living.' I wrote to Toby saying that it seemed to me that this was exactly the point I was making, but from the opposite perspective: the ability of various media to do harm. 'If you allow that their messages can inspire hope and purpose, you have to concede they can also infect with despair and disillusion.' The media were not the only factor, but they were important. 'With that importance comes a responsibility I think the media all too often neglect.' I never had a reply.

The Australian Catholic Bishops' 1998 final report on its three-year consultation, *Young People and the Future*, warns of 'a malaise which is denying young people hope'. 'That malaise, though difficult to isolate and describe precisely, can best be described as a crisis of identity and meaning.' It continues: 'The danger to young people is not themselves, but the culture in which people live today. This largely

nihilistic culture, dominant with negativity and images of rancour, hedonism and rage, has submerged the virtues of faith, hope and love.' I believe the media have played a large part in creating such a culture.

Obscenity has its place, of course, but it is not every place. It allows people to settle disputes and vent their anger without resorting to physical violence (think of the chimps and gorillas that bare their teeth, scream at each other and thrash nearby vegetation rather than attack each other). It also seems to be part of male group bonding (think of football teams or adolescent gangs where, presumably, its use demonstrates that the group members are close enough and trust each other enough not to feel threatened or offended). Making obscenity commonplace weakens its social value.

Defenders of the media continue to doubt that media violence contributes to real violence. It does. Researchers say the relationship between media violence and increased aggressive behaviour and acceptance of aggression is about the same as that between smoking and lung cancer. The United States Surgeon General felt confident enough of the evidence to say in 1972—just eight years after his landmark statement on smoking—that televised violence had an adverse effect on some people. In July 2000, six national scientific and medical bodies in the United States, representing psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians, family physicians and doctors, issued a joint statement stating: 'The data point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behaviour in some children.' The scientific consensus has not been reflected in the popular media, say American psychologists Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman, writing in the journal *Science* in 2002, and controversy over the effects of media violence has continued 'long after the debate should have been over'. (Perhaps we should treat comments about media violence by those in the media industry with the same scepticism with which

we greeted claims by the tobacco industry about the health hazards of smoking.)

A common argument in downplaying the effects of media violence is to point out that most people who view violence do not commit violence. This misrepresents the complexities of social cause and effect. That there is not a strong, direct, linear relationship between media violence and violent individuals does not mean there is no relationship at all. The parallel with smoking is instructive; most people who smoke don't die of lung cancer, but this doesn't mean the two are not causally related. To understand the associations better, we can draw on epidemiological research that suggests there is a relation between the mean, or average, of a characteristic in a population and the prevalence of 'deviance', or more extreme forms of that characteristic—whether this is a physical health problem such as high blood pressure, or a psychological illness such as depression. Furthermore, explanations for health differences between populations may be different from those for health differences between individuals; causes of the incidence of disease can differ from the causes of cases of disease. In other words, we can't simply 'scale up' explanations of individual cases to explain social phenomena.

Applied to violence, these observations would suggest that the amount of extreme violence is a function of average levels of aggression in society and so of social tolerance of aggressive or anti-social behaviour. While media violence may not be a major factor in explaining individual acts of violence, it may be important at the societal level. Consistent with this perspective, criminologists have become increasingly interested in civility, believing that encouraging civil behaviour helps to prevent crime. Incivility—a perceived breakdown in an 'acceptable' quality of environment and 'polite' interaction between people who do not know each other—is seen as one end of a behavioural gradient, linked to disorderly behaviour which is, in turn, associated with criminal activity. Incivility is also central to the fear of

crime. So the social costs of excessive media violence include not just increased violence, but a heightened sense of threat and insecurity.

Instead of grappling with the complexities of media influences, the public debate often becomes bogged down in buck-passing and blame-shifting, especially in the aftermath of specific tragedies such as the Columbine high school massacre in the United States. Politicians say music that glamorises guns and violence is partly to blame; musicians, the music industry and their allies point the finger at government over issues such as poverty and unemployment. Yet both factors—and others—play a part. (In fairness, the two sides are not each united in their views; the Beastie Boys criticised the Prodigy over their song 'Smack My Bitch Up' because it incited violence against women, and also refused to perform in Australia with Marilyn Manson, the arch-exponent of shock rock, renown for his gross on-stage antics.)

Concerns about the social impacts of the media also extend to other issues, including pornography. There is growing evidence of the way pornography is shaping young people's notions of sexuality and relationships. A recent French survey estimated that almost half of the country's children had seen an adults-only sex film by the age of 11. By 17, more than 80 per cent had seen one or more porn films. Claude Rozier, the researcher who led the survey, says hardcore porn has become 'the principal vehicle for quite young children's understanding of everything to do with love and sexuality, sometimes their only point of reference'.

Increasingly the children's language is that of the porn world: sodomy, group sex, gang rape, bondage. French philosopher and psychologist Michela Marzano says it is difficult not to relate children's growing exposure to pornography to a surge in teenage gang rapes. In one recent case, eleven boys, most aged 14 and 15, took it in turns on a Saturday afternoon to rape a 15-year-old classmate in an alley not far from their school. Marzano says pornography will lead many young consumers to construct a world where sexual relations are those of

these films. 'When they discover the real world, some of them will inevitably be disappointed and decide to stick to porn. Some will accept reality. And some will refuse the real and react in the way pornography has taught them: with sexual violence.'

In response to growing concern in France about media violence and pornography, the government asked a panel of experts headed by philosopher Blandine Kriegel to provide an accurate and dispassionate diagnosis of the problem. The panel concluded that television violence and pornography affected young people's behaviour, including 'the undifferentiated and ill-defined increase in violence and delinquency in every sector of our society'. Its recommendations are modest, reflecting a principle of 'testing the water' before any drastic measures are taken, and it emphasises responsibility rests with all parties, including parents and teachers. But the panel also says that where there is a clash between the principle of creative freedom and the principle of protecting children, 'the right of children' should be given priority.

The French survey prompted the Australia Institute, a progressive think-tank, to commission a similar survey here. Of a sample of 200 16–17-year-olds, 73 per cent of boys and 11 per cent of girls had watched X-rated videos (about a fifth of the boys watched them at least once a month); 84 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls had accidentally or unintentionally seen Internet porn sites; and 38 per cent of boys and 2 per cent of girls had deliberately sought out such sites. The institute's report notes that porn, especially Internet porn, depicts a wide range of extreme and deviant behaviour including group sex, rape, bondage, sadomasochism, urination, defecation and bestiality. The report says the available evidence provides grounds for serious concern about children's exposure to particular types of pornography, notably that involving violence and extreme behaviours. It calls for more concerted action to minimise that exposure.

Pornography did not emerge as a factor in the heavily publicised

trial and conviction in 2002 of the young men who took part in a series of gang rapes in Western Sydney—crimes whose public impact was intensified by the ethnic differences between the perpetrators and the victims. However Margaret Cunneen, the senior crown prosecutor in the case, told me that the rapists consumed a steady diet of Internet porn. Even accepting that most porn users don't rape, it is hard not to suspect that the men's exposure to porn shaped their attitudes, expectations and behaviour. Cunneen says her personal belief is that pornography 'had the effect of contributing to a belief that Western women are always amenable to debauched sex with multiple partners'.

There may be a case for distinguishing non-violent from violent porn in terms of their role in violent behaviour, but non-violent erotica has other effects, says American social psychologist Dave Myers. These include distorting people's perceptions of sexual reality, decreasing the attractiveness of their partners, priming men to see women in sexual terms, making sexual coercion seem more trivial and providing mental scripts for how to act in sexual situations. So it is important to acknowledge that we are not just talking about pornography begetting violence. My suspicion is that for children and those young people who are sexually inexperienced and often anxious about the physical and emotional intimacy that a sexual relationship involves, the crudeness of a lot of porn imagery and the apparent violence of sexual acts can be very intimidating.

Another key issue is the relationship between the mainstream and the margin. Even if we regard erotica as relatively harmless, our experience suggests that, unrestrained, it leads to the portrayal of more extreme and degrading forms of sexual behaviour. A recent documentary on the history of porn in Scandinavia showed it was only a matter of years before images of consensual sex between adults became images of very young children being penetrated by adult men—to the concern of some of those who had championed sexual liberalisation. Conversely, the explicitness at the margin tends to influence what is

acceptable in the mainstream. What was once confined to porn movies seeps into mainstream cinema, as illustrated by the French film *Baise Moi*, controversially banned in Australia, which uses real sex in the depiction of sexual violence.

Of course, we can attempt to interrupt these flows of influence through regulation—as we do with child porn, for example—but we need to be more aware that this is, at a social level, like attempting to control a car by braking with one foot while the other has the accelerator flat to the floor. It may be true that humans have always been fascinated by these aspects of human nature—thrilled by violence and titillated by sex—but this hardly justifies the sheer frequency and intensity of our exposure. The issue here is not just a question of personal freedom of choice, but of the powerful cultural promotion of particular values, attitudes and behaviours. Social norms and etiquette define how we should behave; far more pervasively and subtly than the law, they set limits on our behaviour. And laws work better, and can be lighter, when they are used to direct, not check, the flow of social life— when they reflect and reinforce norms, rather than attempt to restrain what the norms encourage. Put another way, life is smoother when there is a fairly wide buffer zone, defined by notions of civility and decency, between what is encouraged, what is permitted and what is illegal—not just the 'thin blue line' of law enforcement.

The problems of media violence extend to activities we seem not even to suspect. One example is road safety advertisements that depict graphic and realistic road carnage. My concern about the ads grew out of my children's reactions when they were young. They found them distressing, jumping up to switch off the television, covering their ears and burying their heads in the sofa cushions, or fleeing the room. The ads are screened in prime time, and watched by kids still years from driving themselves. They often portray children as the hapless victims or witnesses of their parents' or other adults' negligence and recklessness. Whatever the effectiveness of these ads in reducing the road toll, I

wonder if anyone has looked at the 'collateral damage' they cause, the subtle instillation in children of the fear that the next car trip with Mum or Dad or big brother could be their last. During the war on Iraq, parents and psychologists often expressed concerns about the impact of the television coverage on children. The road safety ads are as vivid, the events they depict much closer to home and the exposure more sustained.

Constantly exposed to threat and danger, real and fictional, it is not surprising we are becoming an increasingly fearful and risk-averse society. But it seems to me we often focus on the wrong risks, or too much on some while neglecting others. Reflecting our worldview, we have become obsessed with material and physical hazard, but largely ignore cultural and moral hazard. We can measure our exposure to toxic chemicals in parts per billion, and regulate their use; we accept all sorts of restrictions on our freedom when it comes to owning firearms, using drugs or driving cars—even swimming at the beach or riding bikes. But we struggle to accept that images and perceptions can also be dangerous, and so also have to be managed socially. Psychological damage is as real as physical harm to individuals, and perhaps more dangerous to societies because it can be more insidious and pervasive.

To argue, as many do, that adults have the unfettered right to decide for themselves what they watch and listen to reflects an individualistic fallacy that we are each distinct, separate, self-contained entities whose personal choices don't have social impacts. This is no truer of cultural issues than it is of material matters. What we think—not just what we do—matters to population health and wellbeing. To say this is not necessarily to call for stricter censorship, although regulation has its role. I think the issue is far too subtle and complex for such a crude tool. But we do need to provide children with alternative, healthier frames of reference; we need to use social norms and rules to discourage 'poor taste', just as has happened with racism and sexism. As I argued in chapter 3, values work better than laws in dealing with social complexity.

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Obscenity, violence and pornography do not represent the totality of media impacts on our wellbeing. They are the most debated, but may not be the most important. They form only a part of the cultural costs of the mass media, which include, more broadly:

- Projecting a worldview that is incoherent and internally inconsistent.

- Encouraging moral confusion and ambivalence, often fostering anti-social values while neglecting values long regarded as virtues.

- Promoting a negative, distrustful and fearful worldview by depicting the world outside our personal experience as one of conflict and calamity.

- Distracting us from the important with the trivial.

- Defining quite arbitrarily what is and is not news, so limiting public debate on crucial issues.

- Dividing us rather than uniting us, fashioning public debate into a battle waged between extremes—a delineation of conflict rather than a search for consensus.

- Promoting a superficial, materialistic and self-indulgent lifestyle— a way of living that is marked by fleeting fads and fashions and is, in any case, beyond the reach of growing numbers of people.

- Eroding our sense of personal worth and significance by constantly parading before us the lives of people who are more powerful, more beautiful, more successful, more exciting (but which are, in truth, so often dysfunctional).

- Instilling unrealistic expectations that life should always be fun— effortlessly and unceasingly entertaining and rewarding.

- Isolating us from each other and our communities.

I don't deny the media have many positive features—entertaining, educating and informing us. They are, for example, a powerful force for the global promotion and defence of human rights. Media impacts are complex and often subtle. Some of the effects work in opposite directions; some represent the costs of activities that, in other respects, are beneficial to society. The mix and degree of these impacts, and the balance between cost and benefit, vary between the print and electronic media, between different publications and programs, and between news, entertainment and advertising. For example, the focus of many glossy magazines on self-improvement and personal growth—on how to look and feel better, be fitter and healthier and achieve goals—can be positive. Yet this emphasis, combined with their appetite for stories about the rich, beautiful and famous, can also encourage a preoccupation with appearances and increase a sense of personal inadequacy, as evidenced by the poor body image of many people —particularly women, but increasingly men, too, as the media focus more on male beauty.

The media appear to be a major source of the decline in civic engagement and social capital. American sociologist Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, roughly estimates that about 25 per cent of the decline is attributable to electronic entertainment, especially television (generational change accounts for about half and urban sprawl and work pressures about 10 per cent each). Television's impact is due to its competition for people's time, the psychological effects of television viewing, and the way that specific program content undermines civic motivation. Putnam marshals a lot of evidence to support his claims, including a strong state-by-state association between children's TV watching and an index of social capital. But he admits that, while powerful, the evidence is circumstantial, not conclusive. Heavy users are certainly isolated, passive and detached from their communities, and the rise of television has coincided with the decline in social connectedness. At the very least, he says, television and its electronic

cousins are 'willing accomplices' in this loss, and more likely than not 'they are ringleaders'.

The news media inform us about world events, but it is very difficult to understand how the world works from the patchy, fragmented, superficial coverage, much less feel much hope for its future; even as a journalist I found it hard to make sense of what was happening and why. This broader framework of understanding was once provided by education and religion, but their influence today is swamped by media interpretations. A key issue here is the extent to which public debate is defined according to journalists' own culture. This culture is largely concerned with fine-tuning the status quo; fundamental critiques of society are not, by and large, its concern. Thus the political theatre and manoeuvring of government are thoroughly examined, but deeper questions of political philosophy and ideology, including alternatives to the current dominant political paradigm, are not, despite the manifest failure of this paradigm to deliver promised benefits. Furthermore, the focus on the decisions and pronouncements of elected governments, especially the executive, reflects an outdated model that places them at the centre, or the top, of the processes of governance—rather than representing them as one of many 'nodes' of influence and action that interact in complex ways to determine political outcomes. The media need to adopt a model of a more devolved leadership.

Our circumstances demand that public debate should be broader, deeper, bolder—questioning fundamental assumptions and canvassing radical shifts in our priorities and way of life. Yet through the 1980s and 1990s that debate became more timid, more constrained. September 11 and its aftermath have seen a refocusing of the news media on the bigger picture, a development also encouraged by globalisation, climate change and other matters. At the same time, however, the war on terror is countering this development through increasing pressures for political conformity—with most of the media falling into line—rather than encouraging the whole-system social reappraisal that is necessary.

How do we respond to this situation? There are no simple answers, no exact formulas that can be applied. I don't want to appear to be making the media a scapegoat for problems that, in truth, have many causes, or to be suggesting that we whitewash or sanitise what is often the grim reality of the world. It can be said that the media reflect our culture, but they also powerfully shape it—distorting the reflection and reinforcing many negative elements (and, in fairness, also some good ones). If we keep asking questions, and worrying, about the role of the media in our lives, then what we want and expect of the media will become clearer—to them and us. British writer and journalist John Lloyd argues the media have become 'startlingly uncivil'—'intrusive into private lives, scornful of all politics, hugely arrogant in their power'. The media claim they are only telling our stories, but societies live and die on stories, he says:

> We need to make sure the media take themselves seriously as social actors, because they have a lead part…We need to develop mechanisms for interrogating the interrogators, and to challenge them to widen the arena for deliberation which they may—even without being conscious of doing so—now be closing.

The mass media are one of the most distinctive features of our civilisation: powerful and ubiquitous, employing stunning technologies, dominating our leisure time, filtering our knowledge and experience of the world. Increasingly, they are creating and defining a personal frame of reference that extends well beyond the immediate and intimate. At the heart of the issue is this: the images of the world and ourselves that we see reflected in the media shape who we are and what we become. Those images should reflect important realities, but they should also reveal the good we are capable of. They must combine realism and idealism, inspire as well as educate and entertain. They should never be so bleak that they demoralise and discourage us, nor so trivial that they lull us into complacency. The British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has expressed

well in *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* the importance of social perceptions and cultural images:

> …if what we think about each other reflects what we are, it is also true that what we are is itself a reflection of what we believe ourselves to be; the image we hold of each other and of all of us together has the uncanny ability to self-corroborate. People treated like wolves tend by and large to behave in a wolf-like fashion; people treated with trust tend on the whole to become trustworthy. What we think of each other does matter.

One of the reasons we fail to act on the negative influences of the mass media is that we tend to think that personally we are not affected by what we see, hear and read. Researchers call it 'the third person effect', says psychologist Dave Myers. 'Others more than us, we think, are affected by ads, political information, media violence, and social scripts. The research, however, disarms our hubris; we have met the "others" and they are us.'

Despite all that I have said, I remain ambivalent about some of these issues. I grew up in a time of cultural liberalisation, whose rationale and benefits I appreciate. But I am exasperated by the tendency of '*laissez-faire* culturalists'—like *laissez-faire* capitalists—to ignore or downplay the growing evidence of the social costs of the practices they defend. The French novelist Michel Houellebecq describes luridly in his novels *Atomised* and *Platform* how the freedoms and pleasures of sexual liberalisation, like those of economic liberalisation, have brought not happiness but inequality, exploitation, excess and abuse. As a society we appear reluctant or unable to draw any line between what is and is not permitted, with the result that the acceptable becomes ever more extreme. This failure is closely linked to transferring to the commercial media liberties that were initially intended to free us in our private lives. This is an important point that is often overlooked. In fact,

given the growing extent to which economic production now involves cultural goods and services, it seems increasingly difficult to separate the liberalisation of the one from the other.

Defenders of cultural liberalisation sometimes give the impression that the greatest—even only—hazard is to limit freedom of expression, that cultural content itself does little or no harm. If we accept this, then we must also believe that it does little or no good, that it is a marginal part of our lives. This is surely wrong. Culture shapes society and profoundly influences our lives. It has the capacity to do great good—or great harm. The media and other cultural forces should be subject to vigorous discussion about their roles and consequences—both good and bad—and that discussion reflected in media content. As a society we must take responsibility for these consequences, and strive to ensure that the balance favours the positive. The risks of our failure to do this are a continuing cultural degradation, or a backlash that seeks the imposition of harsh and excessive control. Either outcome threatens our wellbeing.

Children deserve special consideration in these matters. In Cormac McCarthy's novel *All the Pretty Horses*, the hero rides early one morning into a small Mexican town, where a group of laughing girls are decorating a gazebo for a wedding. He stops at a cafe and after serving him the proprietor stands at the window watching the girls and says that it is good that God keeps the truths of life from the young as they are starting out, or else they'd have no heart to start at all. Is it out of laziness, greed or some misguided notion of rights and equality, that we forget that children are not adults; that however worldly they seem, they can be deeply disturbed by things adults take in their stride; and that we have a duty of care to guide their development and to protect them from harm and deprivation, moral as well as material?

Media effects, taken in isolation, are easy to dismiss as insignificant relative to all the other things that impact on our wellbeing. This ploy is widely used in the debate about the media. Taken together,

however, these effects make the media a powerful and often destructive force. Never before have our images of social realities been so filtered and distorted. For all the cultural celebration of autonomy and self-realisation, never before have we lived so much through the experiences of others; and never before have we been so denied the drama, dignity and romance of our own lives.

8> being young: never better or getting worse?

If we want to assess the state of society, a good place to begin is with young people and how well they are faring. There is growing evidence that developmental stages and transition points in life, from before birth and early childhood to adolescence and early adulthood, are crucial to adult health and wellbeing. What happens at these times matters for life, and it makes the young susceptible to the effects of social failing and disruption. What are emerging from the scientific research into wellbeing are the subtleties, complexities and depths of the human psyche, and of the personal, social and spiritual ties that lie behind our health and happiness. At the same time, science is straining to define and differentiate these things. Our politics and economics have barely begun to come to grips with them.

In 1988 I wrote a report for the Australian Commission for the Future, *Casualties of Change: The Predicament of Youth in Australia,* which analysed the worsening plight of young people expressed in rising suicide, drug abuse and crime, and also more widely in an increasing social detachment and alienation. I argued that a range of economic, social and technological changes had combined and inter-acted to create a society that had become increasingly hostile to our

wellbeing, and especially that of young people because of their social and psychological vulnerability. The changes included increases in family conflict and breakdown, unemployment, poverty, education pressures and media influence. I also examined the emergence of a sense of hopelessness among young people, not about their own futures, but about the future of the world and humanity.

At the time this broad, holistic view of the health and wellbeing of a generation was unusual and the report attracted a great deal of public and professional attention; the then prime minister, Bob Hawke, was even questioned about the report by journalists. Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X*, which labelled the generation, was still four years away. Public and political interest tended then to be focused on discrete aspects of the wider picture—drugs, crime and youth homelessness—and political responses targeted each specific issue. Youth suicide, now deeply imprinted on our national conscience, then flickered only occasionally at the margins of public consciousness.

I have attempted in my work on young people to give a sharp edge to an issue that, while clear-cut at its core (suicide, serious mental illness or drug abuse), is very diffuse and ill-defined at its wider social margins (alienation and disillusion). In doing this, I am conscious of treading a fine line between defining a broad, complex situation and exaggerating its seriousness. But this approach has been essential in drawing attention to the links between issues that are usually viewed in isolation, and to the extent to which the problems of young people today go to the heart of our society and its culture and economy.

In a second report for the Commission for the Future in 1992, *Youth and the Challenge to Change*, I described young people as 'the miners' canaries of our society, acutely vulnerable to the peculiar hazards of our times'. I said: 'The health and wellbeing of young people is a critical measure of a society for two reasons: in moral terms, how well a society cares for its weak and vulnerable is a measure of how

civilised it is; in more pragmatic terms, a society that fails to cherish its youth, fails. It's as simple as that.'

The response to this work from my professional peers has been mixed. Many value the integrated, multi-dimensional analysis; others feel I am drawing too long a bow. A professor of psychiatry wrote to me suggesting that my overall pessimism reflected 'an introspective person who is steeped in the data'. Other colleagues implied—politely—that I was wasting my time trying to establish links between a tragedy as rare and personal as youth suicide and broad social and cultural trends. I was invoking a sort of cultural 'miasma' that was harmful to health, one said.

But it is fair to say that the broader social perspective has become increasingly mainstream. Government strategies are moving from problem-specific programs towards 'joined up', whole-of-government approaches. The Australian epidemiologist Fiona Stanley, a member of the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, the initiator of the new Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and the 2003 Australian of the Year, states that many indicators of developmental health and wellbeing in children and adolescents are showing adverse trends, which are linked to the 'dramatic social changes for families and communities over the past thirty years' in Australia and most other developed nations:

> Rising rates are being observed for low birth weight, neurodevel-opmental disorders, asthma, type 1 diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, autism, mental health morbidities, child abuse and neglect, adolescent suicide, obesity, eating disorders, learning disabilities, behavioural disorders, aggressive behaviours and violence, school drop out and truancy, juvenile crime, illicit drug and alcohol use, teenage births.

But the picture is far from clear. The research on young people is throwing up troubling questions more than it is producing definitive answers;

findings are fragmented and contradictory. Some surveys and commentaries indicate the young are thriving in the postmodern world of rapid change and uncertainty, others that they are anxious and apprehensive. Differing views can reflect different disciplinary frameworks, different political ideologies, and selective or partial use of research findings (some cultural commentaries are virtually data-free). Efforts to explain get confused with attempts to lay blame. Some analyses focus on marginalised youth, others on gender differences. The liberal left and conservative right take different approaches to the issues: conservatives focus on the family, the media, moral values and individual responsibility, and blame the permissiveness of the 1960s and '70s; liberals focus on poverty, unemployment, social inequality and exclusion, corporate greed and government neglect, and target for criticism the economic deregulation of the 1980s and '90s. (Ideological approaches tend to obscure the likelihood that all these factors are involved and interrelated.)

Many commentaries on young people are framed in generational terms: conflict and competition between Baby Boomers and Generation X; periodic 'moral panics' by adults about youth; or historical and generational cycles. Judith Bessant and Rob Watts, two Australian youth researchers, claim that concerns about young people as 'victims of change' or 'sources of misrule' are a recurring historical myth unsupported by empirical evidence. Young people are no more likely to suffer mental health problems or commit serious crimes than other age groups, they say; crime rates have fallen, not risen; and while youth suicide rates might have increased, suicide is too rare an event to be linked to social conditions. Bessant and Watts say they are arguing 'against some of the widespread generalisations made about young people as problems or victims', but their thesis goes well beyond this, to the point of denying that the myth has any basis in reality.

American social researcher and writer Mike Males' *Framing Youth—10 Myths about the Next Generation* is a passionate defence

against the demonising, stereotyping and scapegoating of American teenagers by Baby Boomers, governments and the white middle class. The problem is not youth but adults, and the causes of youth problems are socio-economic, not cultural or moral. Males argues that American teenagers today are better behaved than adults today, than today's adults when they were young, and than adults have a right to expect given the way young people are treated. Rates of serious crime, drug abuse, self-destructive behaviour and school failure among youth today are lower than they were twenty years ago.

David Brooks, author of an influential analysis of contemporary America, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, takes the upbeat appraisal further in a 2001 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Drawing mainly on interviews with students at Princeton and other Ivy League universities, he presents an approving image of happy, incredibly hard-working conformists who don't have a rebellious or alienated bone in their bodies: respectful, obedient, responsible, clean, generous, bright and good-natured.

Both Males and Brooks mention the work of historians William Strauss and Neil Howe, who argue in *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* that history runs in cycles of 80–100 years, with each cycle producing four generational types. Baby Boomers, they say, are classic *prophets*, indulged and 'spirited'; Generation X-ers are typical *nomads*, neglected and 'bad'; today's teens and young adults, the Millennials, are the next *heroes*, protected and 'good'. (The fourth generation in the current cycle will be the *artists*, suffocated and 'placid'.) Brooks notes Howe and Strauss surveyed young people for a later book, *Millennials Rising*, and found them to be generally hard working, cheerful, earnest and deferential. In *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam says the rise of volunteering among young people (also evident in Australia) is the most promising sign he has discovered that 'America might be on the cusp of a new period of civic renewal'.

A 2003 Australian survey of 10–17-year-olds seems to support the view that a generational transition is underway. It found them to be generally happy, confident, positive, optimistic and socially liberal and tolerant. Noel Turnbull, a board member of Leadership Victoria, a partner in the study, says it smashes some stereotypes about young people. 'You get this traditional stuff about alienation, depression, rebelliousness…but they don't fit the stereotypes in lots of ways…they aren't frightened, they are very optimistic about the future.' Social researcher Hugh Mackay also sees a new, post-1975, 'options' generation, flexible, open to change, cooperative—and the most tribal generation we have seen. 'They are world champions at establishing intimate, supportive relationships with their peers, standing by each other, and staying connected.'

Yet the picture is far from clear, as I said, and all these claims can be challenged, or need to be qualified. Some of them may be largely anecdotal or based on scant or flawed research, but they inform public and political perceptions of young people's world, so they need to be taken into account in assessing their wellbeing. Bessant and Watts, in overstating their case, lump together sensational media reports with careful research. They fail to account for the full range of evidence on which concerns for young people are based, and to distinguish between explanations of individual cases and population trends; some of their claims are simply wrong. I agree with much of what Males says about the depiction and representation of young people. But in the final analysis, *Framing Youth* paints a somewhat confused, incomplete and often contradictory picture of their situation, especially in claiming teenagers are 'better behaved' than they used to be and, at the same time, that the roots of their problems lie in their *worsening* socio-economic situation. And while Strauss and Howe give some fascinating evidence of generational cycles in history, we should be sceptical of an analysis that ignores or downplays long-term, linear or exponential trends in economic growth, technological

development and related cultural changes such as consumerism and individualism.

The Leadership Victoria study of young Australians is based on limited polling of people aged only 10–17. It is impossible from such surveys to disentangle generational changes from age and period effects. Most of this group are still children, living structured lives framed by school and family; it is probably this that explains any difference in attitude between them and older people. The surge in optimism about the future for young people in Australia, compared to a decade ago, may reflect little more than the effect of a long economic boom after the deep early-nineties recession. And the connectedness of Mackay's 'options generation' seems to me only partly to address the vagaries of an uncertain, unstable world and the isolation of the individualised self.

There are indications that some youth problems have peaked, but little evidence of a solid turn-around in wellbeing. Where improvements have occurred in recent years—as with male youth suicide or drug-overdose deaths—they are more likely to be due to specific developments, initiatives and interventions. If a generational transition is occurring, the evidence for it remains scant, appealing though the possibility is. If it is happening it is likely to be part of a much wider countercultural change. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that young people—not just today but over several generations—have been, and continue to be, harmed and threatened by the social, economic and cultural changes of recent decades.

Central to the 'most kids are doing fine' school of thought is the notion that troubled youth are a small, discrete minority clearly segregated from the majority who are thriving, with unprecedented opportunities, freedoms, material wealth and levels of education. This view is supported by survey findings showing that the great majority of young people say they are healthy, happy and satisfied with their lives. 'Most

young people, an estimated 90 per cent, live healthy, happy lives and make the transition into adulthood smoothly,' says the opening article in a 2001 issue of a health newsletter. 'The health of young people is improving.'

But if we look beyond the statistics on self-reported health and happiness, a different picture emerges, sometimes even within the same study. In a recent survey, 89 per cent of students aged 13–15 in Victoria said they were satisfied with 'their life in general these days'. Yet the same study found over 40 per cent of the students felt that they did not have anyone who knew them very well—that is, who understood how they thought or felt—and almost a quarter said they had no one to talk to if they were upset, no one they could trust and no one to depend on. These students were more likely to be depressed. Another study, again in Victoria and undertaken at about the same time, found 25–40 per cent of students aged 11–18 experienced in the previous six months feelings of depression, worries about weight, worries about self-confidence, trouble sleeping, and not having enough energy.

A survey of students aged 11–15 in 28 countries (mostly European but also including the United States) reported similar findings: while the vast majority (over 90 per cent in many nations) reported feeling healthy and happy, significant minorities (reaching majorities for some countries, ages and complaints) admitted to 'feeling low' and having headaches and stomach aches at least once a week, and to feeling tired most days of the week. To take 15-year-old American and Swedish girls as examples, 49 per cent and 45 per cent, respectively, reported feeling low at least once a week, 38 per cent and 32 per cent feeling tired in the morning four or more times a week, and 57 per cent and 53 per cent having a headache at least once a week.

A large study of adult Australians' mental health and wellbeing found that those aged 18–24 had the highest prevalence of mental disorders during the twelve months prior to the survey—27 per cent—

with prevalence declining with age to 6 per cent among those aged 65 and over. The survey covered anxiety disorders, affective disorders such as depression, and substance-use disorders. The study notes that because the survey did not cover all forms of mental health problems, it may underestimate the extent of mental disorder in Australia. A similar survey of children and adolescents (aged 4–17) found 14 per cent had mental health problems.

In a Queensland study, 52 per cent of young people aged from 15–24 had experienced at least one episode of depression in their lives (defined as 'a period of feeling sad, blue or depressed that lasted for two weeks or more'), and either 34 per cent or 18 per cent were currently depressed, depending on the 'cut-off' point in the depression scale used in the research. A large study of women's health in Australia has found that young women (aged 18–23 when first surveyed) reported higher levels of stress than middle-aged and older women, were often tired, and were over-concerned with their weight and body shape. The young women scored highest of the three groups on the physical-health measures, but the lowest on the mental-health scales.

There is a common perception that the problems of youth are problems of boys and young men, but this is not so. There is evidence that young women report higher levels of stress than young men, and that the decisions and transitions of early adulthood may be more problematic for women than for men. But both sexes are affected, with each expressing the distress differently: women inwardly through depression, anxiety and self-harm; men outwardly through violent suicide, aggression and substance abuse. These differences may be fading, however, with evidence that young women are becoming more like men in their risk behaviour.

The findings about the current state of affairs are backed up by the trends over time in young people's health and wellbeing—in serious, but rare, problems such as drug abuse and suicide; in less severe, more common ailments; and also in happiness. Robert Putnam reports

American survey data on headaches, indigestion and sleeplessness—
what he terms 'malaise'—that reveal a widening generation gap over
recent decades. In the mid-1970s, there was little difference in malaise
between age groups. Since then, the proportion of those over 60 who
ranked high on symptoms of malaise has gone from 33 to 30 per cent;
for those aged 18–29 the fraction rose from 31 to 45 per cent. Putnam
also notes that while surveys in the 1940s and 1950s found younger
people were happier than older people, by the end of the century the
reverse was true. Consistent with these findings, a study of four repre-
sentative cohorts of young Australians (born between 1961 and 1975)
suggests a decline in wellbeing among young people, based on a
nine-item subjective wellbeing index. The Australian Unity Wellbeing
Index surveys described in chapter 5 show younger people today are
less satisfied than their elders (those aged over 55) with their life as a
whole, and especially with personal relationships and feeling part of
the community.

These findings are mirrored in public perceptions of life for
young people today. When I polled almost a hundred teachers in
ACT colleges (years 11–12) in 1999 on whether they thought the
social and emotional wellbeing of young people in Australia was
getting better or worse, 81 per cent said it was getting worse. In a 1999
United States survey of how life in America today compared with
the 1950s, teenagers were one of only two groups (the other being
farmers) for whom a clear majority of Americans (56 per cent) thought
life today was worse (33 per cent better). Life for children also
rated poorly, with 44 per cent saying it was worse today (46 per cent
better). The American study *Yearning for Balance* says children
are 'ground zero' in people's concerns. 'Every time children or
future generations were mentioned in the focus groups, interest
and engagement in the conversation perked up; every time they
were mentioned in the survey, huge majorities registered strong
views.' People felt their values and their future were at stake; 'People

are trying, unsuccessfully, to envision a better world for their kids.'

Surveys and studies of youth attitudes also suggest all is not well. A 1996 international 'Teenmood' survey revealed a global teen generation characterised by four moods: alienated, cynical, experimental and savvy. Of the first two moods, the study says:

> Changes in traditional structures and values have resulted in global teen alienation from family and society…Deep cynicism is the global teens' main defence against a lack of benchmarks, role models or credible authority. They don't trust adults; they don't trust the government; and (they) suspect that everyone has their own agenda.

Today's teens, it observes, expect little or nothing from the future. Of Australian teens, the study says in part: '[They] are not excited about much in life…[they] express a lack of direction…they're uncertain and apprehensive about the future…they feel life is harder and more competitive than in their parents' day.'

In a similar vein, the Australian Commission for the Future found in a 1996 study that young people believed Australian society lacked leadership, vision, clear morals or values and had become a spiritual vacuum. The study also notes: 'Youth seem unusually apathetic about the future. They are not negligent or ignorant of the challenges; they just feel powerless to do anything about it. It is a sense of being disenfranchised and disengaged, awaiting the outcome of events rather than anticipating a role in them.' Bear in mind that these are primarily attitudes towards social conditions and trends, not personal situations and futures. Also, in these attitudes they are not very different from adults, as we have seen.

Overall, the evidence shows that measures of self-reported health, happiness and satisfaction do not present an adequate or accurate account of our lives, and that the prevalence of social and psychological problems has increased among young people—with a

fifth to a third now experiencing significant distress at any one time—
and is often higher than in older age groups. It does not support the
view that there is a small group of troubled youth clearly segregated
from the mainstream, or majority, of young people for whom life has
never been better. The distinctions between them are often of degrees;
there are gradients of disturbance, distress and discomfort that include
a large minority of young people today, perhaps even a majority at some
time in their lives. Regardless of whether we look at crime, depression,
drug use or suicidal thoughts and behaviour, we find these gradients
in the severity of youth problems.

Let me be clear about what I am saying. It is not to give the impression
of universal, serious pathology, or to deny that many young people are
doing fine. Nor is it to 'medicalise' or 'problematise' common human
emotions and experiences. It is about 'politicising' these issues. It is to
show that there are links between even extreme personal distress and
more prevalent, but less serious, suffering, and that the sources of these
conditions can be traced to defining qualities of our societies. In other
words, these sources are social and pervasive as well as personal and
specific, and the problems must be addressed at both levels.

I am not arguing that broad social shifts affect all individuals, or
affect them equally. They interact, in producing their effects, with the
particular qualities and circumstances of individuals and groups. Young
people are one such group because of their social and biological devel-
opment. For example, most researchers believed until recently that the
major 'wiring' of the brain happened in the first three years of life—
hence the current emphasis on the early years in intervention
advocacy—and that the brain was fully mature by about the age of
10 or 12. New research, however, shows that the greatest changes to
the parts of the brain responsible for functions such as self-control,
judgment, emotions and organisation occur between puberty and
adulthood. This may explain youth's greater vulnerability to many

risks—from the effects of alcohol on learning and memory to existential despair.

Questions of genetic and temperamental vulnerability also come into play. Recent research on the human genome, the thirty thousand genes that make up our genetic endowment, has identified genes for addiction, anxiety and depression. However, the research is confirming that genes are vulnerable to experience; the environment influences how they are expressed. For example, the study that linked depression to variants (alleles) of a specific gene found no difference in the risk of depression in the absence of stressful life events, but among people who had experienced in the preceding five years four or more adverse events related to employment, health, relationships, finances and housing, those with two 'short' versions of the gene were more than twice as likely to have suffered major depression in the previous year than those with two 'long' forms of the gene. The risk of depression for people with one 'short' gene and one 'long' fell between the other two groups. Those with the 'short' genes also had a higher average score on a depression scale, were more likely to have felt suicidal, and more likely to have experienced a depressive episode if they had been abused as children. Seventeen per cent of the study group had two 'short' versions of the gene, and 31 per cent had two 'long' genes. The gene is the same one that has been linked to anxiety in other research, which showed that people with the 'short' gene showed more intense activity in a part of the brain associated with anxiety in response to 'fearful stimuli'. It is likely that other genes are also involved in depression and anxiety.

These interactions between genes and environment are consistent with American psychologist Jerome Kagan's view that personality is shaped by an inherited temperamental bias that determines the individual's response to uncertainty and the unfamiliar; but how that bias is expressed depends on the individual's upbringing. About 20 per cent of children, he says, are 'high-reactive', prone to becoming

fearful and introverted. Brought up in academically supportive homes, high-reactive children become conscientious students and accomplished adolescents, but raised in less supporting homes, they turn into shy loners or even violent delinquents.

The human genome research helps us to understand individual differences in susceptibility, but it does not explain the adverse trends in the rates of health problems among young people, the sources of which are clearly environmental. This is something we need always to keep in mind given the undoubted potential of this research to lead to better, or better-targeted, treatments. We cannot just treat as clinical diseases of individuals what are fundamentally social problems. As the research shows, the social environment interacts with the biological in producing health outcomes. This environment goes beyond the family. In the wider domain, most attention has focused on socio-economic disadvantage and inequality.

Generally speaking, there are socio-economic gradients in health—worse health at the lower end of the social scale, better at the top. However, the relationship is not consistent and clear-cut, and can vary according to the cause of death and gender. For example, there is a clear socio-economic gradient in suicide among young men aged 15–24—that is, rates decline with rising socio-economic status—and the gradient became steeper between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. With drug-dependence deaths, however, the gradient apparent in the mid-1980s had almost disappeared a decade later—that is, there was little difference between groups. Among young women, the gradients for both suicide and drug deaths were reversed over this period—that is, death rates were highest in the lowest socio-economic group in the mid-1980s, but not in the mid-1990s. For all causes of death, the socio-economic gradient increased for young males but declined for young females.

So the evidence does not support the view that those youth whose health and lives are at greatest risk are all located, or even heavily

concentrated, within the most materially disadvantaged group. For all their privileges, children in rich families can face greater parental pressures, expectations and/or neglect. This is in no way to deny that there is in Australia today a group of young people who are marginalised, excluded, disadvantaged, seriously 'at-risk', and who need special care and attention; nor are health and behavioural problems the only criteria for evaluating disadvantage.

Even where social gradients in health problems exist, the vast majority of cases will occur outside the most disadvantaged groups because this is where most of the population is located. As the British epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose pointed out, the way risk was distributed in a population meant that a large number of people at small risk could give rise to more cases of disease than the small number at high risk. Accordingly, a small reduction in risk across the entire population would yield the greatest health gains. Rose favoured interventions that addressed the more distal social causes of disease because of their preventative potential, even though these causes were often less scientifically certain.

However, it is clear that there is more to social influences on health and wellbeing than inequality and poverty. In a major international review, two British researchers, Michael Rutter, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and David Smith, a criminologist, say that, to a large extent, finding causal explanations of the increases in psychosocial problems in youth 'remains a project for the future'. However, they regard as unlikely several popular explanations for the trends, such as social disadvantage, inequality and unemployment. (Other reviews include these as risk factors for these problems, but this doesn't necessarily mean they explain the *trends* over time.) More likely explanations, Rutter and Smith say, include: family conflict and break-up; increased expectations and individualism; and changes in adolescent transitions (in particular, the emergence of a youth culture that isolates young people from adults and increases peer-group influence, more tension

between dependence and autonomy, and more relationship break-downs among young couples living together).

Rutter and Smith call for further investigation of the theory that shifts in moral concepts and values are among the causes of increased psychosocial disorder. They note, in particular, 'the shift towards individualistic values, the increasing emphasis on self-realisation and fulfilment, and the consequent rise in expectations'. In my own writing on psychosocial problems among young people since the *Casualties of Change* report, I also have focused on their possible cultural sources, including rising individualism, and young people's particular vulnerability to the failure of modern Western culture to do well what cultures are supposed to do: provide webs of meaning that shape the way people see the world, locate themselves within it and behave in it.

British sociologists Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel say that 'the processes of individualisation, coupled with the stress which develops out of uncertain transitional outcomes, have implications for the health of all young people'. They note the increased sources of stress 'which stem from the unpredictable nature of life in high modernity'. These include the ongoing sense of doubt, the heightened sense of insecurity, the increased feelings of risk and uncertainty, and the lack of clear frames of reference that mark young people's world today. While traditional forms of inequality remain, they say, even young people from privileged social backgrounds worry about failure and the uncertainty surrounding their future. Conversely, those from disadvantaged backgrounds may feel that the risks they face are personal and individual rather than structural and collective.

A 2001 report commissioned by the Salvation Army in the UK, *The Burden of Youth*, notes that there is a stereotypical view that today's youth, 'the Millennial kids', have unprecedented opportunities available to them. While true at one level, 'this belief places false expectations on those who are unable to realise the opportunities, and also places unreasonable pressure to succeed upon those who theoretically

are well-positioned to do so, thereby imposing a heavy cost on the well-being of all young people'.

These perspectives are supported by Australian research. A Victorian study that has followed a large group of young people since they left school in 1991 has found that as they approach thirty many still lead unsettled lives: changing jobs, renting, unmarried, childless. The traditional pattern of a linear transition from education to work to marriage and children no longer applies. The break with the past is not sharp; rather the group is attempting to blend or balance traditional expectations with new life circumstances. According to the study's director, sociologist Johanna Wyn, the post-1970s generation has made a realistic adjustment to an unstable world. They value a multidimensional life based on self-discovery, personal autonomy, fitness and continuous learning; they are self-reliant and self-focused. 'This is the new way of being an adult,' Wyn says. 'This generation is showing the rest of us how adult lives will be lived in the future.'

The positive aspects of this more prolonged journey include more time to explore and assess the demands of adult life, to sort out and balance for themselves their priorities for the future. Most—about 90 per cent—express 'real satisfaction' with their personal development, believing they have made appropriate choices. But, as I've already argued, such findings can't be taken at face value. Whatever the pluses of the 'new adulthood', the evidence shows it comes at a cost to many young people. The young men and women in the Victorian study are a 'success cohort' (with most undertaking further education), but by 2002 they themselves had concerns about their health; less than 60 per cent regarded themselves as physically healthy, and a similar proportion as mentally healthy. They admitted the need for constant reflection, reinvention and flexibility required a lot of effort, toughness and self-confidence. There is a sense of constant movement, 'almost like treading water'. Maintaining the right balance in life remains a real challenge; life is still a struggle with uncertainty. And one of the

consequences is a weakening of links with collective causes and identities.

Annette Dobson, the director of the Australian women's health study mentioned earlier, says the young women reported even higher levels of stress when surveyed a second time four years later, when they were aged 22–27. 'They are stressed about money, employment and work. Their expectations are high and so are their aspirations—for more education, full-time employment, a stable relationship, and two or more children by the time they are 35…they feel more pressured and rushed than previous generations.' One young woman quoted in a newspaper story about the study findings said that if she ever found a time when she had nothing to do, she almost panicked. 'You get addicted to being busy.' Another explains:

> Why am I doing so much? To try and fulfil all of my desires. Why do I have so many desires? It is about society's perceptions of what makes for a fulfilling life. I am not happy to choose one over the other. I want to have them all, and I believe I can. Can that belief be realised? To some degree the answer is 'no'.

The studies raise important questions about the extent to which this way of life is 'chosen' and life-enhancing—a matter of making the most of the choices and opportunities available to young people—or 'imposed' on young people by the forces of economic, technological, social and cultural change (including, for example, the growth in part-time, casual and project-based work). Or rather this 'new adulthood' may demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing between the voluntary and involuntary as new values and norms become accepted and internalised by a new generation. As sociologists have noted, the individualised life is now a fate, not a choice; we can't choose not to play the game. The striving for balance, the busyness, the self-focus reveal, it seems to me, the lack of deeper, broader and more stable forms of meaning, identity and connection.

In *Liquid Love*, British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the modern preference for transience and impermanence: for connections over relationships, networks rather than partnerships. But this strategy doesn't solve the problem posed by freedom. 'Being on the move, once a privilege and an achievement, becomes a must. Keeping up speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore.' Most importantly, the nasty uncertainty and vexing confusion refuse to go, he says. 'The age of disengagement does not reduce the risks; it only distributes them differently.' From this perspective, then, the tribal connectedness of today's youth that Hugh Mackay and others have identified is an understandable response to the desires and demands that define their world—but not necessarily a solution. It may offer some consolation, without addressing the deep structural and cultural causes of the problem. What the research is showing is that just as the ideal of commitment is different from the reality, so too is the ideal of freedom different from its reality.

This situation is not confined to the young; it is, to a greater or lesser extent, a characteristic of our whole society. Some of the key findings of the Victorian and women's health studies are also there in the Mackay and Clemenger reports I discussed in chapter 6. But the young are at the cutting edge of social change; they reveal most clearly the tempo and tenor of the times. The message seems to be this: when skating on thin ice, it's best to keep moving; speed is the essence.

In the light of these findings, it is worth revisiting David Brooks' interviews with the clean-cut, hard-working Princeton students. He sees them as the products of an era of parental protection, prosperity and peace. They are 'the most honed and supervised generation in human history', he says. In contrast to the freedoms granted young people in the 1960s and 1970s, this is a group whose members have spent most of their lives in structured, adult-organised activities. 'The kids have looked upon this order and decided that it's good.'

Brooks does qualify his positive view. He notes the growth in medicating disruptive children and the rise in the proportion of college freshers who say they feel 'overwhelmed'. The rules grow stricter by the year. The students appear to be instructed on just about every aspect of life, except character and virtue, he says, and they are lively conversationalists on just about any topic, except moral argument. Perhaps the busyness and the striving are to compensate for what is missing, he suggests. The students are highly goal-oriented. Activities are rarely an end in themselves, but the means for self-improvement, resumé-building—for climbing, step by step, 'the continual stairway of advancement'. There is little time or energy for serious relationships, it seems, or for national politics and crusades. 'People are too busy to get involved in larger issues,' a student journalist tells Brooks. 'When I think of all that I have to keep up with, I'm relieved there are no bigger compelling causes.'

A few months after Brooks' article appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, another appeared in *Policy Review*, by Mary Eberstadt, which presents a dramatically different view of youth in America. Eberstadt focuses on the phenomenon of latch-key children: the trend of leaving children to fend for themselves, bereft of adult, and particularly parental, attention, 'whether for the sake of material betterment, career fulfilment, marital satisfaction or other deep adult desires':

> The essence of home-alone America is just this: Over the past few decades, more and more parents have been spending less and less time at home, and most measures of what social scientists call 'child wellbeing' have simultaneously been in what once would have been judged scandalous decline.

Then, a year after Brooks' piece, another article appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, by Ron Powers, focusing on another American phenomenon: teenage killers, the adolescents who murder their parents, teachers or peers for little if any apparent reason. The most

chilling aspect of Powers' account is the story told by Theo Padnos, a young PhD in comparative literature, who, eager for an income and to teach something to somebody, took a job teaching literature to adolescent prison inmates. What struck Padnos was the 'language of apocalypse' used by the kids, a message that 'in a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can come to understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness'.

Padnos tells Powers: 'They're a community of believers, in a way. They come from all kinds of backgrounds. But what unites them are these apocalyptic suspicions that they have. They think and act as though it's an extremely late hour in the day, and nothing much matters anymore.' The kids are drawn to the mythic violence of movies and television, the stories of people travelling 'a rough landscape that is their true home': 'People who mete out justice to anyone who impinges on their native liberties. Post-apocalyptic heroes just like they want to be—violent, suicidal, the sort of people who are preparing themselves for what happens after everything ends.'

How do we make sense of these strikingly different accounts of modern youth? The most obvious explanation is that they are describing different groups of young people: the nurtured and honed elite student with the world at his or her feet, and the abandoned and disenfranchised delinquent, to whom it seems the world offers nothing. This is probably how most people would interpret the picture. Yet all three writers extrapolate from each extreme to youth more generally. While most researchers use ever more elaborate methodologies to try to define what distinguishes the homicidal and suicidal, or just plain depressed, from the mainstream of 'normal' youth, these writers say what is happening at the top and bottom margins of society says something about society as a whole.

Brooks admits he is writing about an elite, but he states that they are 'not entirely unlike' other young Americans. Princeton reflects

America, he says, and 'in most ways it reflects the best of America'. Eberstadt says what troubles the public mind about today's youthful killers 'is not that they seem anomalous, but precisely that they might be emblematic'. Powers rejects any suggestion that the notion of an apocalyptic nihilism infecting the nation's children is alarmist. Americans need a 'societal shift in consciousness' to re-centre themselves and their children, he says. They must provide children with a sense of self-worth 'through respectful inclusion; through a reinte-gration of our young into the intimate circles of family and community life'.

Powers' analysis especially interests me because—apart from its dramatic interest, compared to more mundane explanations—it suggests a link between extreme, individual acts and much more perva-sive expectations of the future, and a subtle influence of the media that goes beyond the simple equation relating media violence to real violence. These nuances tend to slip easily from science's grasp. It is arguable that, in times of radical social change, we can gain sharper insights from observing what is happening at the margins or extremes of society than from studying the centre. It is at the top and the bottom where the pressures are greatest and the stakes are highest.

Brooks spoke to those who have thrived on a regimen of super-vision. But even among these high-flyers, we can detect the danger signals. They are under enormous pressure to meet their own, their parents' and society's high expectations, leaping through the hoops that are being set ever higher. The past few years have seen a surge in public and professional concern in the United States over the harm to chil-dren associated with 'hyper-parenting' and increasingly organised, structured lives—a trend also apparent in Australia.

Even these young 'winners' will, sooner or later (and especially when they stumble on the stairway of advancement), wonder what they are striving so hard to achieve, and whether it is worth the effort. They will ask what their lives mean. So in the lives of these privileged,

clever students—just as in the lives of the poor, dispossessed and despairing—we see reflected the values and priorities of our societies. Much of the research literature, the contradictions notwithstanding, suggests these values and priorities are the very opposite of what promotes personal and social wellbeing.

The two views of young people's wellbeing that I have discussed can be characterised by two metaphors: are troubled youth 'an island of misery in an ocean of happiness', or 'the tip of an iceberg of suffering'? Which view we accept has profound implications for what we do about young people's wellbeing. If we adopt the 'island of misery' hypothesis—that is, increasing rates of psychosocial problems in youth are a price we pay for progress, for making life better for most people but at a cost to a small minority—then we are justified in focusing preventive approaches on the minority of people at risk. If, on the other hand, we choose the 'tip of an iceberg' hypothesis—that is, modern Western society is harming a substantial and growing proportion of young people to varying degrees because it is failing to meet basic human needs for belonging, meaning and identity—then we need, in addition to specific interventions, a much broader effort to reform, even transform, society.

For children and adolescents, these reforms mean encouraging the things they need if they are to achieve their potential: families who love and care for them; friends who cherish and stand by them; communities that respect and include them; schools that nurture and educate them; governments that support them; a world that makes sense to them and a future that offers them hope. They also need, at least some of the time and in some respects, freedom from all these things, or from what they imply: freedom from care, from media intrusion, manipulation and exploitation, from adult intervention, supervision and worries; freedom to be themselves, to explore their world, to take risks, to set their own pace.

9> suicide in young people: causal layers and complexities

Matthew Stebbins committed suicide, at the age of 18, in October 1987. It was a time when male teenage suicides in Australia were rising rapidly. Matt was, his parents say, a delightful, warm, intelligent and gentle person, sensitive and caring of others. He showed an intense awareness of issues and imperfections in the world; a keen sense of right and wrong; an aversion to violence and war; an awareness of environmental issues and a love of nature and animals; and a strong creative streak, expressed through art, music and poetry.

Jon and Sue Stebbins, who became involved in the Compassionate Friends, a self-help group for parents and siblings of young people who have died, suggest these qualities may be significant because 'almost all parents of suicides describe similar characteristics and qualities in their own children'. There was a break-up in a romantic relationship a few weeks before his death—again something reported by many parents—but they also noted their son's 'deep unhappiness and his lack of confidence about himself and a future'. Their strongest feeling about their son's life, they say, was 'a deep concern for his inability to find a positive direction in life'.

The Stebbins' observations illustrate the many different 'causal

levels' of suicide. A young man might kill himself 'because' his girl-friend broke up with him, he was abused or neglected as a child, he is homeless or can't find a job, he is abusing drugs or mentally ill—or a combination of such factors. But, as my own work suggests, the most fundamental aspect of the rise in youth suicide in developed nations over the past fifty years could be the impact of cultural change on meaning, identity and belonging.

There are several reasons why it is appropriate and relevant to look at the phenomenon of rising youth suicide in the Western world as part of the broader cultural theme of this book. First, the rise in youth suicide, especially among males, is one of the more striking and unequivocal indicators of the trends in young people's psychological wellbeing. Secondly, suicide is a deeply existential act, penetrating to the core of the concerns expressed in this book. As the Nobel Prize-winning writer Albert Camus said: 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is, or is not, worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.' Finally, the story of youth suicide reflects all of the complexity and paradox of our social situation; we cannot automatically assume, as many social critics do, that rising youth suicide indicates increased social adversity.

Put another way, to what degree is suicide a social aberration, or an emblem? A lot of health research and policy is based, either implicitly or explicitly, on the notion of aberration, so justifying programs of intervention that target high-risk individuals or groups. Even broader social perspectives on health, with their emphasis on social inequalities, tend to reflect an assumption that if we offered the disadvantaged the privileges and opportunities of the majority, the problems would be largely solved. I argued against this dominant view of suicide and other psychosocial problems in youth in the previous chapter, and suggested, instead, that their roots lie deep in the nature of modern Western societies.

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The leading cause of disability in the world is depression. In the global ranking of the burden of disease, measured in terms of both disability and death, major depression is projected to rise from fourth in 1990 to second in 2020. In high-income countries, depression and other neuropsychiatric conditions account for more of the disease burden than heart disease or cancer. Suicide, which has been called the mortality of depression, ranks in the ten leading causes of death in these countries. World Health Organization figures show that between 1950 and 1995 the global suicide rate rose significantly for men, and slightly for women, while the share of suicides committed by people aged under 45 increased.

Rates of psychosocial disorders among young people have risen since World War II in nearly all developed countries. These disorders include drug abuse, crime, depression and suicidal behaviour. Suicide rates among males aged 15–24 have trebled or more in several countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Rates among young women have also increased in these countries, although the rise has been smaller and less sustained; in Australia the female rate in the 1990s was about twice that in the 1950s.

Recent research adds a disturbing dimension to these trends. The increase in suicide is not—now—confined to the young. There appears to be a cohort effect, at least for males, in which successive generations carry the heightened suicide risk during youth into later years. Suicide rates for each birth cohort or group born between the end of World War II and the 1980s show a steeper rise to a higher level with increasing age, before levelling off as the men reach their thirties or forties. One consequence of this pattern is a dramatic age shift in suicide's toll. Earlier last century, suicide rates among young men were a fraction of those for men aged over 40. Now, rates are similar for teenage males, and substantially higher for men aged 20–39 (declining rates among older men have also contributed to this pattern).

One promising way of exploring socio-economic and cultural associations with young people's psychosocial wellbeing is to compare countries. While youth suicide, for example, has increased in most developed nations, there are substantial differences among these nations in both youth suicide rates and the extent of the increase in these rates. There are also marked differences in a wide range of socio-economic and cultural factors that might influence rates of youth suicide and so help to explain their trends.

With colleague Keith Dear, I recently examined associations between youth suicide rates and 32 socio-economic and cultural factors in eleven to twenty-one developed nations. Our central hypothesis was that suicide rates would be correlated with various cultural measures of social attachment and integration, especially individualism. Socio-economic factors were included in the analysis to demonstrate the relative strength of the cultural associations.

Our analysis found a strong positive correlation between male youth suicide rates and subjective measures of health, optimism, trust and individualism. Correlations between female youth suicide and individualism were smaller, attaining significance with only one of several measures of individualism (but were close to significance with two others). In other words, youth suicide rates were highest in the most individualistic countries; the more personal freedom and control over their lives young people felt they had, for example, the higher the suicide rate. Individualism was also positively associated with health, optimism, trust and other quality-of-life variables including happiness and life satisfaction. Significant positive correlations between quality-of-life factors and suicide disappeared, and most correlations became negative, when the effect of individualism on these variables was taken into account. Male youth suicide and individualism were negatively correlated with older people's sense of parental duty. Correlations between suicide and other possibly relevant cultural variables, including tolerance of suicide, belief in God and national pride, were not

significant**.** Nor were correlations significant between suicide and various socio-economic factors, including poverty, youth unemployment, divorce, inequality, social welfare expenditure and per capita income (which is not to say that none of these things matters, only that a link did not show up in this broad-brush analysis).

The simplest explanation of the association between suicide and individualism is that suicide is an individualistic act, and the greater the sense of personal autonomy the more likely people are to choose to die. Indeed, suicide might well be regarded as an ultimate expression of individual freedom of choice and control over one's life. The association may say nothing more about a society and people's wellbeing. However, the significance of the findings may go further than this. The results present an internally consistent pattern that raises intriguing questions. Do they indicate that youth suicide is associated with not just freer youth, but happier, healthier, and more optimistic youth, so suggesting that youth suicide rises as social conditions and personal prospects improve? Or is there another explanation, one that suggests higher suicide is associated with greater social adversity? Are the suicidal 'an island of misery in an ocean of happiness', or 'the tip of an iceberg of suffering'?

The 'island of misery' hypothesis is supported by some other studies. American suicide researcher David Lester tested a hypothesis that suicide is more likely when people have no outside source to blame for their misery, and so should become more common as quality of life improves. He found a significant, positive correlation between suicide rates and quality of life measured by a composite indicator, the International Index of Social Progress. (However, in a later analysis of *youth* suicide, the correlation with quality of life was not statistically significant.)

Jim Barber, an Australian social welfare researcher, compared youth suicide rates with self-assessed adolescent self-esteem, school adjustment and social adjustment in seven countries, both Asian and

Western. He found that male suicide rates were positively and strongly correlated with adolescent adjustment. Correlations between female suicide rates and adjustment were negative, but not significant. On the basis of these findings, Barber rejects—in the case of males—an 'absolute misery hypothesis', which argues that suicide is a valid indicator of a wider social malaise among young people. He proposes, instead, a 'relative misery hypothesis', which holds that disposition to suicide is influenced by an individual's emotional state relative to others, and so increases with rising overall happiness. Barber says that when vulnerable young people perceive those around them to be better off than they are, their distress is magnified and their susceptibility to suicide is increased. 'If you are a depressed, unhappy kid in a country where you are surrounded by kids who are happy and well-adjusted, then you have a double problem—you are depressed and you are isolated as well.'

American psychologist Ed Diener has also noted that individualistic societies have higher suicide rates, and suggests that increasing a social variable like personal freedom involves trade-offs, and can have both desirable and undesirable consequences. People in individualistic societies are free to pursue their own goals, which is very rewarding when things go well, but this can be at a cost to social support on which they rely when things go badly, he says. 'A large number of people find rewarding lives in individualistic societies, but a higher percentage are also likely to feel acutely lonely.' Similarly, Netherlands sociologist Ruut Veenhoven, in commenting on the results of Dear's and my study, suggested individualism was good for the majority but bad for a minority, especially those who were not good at making choices or establishing and maintaining intimate relations.

The results of the analysis Dear and I carried out—showing not only significant positive correlations between suicide and trust, optimism and health, but also significant correlations between individualism and these and other quality-of-life factors—appear to

support the 'island of misery' hypothesis. This possibility is strengthened by other research that shows, for example, that at the individual level, the correlation is reversed—that is, suicidal behaviour is associated with personal pessimism (or hopelessness) and a lack of control. It makes sense that the psychological costs of being pessimistic and powerless are higher in societies where most people feel optimistic and empowered; in a society of 'winners', 'losers' are likely to feel even more isolated and alienated than they might otherwise.

There are, however, two principal reasons for challenging the 'island of misery' interpretation. First, the suggestion that higher suicide rates are associated with higher quality of life may be a measurement artefact resulting from the cultural differences between countries, specifically in individualism. So while it may be that individualism really improves wellbeing, it is also possible that people in individualistic societies tend to rate their happiness higher because it is more important to be happy—to be a winner—in these societies. This could be a significant issue in explaining Barber's findings, in which the major difference was between the (collectivist) Asian and (individualistic) Western nations.

The second reason is that the 'island of misery' hypothesis can only hold true if the evidence shows that the suicidal are indeed part of a small, distinct minority within a population of young people who are thriving and whose wellbeing has improved over recent decades. As I argued in the previous chapter, the evidence does not show this is the case.

A study of Australian university undergraduates demonstrates graphically the gradients of distress associated with suicide. It found that almost two-thirds of the students, with an average age of 22, admitted to some degree of suicidal ideation or behaviour—broadly defined—in the previous twelve months. Based on the most extreme statements with which students agreed, 21 per cent revealed minimum ideation, saying they had felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that

'life is so bad I feel like giving up'; another 19 per cent revealed high ideation, agreeing they had wished 'my life would end', or that they had been 'thinking of ways to kill myself'; a further 15 per cent showed suicide-related behaviour, saying they had 'told someone I want to kill myself', or had 'come close to taking my own life'; and 7 per cent said they had 'made attempts to kill myself'. Another study found 27 per cent of a sample of university students indicated suicidal ideation, also broadly defined, in 'the past few weeks'.

The 'tip of an iceberg' hypothesis is consistent—while the 'island of misery' hypothesis is not—with the observation of the British epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose that diseases or disorders and their causes are rarely binary—individuals have them or they don't—but are distributed along a continuum: how much does a person have? As he demonstrated, there is a relation between the mean of a characteristic in a population and the prevalence of 'deviance'. Rose even uses the 'iceberg' metaphor to describe this relationship, making specific reference to mental illness: 'The visible part of the iceberg (prevalence) is a function of its total mass (the population average).'

Rose also observed that the causes of individual differences in disease or disorder—for example, why one individual and not another commits suicide—may be different from the causes of differences between populations—what explains patterns and trends in suicide rates. This helps us to understand how the association of suicide with optimism and control is positive at a population level, but negative at the individual level. In other words, in an individualistic society, it may be that individuals with a high sense of freedom and control over their lives do better. But at the societal level this individualistic orientation may reduce social capital, cohesion and support, leading to more personal isolation and distress, and so to higher suicide rates.

However, this explanation is hard to reconcile with the finding discussed in chapter 5 that young Americans' sense of control over their lives has diminished over recent decades. Another possibility, then, is

that the indicators of individualism Dear and I used in our analysis, including the perception of freedom of choice and control over life, are measuring not real autonomy but independence or separateness, which is not the same thing and might even reduce control, as I have argued. In contrast, the research on personal control used a psychological instrument specifically designed to measure whether a person's 'locus' of control was internal or external, with an internal locus of control indicating a sense of social as well as personal agency, of being able to influence social events as well as direct our own lives (and so corresponding more closely to genuine autonomy). If this is the case, countries high in individualism may be actually low in personal control, making the population-level effects consistent with the individual-level findings that suicide is associated with low or external control. Again, the key consequence may be a tendency towards social fragmentation and alienation.

The possibility that individualism reduces control may be hard to believe. But it makes sense that in unstable, uncertain times, the lack of clear cultural frames of reference that characterise highly individualistic societies does reduce people's sense of control over their lives. If this is the case, individualism as we experience it delivers a 'double whammy' to our wellbeing: it diminishes both personal control *and* social support.

These costs of individualism are likely to be greatest in new industrialised nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Norway (all of which attained full national status only in the twentieth century), the United States and Canada. The cultures of these countries—certainly the English-speaking nations—are more clearly defined by the related 'virtues' of progress, materialism, mobility (both social and geographic) and independence, and perhaps less tempered by tradition and social obligation. It is among these nations that youth suicide has increased most and is now highest. This is not to claim individualism is the only factor affecting youth suicide. Historically high rates of

youth suicide in the Germanic nations and Japan, and their decline in the latter during the decades they rose in the West, suggest the influence of other sociocultural factors.

The strong link between suicide and individualism found in Keith Dear's and my analysis supports French sociologist Emile Durkheim's theory, proposed a century ago, that suicide is associated with low social attachment, a failure of society to integrate the individual. Consistent with Durkheim's theory, individualism may impact on youth suicide through its effect on specific institutions and functions, such as the family and child-rearing, as demonstrated by the negative correlations between parental duty and both youth suicide and individualism in our analysis. (Parental duty was measured by the proportion of people agreeing it is 'parents' duty to do the best for their children even at the expense of their own wellbeing'—the antithesis of individualism.) Individualism may also impact through politics, as suggested by the rapid rise in male youth suicide in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK in the 1980s, when individualistic, neo-liberal, market-dominated doctrines became politically dominant. The steep rise in male youth suicide during this period is especially marked in New Zealand, which adopted the most radical and rapid economic reforms.

However, the effects of individualism can be taken further than these institutional instances, as I've already indicated. Western societies—and some more than others—may be taking individualism to the point where it can become more broadly dysfunctional—to society and the individual. Individualism may be personally liberating and socially invigorating but, pushed too far, it can also be personally isolating and socially fragmenting. In other words, these societies may be promoting a cultural norm of personal freedom and control that is unrealistic, unattainable or otherwise inappropriate, resulting in a gap between expectations and realities. They project images and raise

expectations of virtually unrestrained individual freedom, choice and opportunity, and of the happiness these qualities are supposed to deliver. The confusion of autonomy—acting according to internalised values and beliefs—with independence, or separateness, may be one important aspect of this flawed cultural construction.

There are several dimensions to this 'reality gap', this tension between cultural ideal, psychological need and social reality. First, there may be today, from the perspective of psychological health, quite simply a surfeit of choice and uncertainty. The openness and diversity of modern life can mean adolescents today are 'confronted with an over-load of developmental tasks', as one researcher put it. Freedom, autonomy and self-determination can become excessive, and experienced as a tyranny or threat, increasing dissatisfaction and depression. Secondly, individualism, because of its self-focus, can undermine or distort the fundamental human need to belong, to form lasting, positive and significant personal relationships.

Thirdly, despite perceptions of freedom and control, individual choice remains significantly shaped by the traditional social factors of privilege and disadvantage. Structural changes of recent decades—such as increases in inequality or unemployment—could have increased this tension between perceived and real choice and opportunity. Fourthly, in contrast to the loosening or liberalising of 'informal' norms, values and constraints associated with individualisation, people's lives are, at least in some respects, becoming increasingly circumscribed by the 'formal' constraints of laws, regulations and rules. More broadly, the growing social, economic and technological complexity of life today also tends to work against individual agency and empowerment.

In one sense, then, the misery of the suicidal is 'relative', but it is relative to the cultural images and myths of 'the good life' that others are leading, not to the reality of their lives. In this sense, suicide may be a measure of a society's cultural fraudulence, the extent to which the cultural ideal deviates from, or fails to reflect, the social reality.

While Dear's and my analysis singles out individualism as a possible contributing factor in rising youth suicide, there are, as we saw in chapter 3, other patterns and trends in modern Western culture that interact with individualism and are also relevant to mental health. These include rampant consumerism and the uncertainty and instability that characterise postmodern life. It might be argued that the harm done by individualism is limited to young people, particularly young men, while older adults benefit. Certainly, our analysis uncovered a cost only in young lives and, as already noted, young people's stage of development and socialisation could make them especially vulnerable to the hazards of individualism. But while this half-way position is plausible, it does not account for the widespread public disquiet about the current focus and direction of Western societies.

Male youth suicide rates were of particular interest in our analysis because it is among young males that the rise in suicide has been most marked and sustained, and hence has generated most international concern. Female youth suicide rates are generally lower than male rates, and their trends more variable. The gender differences in youth suicide do not mean it is a male problem. Young women continue to attempt suicide more often than young men, but die less often because they tend to use less fatal means, especially overdosing. Medical and other advances—including the development of intensive-care and life-support technologies and procedures, and the introduction of less toxic pharmaceutical drugs—have reduced the lethality of suicide attempts during the past few decades, impacting particularly on female suicide. (These developments also mean that trends in suicide rates are likely to underestimate the increase in suicidal behaviour among young people.)

The smaller correlations between individualism and female youth suicide found in our study could be due to a 'masking' effect of this

reduced lethality. Also, the costs of individualism may have been offset in young women by their improving social status and economic participation. Alternatively or additionally, it could be that, for reasons of biology and/or socialisation, individualism has a lesser effect on females; they remain better socially connected. In the West men tend to construe the self as independent and separate from others, while women are more likely to perceive the self as interdependent, with others considered part of the self. This would suggest individualism, with its focus on the self, is less isolating for women. This gender difference could be linked to another: researchers have suggested women's responses to stress are more marked by a pattern of 'tend-and-befriend'—nurturing activities that protect the self and children, and creating and maintaining social networks—than the traditional 'fight-or-flight' responses, which may be more characteristic of men. These factors may help to explain the finding that men are more vulnerable than women to suicide after the break-up of a relationship or marriage, with some evidence that younger men are particularly at risk. For men, marriage and family can often be their most important source of belonging and defence against isolation. But if these things are true, why do women attempt suicide more often than men? Questions remain.

The good news of recent years is that male youth suicide rates seem to have peaked in the 1990s and are now dropping in countries that have seen the biggest rises—including Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada. How does my analysis fit this development? It is too soon to be sure about the significance of these trends and the reasons behind them. One American researcher has suggested better anti-depressants and declining drug abuse explain the American trend. I believe a more likely explanation is the much greater public awareness and recognition of the problem, with the result that suicidal young men feel less isolated and are more likely to seek help, and parents, teachers and friends are more alert to their needs. As a 19-year-old told Reach Out!,

the award-winning on-line youth suicide prevention service: 'Reach Out! made me realise that other people go through what I'm going through and somehow that makes it easier to cope.' Another site visitor wrote: 'I really enjoyed reading the stories of others who have been through hard times. It made me aware I wasn't alone…I feel more in touch with people my own age…It just makes me feel good to be alive.' This result can be regarded as a problem-specific counter to the wider social context of individualism.

The trend reversal may, however, be the result of a wider and deeper social change—one perhaps reflected in a generational shift between Generation X and the Millennials (the oldest of whom are now in their early twenties) which was discussed in the previous chapter. Social researcher Hugh Mackay has noted the strong desire to connect among today's youth, evident in their strong bonds of friendship. They are the harbingers of a new sense of community, a new tribalism, he says. 'The era of individualism is not dead yet, but the intimations of its mortality are clear.' The social shift may also extend beyond generational changes. As we shall see in chapter 13, surveys in the United States and Europe show a growing proportion of people, over a quarter of the population, are rejecting the dominant individualistic and materialistic ethos and ethic of modern Western societies and placing more emphasis in their lives on personal relationships, social justice and equity, spirituality and environmental sustainability.

Still, it is too early to make much of the social significance of the recent suicide trends. They are probably too sudden to be due to social or generational changes. Furthermore, evidence of a turn-around in young people's wellbeing is thin on the ground, and there remain puzzling aspects to the picture: while the male rate fell in the nineties, the female youth suicide rate continued to show a slight upward trend in Australia and doubled in New Zealand. Is this because women are becoming more like men in their individualism, so eroding their gender advantage? It is extremely difficult to tie off all the loose ends

and present a neat analytical package of these issues.

Exploring how socio-economic and cultural factors might influence youth suicide rates illustrates many of the points that emerge again and again in this book: the confusing multiplicity of factors shaping our health and happiness and the complexity of their relationships with each other; the importance of not taking single sets of results at face value, but of placing them within the wider context of social change; and the significance of cultural, not just socio-economic, characteristics in this bigger picture. Every piece of the puzzle has to be fitted if the picture is to be completed. The more complete the picture the better our prospects of understanding youth suicide and other problems, and so preventing them.

10> future visions, social realities and personal wellbeing

Some years ago, I initiated and participated in a study of young people's expected and preferred futures for Australia. The study included a series of scenario-creation workshops with different groups of young people. One group was made up of long-term unemployed, some of whom were verging on being homeless (one girl, we were told, had not eaten for three days). But they were not a homogeneous group. Some were highly politicised and very articulate in their criticism of the status quo; they were, in a sense, unemployed by choice (a few had gone to private schools and had attended university before dropping out). Most of the others were quite different—younger, poorly educated, struggling to stay on their feet in the swirling currents of social change. The young people's circumstances and the differences between them made it a difficult workshop.

Across the city, we ran another workshop with Year 10 girls at a top private school. The girls, chosen from amongst the brightest and most challenging students in the year, threw themselves into the task with an energy and enthusiasm that delighted us and, after two days, left them exhausted. At one level, then, it was a very different experience from the first workshop. Yet at another, it was similar. The dreams and

expectations of the two groups—in so many ways dissimilar—were much the same. The expected futures of both were, in the main, pessimistic and pretty bleak, and the preferred futures reflected priorities very different from our society's today. The unemployed clearly felt exposed to the future they expected—even living it now. The 'rich kids' knew their privileged position would buffer them from the harsher world they foresaw. But this future still worried them. Their visions still revealed a form of alienation from society and the 'official' vision of the future our leaders hold up to them.

This pessimism, which compounds the self-focus of an individualistic, materialistic culture, has probably been intensified by recent global events. On September 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks on the United States, I spoke to a senior secondary school class about progress and the future. To begin the talk, I put to them two scenarios for the world in the twenty-first century. The pessimistic scenario was: 'More people, environmental destruction, new diseases and ethnic and regional conflict mean the world is heading for a bad time of crisis and trouble.' The optimistic scenario was: 'By continuing on its current path of economic and technological development, humanity will overcome the obstacles it faces and enter a new age of peace and prosperity.'

We'd used these scenarios in a 1995 poll of 800 young Australians, aged 15–24, which formed a second part of the youth futures study. At the time, 55 per cent said the pessimistic scenario more closely reflected their view; 41 per cent chose the optimistic. In September 2001, all or almost all the students chose 'the world is heading for a bad time of crisis and trouble' as being closer to the future they expected; none put a hand up for 'humanity will enter a new age of peace and prosperity'. I asked if the events of the previous 24 hours had influenced their view. Many indicated that the events had, but several commented that they had tended to confirm or strengthen their conviction; the events had not changed their minds. When I repeated the exercise with a 2002

class, the result was much the same: one student put her hand up for optimism (but even she, it transpired, thought we needed to change our path). The 2003 class responded in a similar fashion.

The relationship between the future and personal wellbeing is mediated through the quality of hope. Hope is linked to other qualities crucial to wellbeing, especially meaning and purpose in life. The American psychiatrist Jerome Frank wrote: 'A unique feature of human consciousness is its inclusion of the future. Expectations strongly affect all aspects of human functioning…Hope inspires a feeling of wellbeing and is a spur to action. Hopelessness, the inability to imagine a tolerable future, is a powerful motive for suicide.' In his famous account of life in concentration camps during World War II, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl says the prisoner who had lost faith in the future was doomed. With this loss of belief, he also lost his spiritual hold, and went into a physical and mental decline. 'It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future.'

Australian psychologist Ken Nunn describes hope as 'a pervasive and significant correlate of health and disorder'. In a study of the psychosocial impact of the earthquake that struck Newcastle, NSW, in 1989, he and his colleagues found that people's hopefulness was as important in explaining post-earthquake illness as their level of exposure to disruption and threat.

The 'future' and the 'hope' discussed in these instances are personal. They do not concern expectations of the future of the world or humanity. The relationship between this broad vision of the future and personal wellbeing is a trickier issue.

It was the bleakness of many young people's views on the future of the planet and the fate of humanity that first aroused my interest in their wellbeing, including issues such as suicide, drug abuse and crime. I came across the research on youth futures while writing a report for the Australian Commission for the Future on Australians' attitudes to

science and technology and the future. As the father of three young children, I was deeply affected by the sense of hopelessness that pervaded the imagery of many children, teenagers and young adults. So for my next project I explored whether these visions might help to explain the rising rates of psychosocial problems in successive generations of young people in much of the Western world, as well as some of the broader traits and attitudes of this generation. The result was *Casualties of Change*.

Researchers have speculated on a possible causal connection between global threats and personal wellbeing but, so far as I am aware, it remains to be established. They have warned that the pessimism of many young people could produce cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals or lasting commitment. American psychologist and writer Joanna Macy has suggested that people's response to concerns of global catastrophes 'is not to cry out or ring alarms' but 'to go silent, go numb'. She suggests this 'numbing of the psyche' takes a heavy toll, including an impoverishment of emotional and sensory life. Energy expended in suppressing despair 'is diverted from more creative uses, depleting resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies'.

American psychologist Michael Newcomb found in a study of young adults (aged 19–24) a significant association between anxiety about nuclear threats and less purpose in life, less life satisfaction, more powerlessness, more depression and more drug use. He concludes that the threat of nuclear war and accidents is significantly related to psychological distress and may disturb normal maturational development. Nevertheless, his study only established statistically significant correlations, not a causal relationship.

In an Australian study on young people's views of the future, psychologists Kathryn Elkins and Ann Sanson found that nuclear war was seen to impinge on their own personal futures, as well as being feared for its catastrophic effects on the planet. Other global threats

such as environmental destruction did not have this personal impact. They suggest that the nuclear threat may be more likely to have detrimental effects on the psychological development of youth than other concerns. As we saw earlier, psychologist Jean Twenge has found large increases in anxiety and neuroticism in children and college students in the United States between the 1950s and 1990s. She links this anxiety, which has been associated with a wide range of health problems, partly to perceived 'environmental threats' such as fear of violent crime and nuclear war (as well as to low social connectedness).

Intuitively, we might expect that future fears would influence qualities such as hope, purpose and meaning in life, coherence and autonomy, which are important to wellbeing. However, we may never be able to do more than suggest this influence because it is so difficult to disentangle concerns about the fate of the Earth from the many other factors that influence these qualities. Nonetheless I believe there is a dynamic and complex relationship between personal welfare, contemporary social realities and future visions—a relationship in which each domain interacts with and influences the other two.

Some aspects of this relationship are self-evident. For example, current social conditions impact on personal wellbeing and shape how we see the future. But other aspects are not obvious. There are different ways of thinking about the future; future visions may be as much reflections of the present as expectations of the future; and they may affect personal states of mind less than they are affected by them. Given these interactions, each domain provides a point of intervention to change the others.

So we to need to take a broad, integrated and holistic view of the future and its social and personal significance. The present shapes the future. However, the future also influences the present; what we expect influences who we are and what we do. How people, especially young people, perceive the future—whether with hope or trepidation— matters, to them and to society. We tend to underestimate this impact

because it is hard to define. But the future is part of our culture and, like other cultural elements, can profoundly affect our values, priorities and meanings.

British futurist David Hicks cites the work of historian Frederick Polak in stressing the importance of positive images of the future. In *The Image of the Future*, Polak studied how these images had changed over three thousand years of Western history, and notes: 'As long as a society's image of the future is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full blossom. Once the image of the future begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture cannot long survive.'

The complexities of young people's worldviews and expectations of the future are evident from the research. Reflecting the broader commentaries on youth discussed in chapter 8, some surveys suggest most are confident and optimistic, others that they are pessimistic and apprehensive. Some of these differences can be readily explained; others require more thorough analysis. Generally speaking, there seem to be three different images of modern youth, each reflecting different ways of looking at them—different aspects, or depths, of their lives and relationship to the future. The descriptions do not represent different types of young people, although different individuals may fit one image more than another.

- The *postmodern* portrait represents young people as the first global generation, attuned and adapted to the postmodern world: equipped for its abundant opportunities, exciting choices and limitless freedoms—and its hazards and risks. They are confident, optimistic, well-informed and educated, technologically sophisticated, self-reliant, street-wise, enterprising and creative, fast on their feet, keeping their options open. This portrait tends to be promoted by a technology- and media-driven consumer culture that the image helps to sustain.

- The *modern* portrait suggests most young people successfully nego-tiate the transitions of adolescence to become well-adjusted adults. Most cherish their families, enjoy life and are confident they personally will get what they want out of it—a good job, travel, a partner and eventually a family of their own. This portrait focuses on the more personal, and often more immediate, aspects of young people's lives.

- The *transformational* portrait (so-called because of the social trans-formation it suggests is required) reveals young people as understandably cynical, alienated, pessimistic, disillusioned and disengaged. Many are confused and angry, uncertain of what the future holds and what society expects of them. While they may continue to work within 'the system', they no longer believe in it, nor are they willing to serve it. This portrait reflects broader social, and deeper psychological, perspectives.

Another way to look at young people's views of the future is to distinguish between expected, promised and preferred futures. Here the social and psychological significance lies in part in the level of tension—or degree of coherence—between these three futures. Of particular importance is that young people do not see the *promised* future of unlimited economic growth and technological development as delivering a *preferred* future, or addressing the problems character-ising the *expected* future.

These tensions were clearly apparent in the 1995 youth futures study. Conducted under the auspices of the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council (ASTEC), the study sought to obtain a better understanding of what young Australians expect and want of Australia in 2010, and to draw out from these perspectives the key issues shaping the nation's future, including the role of science and technology. It had two components: a series of eight scenario-development workshops involving a total of 150 young people, most

aged from 15–24 and from a variety of backgrounds; and a national opinion poll of 800 Australians in this age group.

The study shows that the future most young Australians want is neither the future they expect, nor the future they are promised under current national priorities. Most do not expect life in Australia to be better in 2010. They see a society driven by greed; they want one motivated by generosity. Their dreams for Australia are of a society that places less emphasis on the individual, material wealth and competition, and more on community and family, the environment and cooperation.

(As an aside, you might be surprised to learn this sort of work can offend political sensibilities when conducted close to government. The ASTEC study received national press and television coverage when I discussed the findings, with ASTEC's knowledge, at a youth conference in late 1995, ahead of the release of the study report. The coverage caused outrage at the highest levels of the bureaucracy and the Federal Government. The report, which had already been through some five drafts, was redrafted yet again and its release delayed until after the March 1996 Federal election. I subsequently learned, indirectly, that it was felt I had 'exceeded my brief'.)

The poll responses about the world in the twenty-first century reported above revealed the contrast between expected and promised futures at a global level. The gulf between promised and preferred futures at a national level emerged in the responses to another question which asked young people to nominate which of two positive scenarios for Australia for 2010 came closer to the type of society they both expected and preferred. The two scenarios were:

• A fast-paced, internationally competitive society, with the emphasis on the individual, wealth generation and enjoying the good life. Power has shifted to international organisations and business corporations. Technologically advanced, with the focus on

economic growth and efficiency and the development of new consumer products.

- A greener, more stable society, where the emphasis is on cooperation, community and family, more equal distribution of wealth and greater economic self-sufficiency. An international outlook, but strong national and local orientation and control. Technologically advanced, with the focus on building communities living in harmony with the environment, including greater use of alternative and renewable resources.

Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) said they expected the first, 'growth' scenario. However 81 per cent said they would prefer the second, 'green' scenario. About a third (35 per cent) expected the 'green' scenario, and 16 per cent preferred the 'growth' scenario.

The contradictions within young people's views of the future reflect a tension between the real and ideal, which, while nothing new, has arguably grown in recent decades. They are, in the main, adapting to the status quo, rather than challenging it (although this might now be changing, as I'll discuss later). Surveys suggest they appear to be adopting attitudes and values they believe are demanded by the world they live in and the future they expect—not those needed to achieve the world they want. We can draw an analogy with homeless youth. At one level, street kids can be described as savvy, self-reliant, resourceful, adapted to their world. Yet it is a world characterised by high levels of drug abuse, crime and violence, sexual exploitation, mental illness and suicide. What street kids want and need most of all are caring families and trusting relationships. No one would suggest theirs is an acceptable or happy situation.

This personal response to social realities and future prospects demonstrates how the three domains interact with each other. The growing disengagement by young people—and older—can be seen as a response to harsher circumstances in which people feel less control

over the forces shaping society, and so are determined to focus more on their own welfare. Yet this same response raises the prospects of the expectations becoming self-fulfilling as it, in turn, influences social outcomes and directions. Visions of the future do not have an external 'reality' independent of contemporary social conditions and cultural images. While many of the concerns people express about future war and conflict, social upheaval and environmental degradation are plausible as future realities, they also reflect perceptions of what is happening today.

The ASTEC study suggests that most young people see the future mainly in terms of a continuation or worsening of today's global and national problems and difficulties, although they also expect some improvements, even in problem areas. Major concerns included: pollution and environmental destruction, including the impact of growing populations; the gulf between rich and poor; high unemployment, including the effect of automation and immigration; conflict, crime and alienation; family problems and breakdown; discrimination and prejudice; and economic difficulties. In areas such as health and education, opinions were more equally divided between improvement and deterioration. In the preferred future, the problems have been overcome. There are a clean environment, global peace, social harmony and equity, jobs for all, happy families (although not necessarily traditional families), better education and health. Research in other developed nations presents a similar picture.

Thus, apart from reflecting legitimate concerns about the future, young people's fears for the future may also be a means of expressing their anxieties about the present. These anxieties may be ill-defined—especially when according to conventional measures of progress most of us are better off than ever before—but are nonetheless personal and deeply felt. By projecting these concerns into the future, they can be described in fictional, and more concrete, terms. A vague sense of unease about the direction the world is going and people's impotence

to change that course becomes, for many, visions of a world in which a growing gap between rich and poor has produced deeply divided and hostile communities; the arms race has resulted in nuclear warfare (still a concern after the end of the Cold War, and probably heightened by the events of September 11); ever-expanding industrialisation and populations have plundered the environment; or the development of technologies with powers beyond our comprehension has culminated in human obsolescence.

This translation is most obvious in the future visions of children, who often relate very personally to global threats and problems, and depict them in apocalyptic terms. I remember vividly one evening in 1989 when my elder daughter, then about to turn nine, mentioned to the family at dinner that the school principal had told her class that scientists believed the world would end in sixty years. After explaining that he was probably talking about global warming and that it did not mean the end of the world, I asked her what her reaction had been to what she'd heard. She replied: 'I thought: Oh no, I'll only be 69!' Others in the class had reacted similarly.

In 1992, a Canberra primary school published a collection of poetry and other works about the future by its 11–12-year-old pupils. *The Spinning Tree* was created under the guidance of a young writer-in-residence, Craig Dent. He had asked them to close their eyes and imagine the year 2020; their poems and ideas could be as weird and wonderful as they wanted them to be. Some visions are frivolous, light-hearted, bright, and some of the more serious still express hope. But fear of what the future holds for them is a common theme in the children's work. Dent said that what he found disturbing about the exercise was that the children wrote and worked on their own but a lot of their imagery was the same: 'What they're writing about is very apocalyptic. They're not sure about where they are going.' He hadn't really noticed this, he said. 'Around the school kids are kids—they're very happy.' But he thought the book would shock people when they

realised that this was what the kids thought. 'I think a lot of them are really afraid of what's going to happen to the Earth.'

Popular culture abets this process of projection. Science fiction fantasies such as *Blade Runner, Terminator* and *Matrix* may influence the *images* young people use in describing the future, but I doubt they are a major source of the concerns they express. Their fears are not remote and impersonal; they are related to their perceptions of life today, particularly perceptions about the values that presently dominate our way of life.

The coincidence of a sense of futurelessness among young people with a constellation of traits and attitudes that researchers have seen as its likely consequences makes the possibility of a causal link compelling. Young people are at a stage of development and socialisation—deciding who they are, what they believe and where they belong—that makes them vulnerable to a lack of a clear and appealing social vision. Rates of psychological and social problems among young people have risen in almost all developed nations over the past fifty years; however, any link between broad cultural issues such as global pessimism and the more extreme events like suicide is likely to be diffuse and indirect. Their effect is to alter the social context in a way that increases the risks for vulnerable individuals.

But anecdotal evidence for an association exists. Counsellors and psychoanalysts have told me their suicidal patients feel their lives lack meaning. Global conditions provide one important context for meaning in life. The father of a young man who killed himself said: 'My son was certain the world would end with a nuclear holocaust, and that it wasn't a good place to be in.' A woman whose son committed suicide said: 'He was upset by the Port Arthur shooting [where a young man shot dead over thirty people at a popular historic site in Tasmania]. He said to me, "everywhere you look, something terrible is happening".' American writer Ron Powers' analysis of the 'apocalyptic nihilism' behind teenage violence, mentioned in chapter 8, is

perhaps another example of an extreme, indirect (and infrequent) impact of perceptions that it is 'a late hour of the day and nothing much matters anymore'.

There are, however, three important qualifications of the belief that global pessimism is eroding young people's wellbeing. First, global pessimism is acting together, and perhaps synergistically, with other features of modern societies. These include, but go beyond, structural social realities. Pessimism is only one of several cultural traits of modern Western societies that are inimical to wellbeing, especially through their impact on values, meaning, belonging and identity. Secondly, any apparent causal relationship between future pessimism and diminished wellbeing can also operate in reverse. For example, depression affects people's view of the world and their place in it: the depressed typically look at themselves, the world and the future with bleakness. If levels of depression have increased in young people, as the evidence suggests, this would tend to produce more pessimistic future visions.

Thirdly, it is the more personal domains of life that most influence subjective wellbeing; and as we've seen, we do have the ability to 'buffer' ourselves against external realities and maintain a relatively high and stable level of life satisfaction. This psychological barrier is not, however, totally impermeable. It does not mean that what happens in the social and cultural spheres is unimportant at a personal level. It does mean that the relationship between the objective and subjective worlds is not linear: a change in one does not produce a corresponding change in the other. While people show remarkable resilience in adversity and while the personal realm affects wellbeing more than the global, perceptions of the future of the world and humanity could nevertheless have a significant impact on wellbeing. For example, research has shown that the ability to adapt, being able to set goals and progress towards them, having goals that do not conflict, and viewing the world as essentially benevolent and controllable are all

associated with wellbeing. Future visions would certainly affect (and reflect) the last, and may well bear on the other qualities, such as setting and attaining congruent goals.

When I first examined the impact of future visions on young people's wellbeing in my 1988 report *Casualties of Change*, most of the experts I spoke to—apart from the small group of psychologists who had researched the topic—discounted their importance. They emphasised the more personal circumstances and experiences. I think we are only beginning to grasp the extent to which the world has changed, and how much globalisation and the media have expanded our spheres of awareness and so the range of influences on our wellbeing. Australian psychologist Amanda Allan says our relationships with time and space have changed markedly. 'People are referencing themselves more and more in relation to global events, and social cultures beyond their immediate context.' In Western societies, she says, there has been 'a disembodying of what we consider to be our intimate frame of reference', resulting in a reorientation of who we are in relation to others.

So the visions we have of humanity's future involve complex and subtle relationships between expected future conditions, contemporary social realities and personal states of mind. Future visions can both reflect and reinforce social conditions and personal attributes. They can act on personal wellbeing directly, and indirectly through their social impacts.

There are two, quite different, perspectives on the future that comedian Woody Allen has nicely encapsulated. The first is: 'It is clear the future holds great opportunities. It also holds pitfalls. The trick is to avoid the pitfalls, seize the opportunities and get back home by six o'clock.' The other is: 'More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.'

The first perspective is pragmatic and personal, dealing with down-to-earth issues of getting ahead in life; the second is more philosophical and universal, grappling with the fundamental questions of meaning and destiny. Most public and political debate is firmly anchored in the former. In the case of education, for example, most discussion revolves around practical issues of structures, curriculums, budgets and technology—of how, for example, we best equip young people with the skills they need in the rapidly changing world of work. But we also need to examine education from the second perspective, and address issues that are broader, deeper and less tangible, that have to do with identity and purpose, values and visions.

Any consideration of education must take into account the whole person—his or her outlook on life, expectations of the future, and values and attitudes. These qualities will shape a person's approach to all aspects of life, including education, work, citizenship and personal relationships. If young people believe in themselves, not just as individuals but also in their ability to contribute to society, and have faith in the future, anything is possible. If they lack these qualities, as the evidence suggests many do, no amount of conventional policy adjustment will deliver the results we seek.

Yet we continue to neglect the significance of these psychological factors, while expending huge amounts of political energy in attempting to get the policy settings right. This emphasis on policy, and especially on the financial bottom line (whether for education or the nation), not only ignores questions of morale and inspiration, it can contribute to their erosion. The consequences of this oversight are serious enough even in terms of narrow goals like improving employability or economic competitiveness. They become even more costly in the context of the much greater task of building a more just and sustainable society.

What most encouraged those of us involved in the ASTEC youth futures study was the enthusiasm of most of the young people who

participated, and the idealism and altruism that shone through when they had the opportunity to discuss their preferred futures. Many of the students said they had enjoyed the experience; they clearly would like more of their schooling to be like this. They also valued the opportunity to think about the future in more than just personal terms. They said that thinking about preferred futures had made them more aware of the positive changes that could be made and their personal responsibility to contribute to these changes.

Education, like the mass media, often emphasises the negative. For all my environmentalist sympathies, I worry about teachers placing the burden of the world's problems on children as young as 5 or 6, an age when they are not equipped to understand or respond to them. We should instead be teaching them an appreciation of nature's beauty, humanity's rich diversity, and what makes a good life.

The results of the ASTEC study suggest, as does other research, that the education sector faces a tremendous challenge to help young people create and work towards a new vision and a different way of life that reflect more closely their dreams of a more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable society. More should and could be done in schools to encourage in young people a greater sense of optimism about the future, a conviction that the future is theirs to shape, and the faith in themselves needed to tackle this task. This surely should be a fundamental task of education today. If children lack these qualities, everything else in education—whether it is providing basic literacy and numeracy, instilling a love of learning or developing vocational and life skills—becomes devalued and harder to achieve; we cannot provide a compelling answer to the question 'For what?' except one based narrowly on self-interest. And, ultimately, this is not enough, for either individuals or society.

There is the scope to nurture these qualities, both outside and within the curriculum—in social and environmental studies, science and English, for example. This does not mean imposing on students a

particular worldview or set of values, but giving them the opportunities and guidance to establish their own. Given these, the evidence shows they will do the right thing. The task presents a great opportunity to give teachers and educators a stronger sense of vocation and a clearer focus. Without a vivid and vital context within which to operate, education cannot fulfil its highest purpose; it becomes merely instrumental and utilitarian, serving narrowly defined objectives. The fundamental task of education today is not just to prepare students for the future, but to equip them to create a future they want to live in.

While the future is an outcome of past and present choices and events, it is also an entry point for creating meaning, identity, belonging and other qualities essential to healthy societies and healthy people. Visions of a better world can guide social action and provide personal inspiration and hope. They can help to ensure that the relationships between the domains of future expectations, social realities and personal wellbeing constitute a virtuous cycle, not a vicious one.

11>   tales of the future: human obsolescence or transformation?

To understand what we must do in the present, we must look into the future—not to try to predict it, but to explore the alternatives available to us. Our future is extraordinarily open; almost anything is possible, from human extinction to human transcendence. This openness is what I want to consider in this chapter—superhumans, conscious machines, alien civilisations, genetic timebombs. These things might seem to belong in the realm of science fiction, but I have a serious purpose in mentioning them. They expose the fallacy of thinking about the future as simply an extrapolation of past trends. And yet there is little recognition of this in the current public debate about the society and world we are creating. As I argued at the outset, our decision-making is dominated by linear optimism—the belief that by continuing on our current path (human) life will keep getting better.

I'll begin with two tales of the future: stories of imminent 'spikes', or radical discontinuities, in the story line of humankind. (As it happens, they both display an intriguing interplay of science and religion in shaping human destiny, a theme I'll take up in the next chapter.) At an international futures conference in Perth in 2000, Damien Broderick, an Australian science fiction and science writer,

described a view of the future drawn from his book, *The Spike*. Developments in computer, gene and nano (molecular) technologies, he says, will produce by 2030, or 2050 at the latest, a 'spike' or 'technological singularity': a period of change of such speed and scale that the future is rendered opaque and things become unknowable. The spike could end in human obsolescence, transformation or transcendence. It could mean, as computing power continues to obey Moore's Law and double every year, the rapid emergence of not only intelligent machines but superintelligent, conscious machines, which leave humanity in their evolutionary wake. Or it could result in bionically and genetically enhanced superbeings who are effectively immortal.

Broderick has an optimistic view of this spike, essentially arguing that things are likely to turn out for the best because there will be neither a reason nor the means to harness the new technologies to exploit and oppress. At the same time, as he admitted in an email exchange after the conference, it was not clear that there would be 'any path at all for us mere humans on the far side of the Spike's looming wall'. (British cosmologist Martin Rees is rather less sanguine, arguing in *Our Final Century* that these same technologies—and other novel scientific risks—threaten to wreak chaos and catastrophe on Earth and that there is a chance humanity will not survive the twenty-first century.)

Providing a counterpoint to Broderick's spike of runaway technology is another: the population spike of a plague species—we humans—as it grows exponentially then collapses, overshooting the capacity of its habitat to support it. And this within about the same timeframe as the technological spike, or a little later. Australian writer Reg Morrison argues in *Plague Species* that this is the certain fate of humanity. He says evolution ensures this outcome for any species that threatens to become too dominant and reduce the Earth's biological diversity. With many more decades of population growth (despite

declining birth rates), and the increasing rate of energy and resource consumption, Morrison says, we seem to be well set up for 'an environmental *coup de grâce*' in the second half of the twenty-first century. '...[W]e are facing precisely the same conclusion that all mammal plagues eventually face—a hormonally orchestrated autodecline followed by an environmental backlash that cleans up most of the stragglers.'

Both spikes have an intriguing theological or religious dimension. With Broderick's spike, it could be worship of the event itself. While he insists that religion is the wrong interpretative filter to place over the singularity, 'the iconographies of a millennium of richly embroidered sacred art do yield a suitable set of metaphors for the strictly unimaginable', he says. Or it might be in the form of stellar intelligences and cosmic-scale engineering—of other powers in the cosmos, even now, 'who have passed through the veil of the Spike', their physics being 'to ours as ours is to Aristotle's, or an ant's'.

Morrison's spike has theology at its very core. He argues that our genes have bequeathed us a self-destruct mechanism: our spirituality. The tendency to spiritualise or mysticise our existence, he says, has been crucial to our success as a species, but will be lethal in the long run. 'Our genetically derived delusions', without which we would never have come so far, will ensure we will never—can never—behave rationally enough to achieve sustainable planetary dominance, and so are destined to suffer the fate of all plagues. 'Only our obsessive yearning for significance, spirituality, and the supernatural,' Morrison says, 'could have blinded us to the dangers of overpopulation and environmental degradation and prevented us from taking sufficient precautions to avoid it.' He told me he is in the curious position where, for his thesis to be true, it must be generally disbelieved.

There is a fascinating symmetry to these spikes, both foreseen as the result of exponential growth—one in technological power, the other in human numbers—both occurring at about the same time in

history. Maybe we will see the evolution of a new level or form of intelligence and consciousness just as its progenitor—*Homo sapiens*—reaches its zenith, and burns out: a metaphorical spaceship jettisoning its booster rockets, which fall back to Earth, as it sets out into the vastness of the universe. Outer space did, in fact, come to mind when I began to wonder how we might respond to either or both of these imminent spikes, each of which has the most profound implications for human civilisation. I was reminded of a scientific workshop in Sydney in 1994 at which I was asked to give a paper on the social implications of SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. At the time, the CSIRO radio telescope at Parkes, NSW, was about to play a big part in a new phase of the search, a long-running US-funded project. (My children were all sure intelligent life existed elsewhere in the universe; asked why, my younger daughter replied: 'Well, I never win the lottery.')

The literature on SETI reveals a fascinating array of possibilities about contact with an extraterrestrial intelligence. Human responses could range across a wide spectrum, from irrationally positive ('pronoia') through indifference to irrationally negative ('paranoia'), depending on a host of factors including education, religion, gender, ethnicity, and whether the emotional context of a culture at the time of discovery is optimistic and excited, or pessimistic and anxious. Reflecting this spectrum of possibilities, commentators tend to fall into two camps: 'millenarians', who believe profound good is likely to come of the discovery; and 'catastrophists', who argue the opposite.

Some warn of terrible dangers, especially if discovery were to lead to communication with another civilisation. Contact with a superior intelligence could demoralise us, jeopardising the dignity, worth and meaning of humanity. It might even expose us to the risk of invasion and colonisation, including the possibility of an extraterrestrial 'Trojan Horse' arriving on radio waves. Others believe that as any civilisation we detect is very likely to be much older and more advanced than ours,

there is no limit to what we might learn about ourselves, life and the universe. Contact with such a civilisation could help us to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of our own development, such as the threats of mass annihilation and global environmental destruction. It could show us new ways of social organisation, elevate us spiritually or link us into a chain of rich cultures, 'a vast galactic network'.

I suggested at the time that there were three possible ways in which the discovery of extraterrestrial intelligence might impact on global civilisation: it could inject a new source of instability into what was already a very volatile situation; it might have very little impact, overwhelmed by the turmoil created by other more obvious, more powerful cultural forces at work in the world; or it could be a significant, perhaps decisive, factor in the emergence of a new global human culture. I also argued the key issue was not one of trying to *discover* the cultural meaning of such an event, but rather one of what meaning we might *create* out of it.

The SETI literature suggested that reactions to a discovery were more likely to be negative if it occurred during times of stress and anxiety, which ours certainly are. However, my own feeling was that the discovery might not make things worse, except under one possible scenario: the continuing rise of religious fundamentalism. The literature notes that members of fundamental Christian groups are more likely to reject the notion of extraterrestrial intelligence, seeing it as a threat to their beliefs. There is a risk, then, that the discovery of other intelligent worlds could fuel the flames of fundamentalist passions. On the other hand, I also thought there was a real chance that the discovery of non-human civilisations—just the event, regardless of what we find out about them or whether we make contact with them—could help to tilt the cultural balance in favour of the third response.

We are, and will be for some time, struggling to establish a new framework of beliefs to define who we are and how we should live. SETI, if it confronts us with the reality of other intelligent worlds,

could reinforce our common humanity, our primary allegiance to the species and the planet. I recalled when travelling through the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s being struck by the ever-present reminder of the fascist threat—as if World War II had only just ended. The Soviet Union used this vague threat—the enemy was not named—to help it to unite a vast territory of different ethnic, religious and racial groups. When that threat could not be sustained, and plagued by economic and environmental problems, the union fell apart.

To have a similar binding effect on human civilisation, the existence of an alien intelligence need not be seen as threatening. It may be enough that it provides us with a clear 'other', a new 'them' to allow us to redefine 'us', a new frame of reference for thinking about ourselves. This global perspective is already very much part of SETI, as is clear from the principles that have been proposed for considering whether we should reply to any signal we detect: that any decision to respond should be made by an appropriate international body, representative of humankind; that a response should be on behalf of all humankind; and that the content of the reply should reflect an international consensus. But I stressed this redefinition might have to be deliberately constructed, engineered; it might not happen automatically.

But to come back to the 'spikes', and reflecting my thinking about SETI, there could be at least three, very different, possible human reactions to a 'technological singularity' or an 'environmental *coup de grâce*':

- *Surrender and abdication*: the scale and speed of change are so great that people will give up any hope of trying to manage or direct it. The sheer impotence of governments or any other human institutions in the face of such change will totally undermine our already weakened faith in them, leading to further political disengagement and an even greater focus on individual goals, especially hedonistic ones—precipitating a period of chaotic change.

- *A fundamentalist backlash*: the technological 'fundamentalism' that the singularity represents triggers a desperate response by religious (or national) fundamentalists, to whom it is deeply offensive, and who use every means at hand to oppose it—including potent technologies of biological or nuclear terrorism. A population crash could also see a fundamentalist revival, but for a different reason: the perception that this is the act of a vengeful God.

- *A new universalism*: a more benign outcome is that the spikes—one or other or both, because of the global threat or challenge they pose—help to drive the emergence of a new universal culture, a new sense of human solidarity and destiny, and a resurgent spirituality. Set against the momentousness of these events, all differences between us become petty, our present priorities trivial; only the most important aspects of our situation matter.

Both Broderick's spike and Morrison's are highly deterministic—one technologically, the other biologically: there is a strong element of inevitability about them, which I'd challenge. I also feel, as the last response indicates, that spirituality is crucial to meeting the challenge of the spikes. Nevertheless, the 'technological singularity' and 'plague species' scenarios, and how we might respond, contain several important lessons for us. The spikes are real possibilities; they are not events in the far distant future, but within our lifetime or that of our children. Even if we regard them as too extreme and therefore improbable, they can serve as metaphors for contemporary social, technological and environmental trends, as stories that compel us to fix our gaze on much larger visions of the future. We can, for example, already see elements of all three responses in our reactions to recent global events—terrorism and the war against it being the most dramatic examples.

Futurists use a range of techniques in creating scenarios of possible and plausible futures. One is to express key variables or uncertainties as

dichotomies or polarities, and to construct scenarios around these. Two such contrasting scenarios occurred to me when, on a family holiday to Queensland, we spent a day at Dreamworld and, about a week later, walked along a bush road to visit Chenrezig, a Buddhist retreat in the hills inland from the Sunshine Coast. I labelled the scenarios 'cheap thrills' and 'inner harmony'(they mirror, to some extent, the first and third responses to the historical spikes described above).

Dreamworld—like all such places, casinos and huge retail/leisure centres included—is a good metaphor for the current preoccupations of modern Western societies: the quest for ever more forms of consumption that offer pleasure, fun, excitement. (Although something I've long wanted to do, I found the Dreamworld visit strangely disappointing, the thrill of even the most extreme rides momentary, lasting barely longer than the ride itself.) Chenrezig—with its sign requesting no drugs, sex or killing (of anything), its tranquillity, and the Buddhist recognition that suffering is rooted in unceasing desire—is about something entirely different: developing a whole new (from a modern Western perspective) awareness of ourselves and our relationship with nature.

'Cheap thrills' and 'inner harmony' reflect a central theme of this book: the growing and conflicting trends in modern life that are producing an increasing tension between our professed values—a desire for simpler, less materialistic, less fraught lives—and our lived lifestyle—one encouraged, even imposed, by our consumer economy and culture. 'Cheap thrills' does nothing to address the challenges the two spikes illustrate. In fact, its appeal lies in allowing us to avoid such issues, in celebrating the power of technology to distract and amuse. 'Inner harmony', on the other hand, reflects an emerging global consciousness, environmental sensitivity and spiritual awareness—a transformation of the dominant ethos of industrialised nations in recent centuries. The structures of modern societies, especially politics, commerce and industry, are still driven by the old ethos. In the spaces

between these structures, at deeper levels of our individual and collective psyche, the new is emerging. We need to acknowledge this, to recognise in our social and political analysis and commentary the importance of richer philosophical, historical and scientific insights.

Whether a technological singularity represents one more 'genetically derived delusion' that will prevent us from escaping the fate of all plague species, as Morrison would argue, or whether it will allow us to break free of our evolutionary origins and ecological limits, as Broderick suggests, only time will tell. But both stories warn us of the need to think more deeply about our situation and our destiny. Until this happens, our politics will become increasingly irrelevant to what is most important to us—just another source of distraction.

In ordinary times, it is perhaps normal for different planes of perception and understanding of the human condition to remain relatively separate and distinct, with little 'friction', or influence, occurring between them. In transitional epochs, when what it is to be human is undergoing profound evaluation and radical alteration, these planes of perception need to come together in a single, interwoven, public conversation. Ours is such a time.

12> postmodern science, faith and morality

I sometimes think that the appeal of postmodernism to many people, myself included, is that it relieves us of the effort of trying to make sense of a world that no longer seems to make sense. The postmodern world offers an abundance of promises, perils and paradoxes. This is apparent, for example, in science and religion and the relationship between them. We live in a time when astonishing scientific and technological advances coexist with resurgent religious fundamentalism. Through the new media and communication technologies, the modern materialistic world is penetrating the most remote and traditional communities, while old-time religion and talk of God and the Bible are flourishing in the richest, most powerful and technologically sophisticated society in the world, the United States. How these issues develop in the coming decades will profoundly shape our future; depending on how the challenges of postmodernity are played out, we could see, in the next century, either the decline or liberation of science and, in a different sense, of faith.

Science and technology are among the key instruments of the modernist dream of creating a perfect social order. As Australian sociologist Anthony Elliott puts it, 'Science, bureaucracy and technological

expertise serve in the modern era as an orientating framework for the cultural ordering of meaning.' This changes in a postmodern world; the vision of the Enlightenment has faded. 'The grand narratives that unified and structured Western science and philosophy…no longer appear convincing or even plausible.' From a postmodern perspective, he says, 'knowledge is constructed, not discovered; it is contextual, not foundational'.

Elliott argues that knowledge generated by experts and institutions is no longer equated with increasing mastery and control of the social order. In fact, he says, the advance of modernisation is increasingly equated with the production of risks, hazards and insecurities on an unprecedented global scale. 'Put more accurately, technological knowledge and control of the social world today are as much about managing socially produced risks and dangers which are worldwide in their consequences as about unbounded mastery in the service of political domination.'

So we can see that there are two aspects to the postmodernist critique of science. One—that it is a doubled-edged sword, a mixed blessing—is incontestable, and doesn't need elaboration. This applies to specific products of science (technologies) such as nuclear energy, pesticides or genetic modification, and also more broadly to the whole relationship between science and material progress.

The other charge—of epistemic relativism, the idea that scientific knowledge is culturally adulterated—is more contentious, at least among scientists. I don't entirely agree with the assertion. Scientific knowledge does transcend its cultural context; science does 'advance' in a way that is, I think, unique. But scientific knowledge is never the whole truth or an absolute, immutable truth. And what science is done, and how its results are applied, are powerfully determined by its cultural context. Given that we choose into which corner of the dark cavern of the unknown we shine the light of scientific inquiry, and given that we will never light up everything, then we do need to

acknowledge the degree to which what we see depends on what influences our choice of where to look and what to look for—that is, on who we are and what we believe. This degree of cultural construction depends on the science: smaller in the case of the physical sciences, larger in the social; lesser in pure science than in applied.

There is another factor that could compound the effect of postmodern thinking on science: the possibility that science may have to confront its own intrinsic limitations.

Science writer John Horgan has argued that we must accept the possibility that the great era of scientific discovery is already over. It is important to stress he is not referring to applied science, which still has an abundance of problems to solve—or to technological innovation—but what he calls 'science at its purest and grandest, the primordial human quest to understand the universe and our place in it'.

Horgan develops an idea propounded by Gunther Stent in *The Coming of the Golden Age: A View of the End of Progress*, published over thirty years ago. Stent argued that if there were any limits to science, any barriers to further progress, then science might well be moving at unprecedented speed just before it crashed into them. When science seemed most muscular, triumphant, potent, that might be when it was nearest death, Stent said. 'Indeed, the dizzy rate at which progress is now proceeding makes it seem very likely that progress must come to a stop soon, perhaps in our lifetime, perhaps in a generation or two.'

Horgan implies three different reasons for this view. One is that all the major discoveries—or should we call them 'constructions'?—might have been already made: 'Now that science has given us its Darwin, its Einstein, its Watson and Crick,' he says, 'the prospect arises that further research will yield no more great revelations or revolutions but only incremental, diminishing returns.' (He discusses, but dismisses, the common belief that scientists thought this about physics in the late nineteenth century.) Another reason is that even seemingly

open-ended sciences like physics inevitably confront physical, financial and even cognitive limits; modern physics, for example, is becoming increasingly difficult for anyone, even physicists, to comprehend. A third factor is the intrinsically indeterministic nature of many natural phenomena—that is, they are unpredictable and apparently random—making them resistant to scientific analysis. The work emerging from chaos and complexity theories demonstrates that science, when pushed too far, culminates in incoherence, Horgan says.

So science is being assailed by two forces: the first, postmodernism and its challenge to science's social and intellectual authority; the second, science's own 'limits to growth'. What will be the consequences?

While technological innovation will continue apace, science will cease to be the defining and dominant feature of our society. It will co-exist, often uncomfortably, with irrationalism, superstition and other belief and knowledge systems. In losing its ideological dominance as the source of progress, science is losing its own internal coherence, and the philosophy and culture that have held it together. While good science will remain rigorous and empirical, this will be more a question of professional ethics and sheer pragmatism—this science delivers the best results—than the sort of ideal represented by American sociologist Robert Merton's four norms of science: universalism, communism (public ownership), disinterestedness and organised scepticism.

Like everything else, science is fragmenting. Much more openly and unequivocally than in the past, science today serves different masters and different purposes. Its culture and norms become those of its users. Thus it is increasingly meaningless to talk about a single form of scientific progress, or about attitudes to science in any generic sense. Public opinion about science depends on which public and which science. The epigraph on the US National Academy of Sciences building in Washington—To science, pilot of industry, conqueror of disease, multiplier of harvest, explorer of the universe, revealer of

nature's laws, eternal guide to truth—becomes a quaint anachronism in the postmodern world.

   This is already apparent from surveys of how people perceive science and technology. Their perceptions are marked by ambivalence, ambiguity and contradiction at every level, from the mundane to the metaphysical. There is a celebration of the convenience, pleasures and other benefits new technologies offer, and concern over our growing dependence on them and their ever-deepening penetration of our lives. But there is also discernment. Take the 1995 youth futures study discussed in chapter 10: a key finding was the extent to which views on science and technology were embedded in a wider social context. The role young people saw for science and technology differed markedly between their expected and preferred futures. Young people were not so much *against* science and technology; they acknowledged their importance in achieving a preferred future. But they were astute enough to realise science and technology were tools, and their impacts depended on who controlled them and whose interests they served. They *expected* to see new technologies used to further entrench and concentrate wealth, power and privilege. They *wanted* to see new technologies used to help create closer-knit communities of people living a sustainable lifestyle. For example, young Australians were asked in one poll question to agree or disagree with nine specific statements about science and technology. The responses showed that:

- Young people believed science and technology offered the best hope for meeting the challenges ahead (69 per cent), but also that they were alienating and isolating people from each other and from nature (53 per cent).

- They believed that computers and robots were taking over jobs and increasing unemployment (58 per cent), and a significant minority (35 per cent) thought that they would eventually take over the world.

- They were more likely to think that governments would use new technologies to watch and regulate people more (78 per cent) than to believe that new technologies would strengthen democracy and empower people (43 per cent).

- They expected science to conquer new diseases (87 per cent), but not to find ways of feeding the growing world population (39 per cent), or to solve environmental problems without the need to change lifestyles (45 per cent).

One possible consequence of postmodernity is that science will become a greatly diminished cultural influence in our lives and in national affairs (even while we continue to embrace its products). For example, Horgan sees the limitations of science contributing to a growing reluctance by the public to support science, and even to the rise of anti-scientific sentiments. He notes that Oswald Spengler foresaw the disillusionment with science in *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918: Spengler predicted that the demise of science and the resurgence of irrationality would begin at the end of the millennium. As scientists became more arrogant and less tolerant of other belief systems, notably religions, he believed society would rebel against science and embrace religious fundamentalism and other irrational systems of belief.

There are signs that this might be happening—although public sentiment has not so much swung against science and technology as shifted towards superstition and fundamentalism. For example, Americans view science and technology as the engines of the past century's economic prosperity and the main reasons for the improvements in their way of life, and are optimistic about further gains in the next century. Yet they also express misgivings about the way their country has changed culturally and spiritually. Asked in a recent poll what was more important, encouraging a belief in God or encouraging a modern scientific outlook, 78 per cent of Americans chose 'a belief in God', and only 15 per cent 'a modern scientific outlook'. Over a third

(36 per cent) believed the Bible was the actual word of God, to be taken literally word for word, while almost half (48 per cent) believed it was the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally. Only 14 per cent regarded the Bible as an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man.

But there are also other possibilities. In the early 1990s, I wrote in essays for the Australian Commission for the Future and the *Futurist* magazine that science could play a crucial role in achieving the sort of cultural or values shift necessary to address twenty-first-century challenges. Having helped to inspire an overemphasis on the individual and the material, science is now leading us back to a worldview that pays closer attention to the communal and the spiritual by revealing the extent of our interrelationship and interdependence with the world around us. But in effecting change, science must itself be changed. While remaining rigorous, science must become intellectually less arrogant, culturally better integrated and politically more influential. Science must become more tolerant of other forms of reality, other ways of seeing the world. It must become less remote from public culture, with a steadier and readier flow of influence between the two—in both directions. And it must contribute more to setting political agendas.

I didn't realise then how postmodern this perspective was. It represents perhaps the best outcome for postmodern science. And there are signs that this is happening. It is from this perspective that postmodernism can liberate science. By acknowledging that science is not a dispassionate, value-free search for objective knowledge about nature and society, that it is imbued with the subjective and conditioned by its social and cultural environment, science becomes more pluralistic and flexible.

Science can break free of a narrow, limited view of its role—particularly by governments, which see the prime objective of science policy as harnessing scientific research and education ever more closely to the tasks of economic production—and openly associate itself with

other social goals. Science and scientists have, after all, been the driving force behind the modern environmental movement. We could see the growth of a 'transformational science' (or what others call 'post-normal science' or 'sustainability science'), a highly interdisciplinary style of research that would draw its inspiration, its coherence, from a shared ideal: using science to achieve a transition from a society defined by economic growth and a rising material standard of living, to one that offers a high and lasting quality of life. While the research would continue to be directed towards practical outcomes, it would be defined and guided by this transformational vision of sustainable development.

Aldous Huxley once said that if he had rewritten *Brave New World*—with its vision of a scientifically controlled society in which babies were grown in bottles, free will was abolished by methodical conditioning, strong passions were discouraged because they interfered with the people's economic duty to consume, and regular doses of chemically induced happiness made servitude tolerable—he would have included a sane alternative, a society in which 'science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they had been made for man, not (as at present and still more so in the Brave New World) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them'.

The current dominant view of science as an economic (and military) tool is such an impoverished vision. Science has much, much more to offer humanity than that.

Back in the 1970s, when I was a young man travelling abroad, I spent some time living in a cave on a remote part of the south coast of Crete. It was there, alone, watching the full moon rise over the sea one night, that I had my most intense spiritual experience. It was something I find almost impossible to put into words. There was nothing 'romantic' about the moment. I felt as if some force or power had penetrated to the core of my being, a part of me that seemed to go back in time forever, and to be connected with everything else. I was filled with awe and reverence.

Now you might be inclined to dismiss the experience as some kind of 'hippie trip' or drug-induced trance. But it was one of several occasions during my travels that convinced me of a spiritual reality and its importance to our psyche and our health and wellbeing. I understood instantly why my ancestors had worshipped the moon, so eerily powerful in a vast, otherwise unlit landscape. But for me, the rising moon was the trigger, not the source, of my transfixion. I have no doubt that if I'd come from a religious background, I would say that I had 'felt the presence of God'. But my background is science, so I think of the experience as the tapping of a 'genetic memory' of my evolution, of everything that had ever come before me.

The mystery of my experience, and the difficulty of articulating it, is well understood. I remember the Catholic theologian Tony Kelly saying in a television program that God is beyond images and beyond thought. 'Thomas Aquinas said that we know God best when we come to the point of knowing that we don't know him.' A Sanskrit text, the *Upanishad*, says of Brahman (the ultimate reality, or Self, from which the world was created): 'Brahman is unknown to those who know it and is known to those who do not know it at all.' Australian biologist and theologian Charles Birch emphasises the 'relational' nature of God. God, he says, 'is internally related to all that is'. 'God is to the world as self is to the body.' As I understand this, he is saying our relationship to God is personal, but it is an internal relationship, not a relationship to something or someone else.

I think of spirituality as a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or connectedness to the world and the universe in which we live. Religions are social institutions built up around a particular spiritual metaphor, or set of metaphors, for this relationship (just as my use of the term 'genetic memory' is metaphorical). After my stint as a Cretan troglodyte, I travelled back to Australia through Asia, where I got to talk to quite a few disciples or devotees of various gurus and cults. I could see they were all speaking of the same ultimate truth, but using

different stories or metaphors. Yet they usually couldn't see this; they tended to believe their faith was the one true path to enlightenment, and everyone else was just 'on a trip'. Religions may be socially necessary and desirable to obtain the greatest social and personal benefits from a sense of the spiritual—meaning, fulfilment, virtue. I don't feel my own spirituality is particularly adequate or developed. However, religions can be made so rigid and sclerotic by institutional inertia, and by layers of bureaucracy, politics and corruption, that their spiritual core withers. When this happens, they become self-serving institutions lacking any higher purpose; worse, they can become potent ideologies of oppression and abuse.

Science also uses metaphors to describe the world. These days, cosmology is full of terms like black holes, worm holes, quantum foam. We are learning that science and religion use different metaphors to describe the same world, or different dimensions of the same world. Some metaphors, such as Gaia, the notion of the Earth as a single, self-regulating living system or organism, can even be both scientific and religious. Recognising the metaphorical basis of scientific and religious concepts helps us to reconcile the two, although any compatibility of science and religion does depend on which scientific or religious world-view we hold.

Here are two scientific descriptions of the world, which represent the extremes of the modern scientific worldview. According to one, we are doing what all species have ever done: to do as well as possible, to sequester for ourselves as much of the Earth's resources as we possibly can. According to the other, we are part of an awesome evolutionary pattern that has seen, in the space of some twelve billion years, the emergence of a universe that can wonder and marvel at itself. The first comes from British biologist and writer Richard Dawkins, the second from Australian physicist and writer Paul Davies:

> In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other

people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

The true miracle of nature is to be found in the ingenious and unswerving lawfulness of the cosmos, a lawfulness that permits complex order to emerge from chaos, life to emerge from inanimate matter, and consciousness to emerge from life…[T]he universe [is] a coherent, rational, elegant and harmonious expression of a deep and purposeful meaning.

Western culture has been deeply influenced by the old, Newtonian model of a dead, mechanical, clockwork universe. It has yet to absorb the significance of the new model, one of a dynamic cosmic network of forces and fields, of an 'undivided, flowing wholeness'—to use physicist David Bohm's words—that is far more compatible with a spiritual sense of connectedness to the universe. The American physicist and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg has argued that life as we know it would be impossible if any one of several physical quantities had slightly different values. For example, the vacuum energy or cosmological constant appears to need to be fine-tuned to an accuracy of about 120 decimal places for life to exist in the universe. Weinberg acknowledges that opinions differ on the degree of this fine-tuning. He also says this does not necessarily mean that 'life or consciousness plays any special role in the fundamental laws of nature'. Still, it raises an intriguing question: is this the razor's edge of probability, or exquisite precision engineering?

This acknowledgment of the unity underlying the complexity, of the interconnectedness of all things, is also emerging from other sciences, notably ecology but also to some extent from social sciences such as sociology. So spirituality is the intuitive sense of what science

seeks to explain rationally. For me, the significance of all this is not that there is some Divine Purpose or Supreme Being somewhere 'out there' that gives meaning to life. Rather this understanding, or awareness, of our relationship with the cosmos fosters a sense of deeper purpose, or meaning, within ourselves. As the British philosopher and theologian Don Cupitt says: 'God is not a being but a spiritual ideal, an imaginary focus for the religious life…a symbol of the meaning of religion.' David Tacey, in *The Spirituality Revolution*, says that while the God of old-style religion is remote, detached, interventionist and supernatural, the God of the new spirituality is intimate, intense and immanent (all-pervasive), 'revealed to all and everyone who cares to look, listen and feel deeply enough'.

We can find meaning at a variety of levels. At the most fundamental, transcendent level, there is spiritual meaning: a sense of having a place in the universe. There is also the level of identity with a nation or ethnic group, and with a community. Closer to our personal lives, there are things like our work, families and friends, interests and desires. Many people today find meaning in the pursuit of personal goals. But spirituality offers something more. It represents the broadest and deepest form of connectedness. It is the most subtle, and therefore easily corrupted, yet perhaps also the most powerful. It is the only form of meaning that transcends our personal circumstances, social situation and the material world, and so can sustain us through the trouble and strife of mortal existence.

History suggests a measure of both balance and stability in meaning in life is crucial to personal wellbeing and social cohesion. A lack of meaning beyond the personal increases our vulnerability; too much meaning is attached to things that are fragile, transient or ephemeral: our looks, careers, sex lives, romantic relationships, personal development, health and fitness, even our children (when we burden them with our own expectations and dreams). Disappointment and failure become more likely. But the imbalance can also be in the

other direction, where the desperate search for meaning and belonging ends in the total subjugation of the self—in, for example, religious or national fanaticism. We are seeing this happen today in both the East and the West. Even short of this extreme, religion is no panacea. Americans stand out from the people of other developed nations in the strength of their religious belief and observance. Yet the United States compares poorly on many social indicators, including life expectancy, crime, poverty and inequality. (This may be because, as the writer Susan Sontag said in a recent speech, religion American-style is 'more the idea of religion than religion itself'.)

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz said: 'Whatever else religion does, it relates a view of the ultimate nature of reality to a set of ideas of how man is well-advised…to live.' It has often been said that science, while also offering a view of 'the ultimate nature of reality' lacks the moral dimension. Yet research in a wide range of disciplines—from psychology and physiology, epidemiology and sociology, to ecology and cosmology—does provide guidance on how we ought to live, guidance of a kind that is compatible and consistent with religious teaching. But in both realms—the scientific and the spiritual—we are operating at the very limits of our capacity to comprehend 'the grand scheme of things'. In a recent article on the scientific and theological worldviews, the American physicist Freeman Dyson says he is 'a practising Christian, not a believing Christian'. 'To me, to worship God means to recognise that mind and intelligence are woven into the fabric of our universe in a way that altogether surpasses our comprehension.'

At this conceptual level, our view is highly subjective, we can only express ourselves in metaphors; the moral lessons can only be human interpretations, not laws of science or of God. A sense of the spiritual encourages a moral life; it does not set moral rules. The essence of religion is well expressed in a quotation from the Jewish prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, which someone emailed to me, saying he had read it on the

same day that he had read a newspaper article on which this chapter partly draws:

> Religion is not merely a belief in an ultimate reality or in an ultimate ideal…Religion is a momentous possibility, the possibility namely that what is highest in spirit is also deepest in nature—that there is something at the heart of nature, something akin to us, a conserver and increaser of values…that the things that matter most are not at the mercy of the things that matter least.

Science has driven home to us what philosopher Jonathan Rée, drawing on Søren Kierkegaard's notion of 'incommensurability', describes as 'the immense disproportion between our puny individual existences and the vastness of the natural and historical worlds in which they fleetingly take place'. That our lives and the lives of those close to us are matters of utter indifference to the universe becomes particularly important when calamity strikes us. As Rée points out, it is religion that has supplied almost all the concepts, stories and images that help us to deal with this. 'Religions have created prayers and liturgies and buildings and open spaces that may help us see our griefs and perplexities in their indissoluble individuality, but without forgetting their continuities with those of other people and other generations.'

Religion faces a growing tension that will bear mightily on its future: a tension between developing new, or renewed, 'transformational' religions and retreating to old, fundamentalist faiths. The former would use metaphysical metaphors and practices attuned to our times and our modern, scientific understanding of the world; the latter offer rock-solid certainties in a time when these can be enormously destructive. I don't mean, in talking about this tension, to sideline current mainstream faiths, but rather to suggest they will be caught up in it, and could be profoundly shaped by it. The danger with fundamentalism is that it mistakes the religious 'metaphor' for the spiritual 'truth', and so

cedes too much power to those who claim to speak on God's behalf. On the other hand, more 'modern' concepts of God, while philosophically compelling, may be too abstract to meet the human yearning for spiritual comfort and moral authority. Still, this path seems to me to offer the best prospects of a better future—harder, undoubtedly, but more likely in the long run to lead to a peaceful, equitable and sustainable world. Science has a role in encouraging us to take this path.

The new religions would transcend, rather than confront, the powerful individualising and fragmenting forces of postmodernity. One of the most exciting ideas to emerge from recent postmodern scholarship is that we have the opportunity, however small, of becoming truly moral beings, perhaps for the first time in history. That is, we have, each of us, the opportunity to exercise genuine moral choice and to take responsibility for the consequences of those choices, rather than accepting moral edicts based on some grand universal creed and handed down from on high by its apostles. British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes: 'The denizens of the postmodern era are, so to speak, forced to stand face-to-face with their moral autonomy, and so also with their moral responsibility. This is the cause of moral agony. This is also the chance the moral selves never confronted before.' This seems close to what theologians call the doctrine of 'primacy of conscience'. It presents us with an immense challenge, and it may well be asking too much of us. But the ideal is there, if often hidden, in both religious teaching and science.

It fascinates me that argument and evidence for a new moral autonomy are also coming from other quarters. More writers are talking about the need for responsible individualism, or what British writer Charles Handy has called 'proper selfishness'. American social scientist Alan Wolfe, in *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice*, describes an unprecedented change that has swept America since the 1960s: people have begun to make moral decisions based on their own needs, rather than deferring to traditional religious and

government sources of authority. In a national poll of attitudes to money, sex, work, morality and God, and in-depth interviews with 25 people from eight diverse communities, Wolfe found that his respondents were generally morally moderate: although most no longer accepted traditional ideas about vice and virtue, they also avoided libertine lifestyles. People want to live a good life but insist on deciding for themselves what a good life is.

Denis Kenny, an Australian moral philosopher, says all moral orientations and theories spring from one or other cosmology, or conception of the universe. When the cosmology of a society changes so does its morality. But shards of older moral traditions can persist, even for centuries. Over more than 100,000 years of human history, he says, we have (from a Western perspective) inhabited four quite different universes:

- *The enchanted universe*: a world alive with forces, powers and influences, often personified as gods, which toyed with people's lives; it lives on in New Age beliefs.

- *The sacred universe*: the universe of Christianity, a world created by God; 'The first comprehensive, fully integrated theory of everything in human experience.'

- *The mechanical universe*: the universe of Newtonian physics; a world that runs like clockwork according to a set of physical laws.

- *The organic universe*: the universe of Einstein, relativity and quantum physics; a cosmic dance of energy in which the distinction between the material and spiritual no longer make much sense; 'The first universally valid and scientifically based cosmology in the history of human consciousness and culture.'

Now we are on the threshold of a fifth cosmology, Kenny says: *the creative universe*, the universe as a self-organising and creative process;

'the human species is given the opportunity to take full control of our future'. Rather than searching for meaning, we will create it by taking responsibility for the design of our personal, social and planetary future. In this design, there is no fixed point to satisfy our longing for ultimate foundations, he says. Apart from outdated religious and philosophical traditions, the most formidable obstacle we face to the exercise of moral and political responsibility is 'the imperial ambition of the global market' whose foundations and justification 'lie in the obsolete cosmology of the mechanical universe'.

Kenny states that the paradoxical consequence of the great scientific enterprise of the past five hundred years is not that we have finally uncovered the laws of being, 'but that we have discovered a cosmic narrative that leaves us holding the baby of the evolutionary future':

> We are all now faced with a radical moral choice. We can step confidently into a new realm of creative freedom and take full, democratic responsibility for that future, or, alternatively, retreat into a blind and irresponsible dependence on moral authorities who…will confidently claim that they have a mandate from God, nature, history or the market to define that future for us.

I am not sure—and not familiar enough with the relevant literature to decide—whether there is complete convergence on this question of moral autonomy, or whether it is all for the good, or even feasible. Wolfe says cryptically that the notion of moral freedom 'is as inevitable as it is impossible'. I've argued that the freedom expressed in total postmodern relativism is not personally and socially sustainable; we need some social moral framework within which to make choices. This may be, as Wolfe suggests, by way of wanting to hear 'second opinions' as we make up our minds about various issues.

But as the *Yearning for Balance* report and the other surveys on values also make clear, there is a tension or ambivalence being generated through recognising people's right to make their own moral

choices and the perceived need to change morally as a society. And as we have also seen, the shift to moral independence has been associated with both a growing loss of faith and trust in social institutions and a withdrawal or disengagement from social and civic affairs, which hardly augur well for governance. Can we, then, develop a morality that is autonomous, yet also institutionalises social responsibility and engagement? Perhaps we are seeing the centre of moral gravity shift from social institutions to individuals. Rather than morality being imposed on us by our institutions through frameworks of regulation, we, through our personal choices, will imbue our social structures and cultures with moral content.

We need to work through these issues, and there is some evidence that we have begun. Both science and spiritual faith will play a part— not, as in the past, as institutions of moral authority, but as sources of knowledge and guidance.

13> beyond growth, or 'it's the *Weltanschauung*, stupid!'

War, pestilence, famine and death: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. Will this be their century? Even if global change stops short of the 'technological singularity' and 'population crash' discussed earlier, we still confront formidable possibilities. Leading American futurist Jim Dator once said that he would like to avoid the twenty-first century and move straight to the twenty-second, for which he saw some hope: a time when, one way or another, by choice or compulsion, humanity would have dealt with all the challenges it faces—population pressures, environmental destruction, economic equity, global governance, technological change. Dator warned that the twenty-first century was not likely to be pleasant for anyone because we would pay the price for ignoring the future.

The early signs suggest Dator might well have been right. In the first years of the new century, we have confronted a new terrorism and a war against it—grounded in global inequalities and religious differences (religion is one of the four horsemen in some interpretations). AIDS is rampant in southern Africa, and worsening in parts of Asia—linked to poverty and social stress and dislocation. SARS—severe acute respiratory syndrome—exacted a serious human and economic cost,

but was also a warning that much worse could come. Famine is again stalking parts of Africa—a result of both local and international factors. Across the world, droughts, fires, heatwaves, storms, tornadoes and floods—in all probability amplified by global climate change—have caused death and devastation.

It is possible, of course, the dangers will dissipate, not deepen. Perhaps the war on terrorism will be short and victorious. The AIDS pandemic will be brought under control. And global warming—and other environmental threats—will not bring about the hardships and suffering, including famine, that some predict. But we would be foolish to bank on these benign outcomes and not to consider what could happen if, instead, geopolitical tensions, economic instability, social upheaval, disease pandemics and ecological disasters coalesce to create a nightmare future for humanity in this century. We would be wise to think about what we might do to avert this possibility, reaching far beyond our immediate reactions to each individual issue.

Our situation poses profound questions about how we seek progress in this century. Yet the political perspective continues to equate progress with the pursuit of economic growth. It is striking just how much the political framework of growth is regarded as a 'policy constant' that is beyond scrutiny or debate. Political leaders explicitly state high growth as their prime objective, believing it to be the foundation upon which social progress, including better health and greater wellbeing, is built. The political priority is epitomised in the reminder notices posted in Bill Clinton's campaign offices during the 1992 American presidential election: 'It's the economy, stupid.'

The former senior government minister Peter Reith put the view well in an interview with the *Australian* newspaper in 2000:

> If we are to provide the social services we all want for the disadvantaged and aged; if we are to build new national infrastructure; if we are to better resource our schools, our health systems, our law enforcement; if we are to redress disadvantage suffered by

indigenous people—then we continuously need to build a more prosperous and competitive Australia. That must be the national goal.

Similarly the finance minister, Nick Minchin, said in response to a major 2002 CSIRO report on Australia's options on population, technology, resources and the environment that a successful economy allows governments to spend money on solving environmental problems. 'It's the poor countries of the world that are incapable of dealing with their environmental issues. As a rich country, we can.'

This view is understandable: strong economy, higher growth, more revenue, bigger budget surpluses, more to spend on new or bigger programs. However, if the processes by which we pursue growth do more damage to the social fabric and the state of the environment than we can repair with the extra wealth, then we are still going backwards (even assuming we can identify and repair the damage). 'Efficiency' in generating wealth may well mean 'inefficiency' in improving overall quality of life. The fact of the matter is rich countries, including Australia, are not even dealing with all their own environmental problems, never mind the global ones—to which they continue to contribute a disproportionate share. Australia confronts serious land degradation, loss of biodiversity, depletion and pollution of water resources and destruction of the Great Barrier Reef; it has one of the highest per capita emissions of greenhouse gases in the world. And some social problems have worsened, not diminished, with rising wealth, including crime, unemployment, obesity, drug and other addictions, declining social capital and increasing social isolation and alienation. In other words we cannot assert, as some do, that increased income is better—'all other things being equal'—because it increases our choices, our 'command over goods and services'. As I've argued in this book, other things can never be equal; on the contrary, the processes of growth inevitably and inherently tend to affect 'all other things'.

The treasurer, Peter Costello, disappointed by John Howard's decision in 2003 to remain as prime minister, pointed out that the key to the government's success had been its economic management, which was 'the foundation for everything else'. He also dismissed surveys showing most voters would prefer more money to be spent in areas such as education and health than handed back to them in tax cuts. At the same time, in keeping with his stated intention to speak out more on social issues, he has lamented the loss of community connection and trust in charities and the church; worried about the drug problem, family breakdown and retrenched middle-aged workers; and spoken of the need to restore traditional community values. Costello's pronouncements reflect the compartmentalisation that is pervasive in government, a failure to see the links between a political philosophy based on material self-interest and the problems he identifies.

It is true that a lack of growth—the economic contraction experienced in recessions and depressions—causes hardship, especially through increased unemployment, and governments usually justify the pursuit of growth in terms of job creation. However, the association between growth and jobs does not negate the need to examine more broadly and carefully the social effects of growth. Also, we need to bear in mind that the strength of this association is a characteristic of our current economy; we cannot judge possible alternatives by the rules—the internal logic—of the existing system. Given the evidence of the diminishing benefits and rising costs of growth, it is not good enough to justify or defend growth on the grounds that its absence also causes problems.

We need to think less in terms of a 'wealth-producing economy' and more about a 'health-producing society', where health is defined as total wellbeing—physical, mental, social and spiritual. We need to pay attention to the content of growth—and the values and priorities it reflects and serves—not just its rate. At present, government policies give priority to the rate, but leave the content largely to the market and

consumer choice. Most economic growth is derived from increased personal consumption, despite the evidence of its personal, social and environmental costs. We need, individually and collectively, to be more discerning about what economic activities we encourage or discourage. While such suggestions are often dismissed as 'social engineering', this criticism ignores the extent to which our lifestyle is already being 'engineered' through marketing, advertising and the mass media.

We need to examine more critically the whole basis on which progress is currently defined, measured and achieved—that is, by increasing (real per capita) GDP. Economic activity can be directed towards increasing personal wealth and consumption, and it can be directed towards restoring and protecting the environment and strengthening social relations. There is a case for devising a strategy to reduce the proportion of GDP derived from *consumption* undertaken for short-term, personal gratification, and to increase that involving *investment* directed towards broader and longer-term social and environmental goals.

To be *against* current patterns of growth is not the same as being *for* failed socialist, centralised, command economies. This common confusion leads to the claim that whatever its faults, capitalism is the best system we have and we should stick to it until someone invents a better one. This claim confuses means and ends, function and meaning, systems and worldviews—how we do something rather than why we do it. Nor should my arguments be interpreted, more broadly, as an attack on economic and technological development as such, but rather as a critique of the ends towards which it is being directed, and the manner in which it is being pursued. Rather than casting the core question in terms of being pro-growth or anti-growth, we need to see that growth itself is not the main game.

In the face of an immediate terrorist threat, we have not hesitated to direct wealth (and so economic activity) into strengthening defence

and national security. Confronted with the magnitude of twenty-first-century challenges, it is lunacy to continue to regard these issues as something that can be dealt with by fiddling at the margins of the economy, the main purpose of which remains to serve and promote our increasingly extravagant consumer lifestyle. It is becoming ever clearer that we are being force-fed, like *paté de foie gras* geese, by a vast media-marketing complex to meet the demands of the economy. We could choose to redirect economic activity into creating a fairer, cleaner, healthier, safer world. We don't have to keep consuming more in order to generate the wealth to try to fix the problems that consumption gives rise to. We in the rich world don't have to eat another four-litre tub of ice-cream so that a child in a poor country can afford a single cone.

Economics does not forbid such a choice; most economists simply assume it won't be made because it goes against human nature—or so they think. But it is in our nature to cooperate as well as compete, to show compassion and generosity as well as ruthlessness and selfishness. And human nature isn't fixed, hard-wired; it is influenced by culture. In any case, as I've shown, these choices can be framed in terms of self-interest, as well as altruism. It all depends on how we perceive our interests. It's not the government's role 'to start lecturing people about their lifestyles', Nick Minchin said. Some might think it is the government's role to educate people about their lifestyles. And it is clearly time more people began educating governments about the consequences of the lifestyles their policies promote.

While national governments are slow to accept this truth about the relationship between economic growth and wellbeing, powerful international bodies have come a long way in the past few years towards embracing it. A 2000 report by the World Bank, *Quality of Growth*, stresses the importance of 'the sources and patterns of growth to development outcomes'. It questions why policy-makers continue 'to rely so heavily, and often solely, on the pace of GDP growth as the measure of

progress'. The report emphasises four crucial areas that complement and shape growth: improving access to education, protecting the environment, managing global risks and improving the quality of governance. The last includes making institutions less corrupt, more transparent, and accountable to ordinary people.

At the news conference to launch the report, a journalist from the *Economist* observed that if the report was saying that GDP did not cover all aspects of human welfare, this was obvious and nothing new; if it was saying that there were circumstances where growth in GDP should be sacrificed for other things, then this was radical. Both the World Bank's chief economist, Nick Stern, and vice president and lead author of the report, Vinod Thomas, said that, in short, yes, this (the latter) was what the report was arguing. Thomas said: 'Just as the quality of people's diet, and not just the quantity of food they eat, influences their health and life expectancy, the way in which growth is generated and distributed has profound implications for people and their quality of life.'

Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the 'club' of rich nations, states in its 2001 report, *The Wellbeing of Nations*, that following unprecedented increases in economic output, concern is now turning more to the 'quality' of economic growth and how to achieve further increases in wellbeing. The report notes that wellbeing is more than economic wellbeing which, in turn, is more than what GDP measures; and that not all of what GDP measures contributes directly to wellbeing. It quotes the Nobel Prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets, father of the GNP, as saying as far back as 1962: 'Distinctions must be kept in mind between quantity and quality of growth, between its costs and returns, and between the short and the long run…Goals for "more" growth should specify more growth of what, and for what.'

Focusing on the quality of growth, rather than just the quantity, brings us closer to the concept of sustainable development, which

represents an important merging of two different perspectives on human development and progress: the fight for social equity and justice, and the fight to protect the environment. Sustainable development seeks a better balance and integration of social, environmental and economic goals and objectives to produce a high, equitable and enduring quality of life; economic growth is not paramount. A common theme in much of this work is the perceived need to shift from *quantity* to *quality* in our way of life and our measurements.

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways. The World Commission on Environment and Development described it as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The World Conservation Union (IUCN), the UN Environment Program and the World Wide Fund for Nature have defined it as 'improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems'. The two key aspects of life—quality and sustainability—are indivisible in that high quality of life obviously cannot remain high if it is not also sustainable. Sustainable development acknowledges this dynamic relationship between the goals of improving wellbeing and ensuring that improvements are compatible with a healthy natural environment. Although dismissed by some as an oxymoron or as too vague, sustainable development has become widely accepted in the past decade. It represents the most significant challenge to date to economic growth as the defining process of progress.

Our growing understanding of health and wellbeing can make an important contribution to working towards sustainability. It provides a means of weighing and integrating different objectives by allowing them to be measured against a common goal—improving human wellbeing. A striking example of this is the evidence that economic growth, which is increasing pressure on the natural environment, is less important to health and happiness than generally believed, and may even be detrimental to wellbeing through its social and cultural

impacts. While human health is not the only consideration here, it is critical to achieving a real political commitment to sustainable development. In other words, we need to think of health, not wealth, as the bottom line of progress.

Recent projects to develop global scenarios of the future emphasise the values shifts necessary to achieve sustainability. New values underpin the preferred visions of both the United Nations Environment Program's *Geo-3* report and the Stockholm Environment Institute's 2002 report, *Great Transition*, for example. The latter's 'Great Transition' is galvanised by the search for a deeper basis for human happiness and fulfilment. While sustainability is the imperative that pushes the new agenda, desire for a rich quality of life, strong human ties and a resonant connection to nature is the lure that pulls it towards the future. The 'Great Transition' pathway moves beyond solving the economic problem of scarcity, which has defined progress, into a 'post-scarcity world' where all can enjoy a decent standard of living. It acknowledges the reality of a 'fulfilment curve' (akin to the threshold hypothesis discussed in chapter 2), which shows that past a certain point increased consumption fails to increase fulfilment:

> Additional costs exceed the marginal satisfaction of additional luxuries as we work to pay for them, learn to use them, maintain and repair them, dispose of them and perhaps feel guilty about having them when others have so little. Profligate consumption sacrifices the cultivation of other aspects of a good life—relationships, creativity, community, nature and spirituality—that can increase fulfilment.

In chapter 1, I described Bjorn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* as, at first glance at least, the most comprehensive and convincing account of 'go for growth' linear optimism, published at a time when champions of

unfettered growth need evidence that they are right. Controversy over the book has continued since its publication in English in 2001. Denmark's conservative government, on its election in 2002, appointed Lomborg director of its new Environmental Assessment Institute. In the same year, the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty investigated complaints about Lomborg and delivered the verdict that his book, while not intentionally dishonest or grossly negligent, was 'clearly contrary to the standards of good scientific practice' (a decision which has generated its own controversy). It is worth looking at his arguments in the light of what I have said in the preceding chapters about the social, economic, cultural and environmental dimensions of health and wellbeing.

Few, if any, would disagree with some of Lomborg's central claims: human life has improved in many respects; past prophecies of environmental catastrophe have not materialised and some environmental conditions are improving; innovation has allowed us to sidestep or defer resource limits; and we should prioritise our actions on the best evidence. None of these points is new, but I accept that the public, the media and those of us (myself included) whose work focuses on the problems of the world, all need reminding occasionally of the gains that have been made.

Most of the criticism directed at the book has addressed the issues of truth and accuracy concerning environmental conditions and trends. Scientists have expressed their frustration at Lomborg's misrepresentations, misinterpretations and misunderstandings, saying he underestimates the planetary scales, dimensions, complexities and implications of environmental change and degradation.

There are other conceptual failings. First, Lomborg focuses, like other linear optimists, almost exclusively on material wellbeing. Emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing barely register in his view of progress. And it is in these areas that progress has become most problematic, especially in rich nations. We may be tempted to brush aside

these concerns as a self-indulgent existential angst, as implied in the expression Lomborg cites: 'No food, one problem. Much food, many problems.' However, this dismissal of the non-material aspects of life flies in the face of human history and a huge body of psychological knowledge about the importance to human health and wellbeing of qualities such as meaning, belonging, identity, autonomy and hope, as I discussed in earlier chapters.

A second conceptual flaw is that Lomborg, again like many others of his ilk, attributes human progress over the past two centuries almost wholly to economic growth and development. His analysis ignores the evidence that knowledge and institutional development, not just economic growth, have played important roles in improving health and opportunity—including in capturing the benefits of growth. Furthermore, Lomborg fails to recognise that economic growth has very different impacts at different stages of development, and in developed nations growth offers diminishing benefits and rising costs.

Thirdly, Lomborg stresses the importance of prioritising, and doing this on the basis of facts, not fears. We have to weigh the benefits of environmental protection against those of better education and health care, or improving conditions in the Third World, he says. The fallacy of Lomborg's appeal to simple arithmetic in setting global priorities is evident from the fact that, despite a more than 30 per cent expansion in global economic output since 1992, foreign aid spending declined from US$69 billion in 1992 to US$53 billion in 2000. Broad geopolitical changes such as the end of the Cold War and ideological shifts, not increased environmental spending, are behind this fall. Prioritising should not be limited to public spending, but should extend to private choices as well as public, and to how much we spend in each domain. It must also to take into account more than the costs and benefits to GDP, which Lomborg emphasises, as GDP is such a flawed measure of welfare.

Lomborg's bias in assessing the state of the world is apparent from

his long quotation from historian Lawrence Stone on life before growth, which he also paraphrases in his final chapter: 'We are no longer almost chronically ill, our breaths stinking of rotting teeth, with festering sores, eczema, scabs, and suppurating boils.' He uses this to warn against 'a scary idealisation of our past' and as a descriptive benchmark against which to judge progress. It is recited as if it represents the human condition before modern times. I have travelled through many poor African and Asian countries; the description applies to no communities I have seen. It fits few other societies and times, including indigenous and hunter-gatherer peoples. It is not how animals in the wild are—and humans have been, for most of their history, animals in the wild.

Stone's description is of one time and place in human history—England in the eighteenth century—when rapid population growth produced widespread social dislocation as rural people flocked to over-crowded cities. We might compare it with this assessment of life in medieval England in *The Year 1000*, by journalists Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger:

> We have more wealth, both personal and national, better technology, and infinitely more skilful ways of preserving and extending our lives. But whether we today display more wisdom or common humanity is an open question, and as we look back to discover how people coped with the daily difficulties of existence a thousand years ago, we might also consider whether, in all our sophistication, we could meet the challenges of their world with the same fortitude, good humour, and philosophy.

Statistics are Lomborg's stock in trade. But behind the mass of statistics he assembles to argue that life is getting better and will continue to improve—and beyond some of the undoubted truths he expresses—is a simplistic conceptualisation of the nature and sources of human health and wellbeing.

The problem with a cultural story that defines progress in largely economic and material terms—life is getting better because we are getting richer—is that it lacks coherence. Ordinary people recognise this better than their leaders; they view their lives as a whole, they weigh up the totality of their circumstances and experiences. Leaders evaluate performance according to a set of highly selective and imperfect measures of national wellbeing. These indicators are treated in isolation; they only make sense if there is no attempt to link and integrate measures of economic performance with those of personal happiness and wellbeing, social cohesion and equity, and environmental health and integrity. The incoherence that underlies the contemporary 'official story' of life in Australia and other rich nations, and which emerges from the research literature, can be expressed in a series of questions and their answers:

- Is increased material wealth, measured as growth in GDP, the top priority of government? Yes. This is explicit in statements by political leaders and implicit in the emphasis of government policy.

- Is increased wealth the top priority of individuals? No. Surveys consistently show that prosperity ranks in importance well behind things like family and security.

- Can the pursuit of economic growth harm civil society? Yes, when it is given priority over other goals. The research shows there is a common perception that greed, selfishness and excess—all associated with the push for growth—are contributing to social problems and the loss of a sense of community.

- Can increased wealth harm personal health and wellbeing? Yes, when becoming richer takes precedence over other aspects of life. Both public opinion and scientific research show that wealth is a poor predictor of happiness and the desire for riches can be detrimental to wellbeing.

• Are current patterns of economic growth environmentally sustainable? No. The overwhelming weight of scientific evidence and expert opinion is that economic growth, as currently defined and derived, is damaging the Earth's natural environment.

In considering these issues, it is important to bear in mind that we are not discussing a static situation. The evidence suggests many people regard their current way of life as 'excessive'. If recent growth rates are sustained, and this growth continues to be based largely on increased private consumption, then our lifestyles will become twice as 'excessive' within about twenty years. Social researcher Hugh Mackay says that if the mood in Australia is depressed now, it turns even bleaker when Australians contemplate the future. 'They fear further degradation in our quality of life—through excessive development, excessive materialism, excessive reliance on technology, excessive speed.'

Deep down, beneath the satisfaction of everyday life, we are looking for a different paradigm, a new story to define who we are and where we want to go. Instead of one narrowly focused on material progress, we want a coherent vision that expresses a better balance between economic welfare, social equity and environmental sustainability, a vision that reflects the reality that these are, ultimately, inextricably linked. We want the option to weigh and trade economic, social and environmental costs and benefits—just as we did in the earlier part of last century in trading off higher economic growth for a shorter working week and a shorter working life, in 'buying' more time for things other than work.

Underlying today's cynicism about politics and disengagement from the political process is a recognition that the big issues that dominate political debate are trivial compared to this far bigger agenda. Australians' desire to have fun and to indulge themselves might reflect 'consumer confidence'. It is also an understandable response to 'issue fatigue', to the constant demand to ingest, digest and decide on a

growing multitude of matters. But it also reveals a disappointment that the national stocktake, the whole-of-society evaluation, we feel is needed is nowhere in sight.

The more fundamental issues I have raised are not the issues with which governments are concerned. There seems to be a disjunction between our broad social experience and a narrower political agenda, as if they exist on different planes of perception. Somewhere in the translation of social concerns into political issues an awful lot gets distorted or lost altogether. In fact, the evidence suggests that many Australians are identifying as a *problem* what governments—with their eyes fixed firmly on economic performance—persist in seeing as the *solution* to our situation. And many see people in positions of power and influence as more likely to be part of the problem than the solution. So the impetus to change will not come from our leaders, but from ordinary people. This is where the 'big picture' intersects with our personal lives. This is from where we draw our power. Change will come about from choices, individually taken as citizens and consumers, parents and producers, which reflect a collective will to think and do things differently.

What polls are measuring, and qualitative surveys are explaining, is a tension between Australians' values and their lifestyles. This tension is always present, a part of the human condition. What is significant about the times is that the tension is increasing, and what is different is the extent to which social institutions and Western culture are contributing to the tension by promoting and encouraging—even demanding—a fast-paced, high-pressure, hyper-consumer lifestyle. Modern economies rely on this way of life. People are torn between a sound common sense and basic decency and the lure of constant distraction and instant gratification. The growing tension between values and lifestyles may well become the defining dynamic of life in Australia and other Western societies in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

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A frequent criticism of studies and surveys that show widespread disquiet about our modern way of life is that they reflect what people *say*—and have probably always said—when it is what they *do* that provides a truer measure of social preferences. This claim is partially valid, but it overlooks two things: the cultural pressures that push people to behave in ways contrary to their beliefs; and the growing evidence that a profound change is taking place, not just in attitudes, but in lifestyles.

Evidence of the moral tension in modern life is unequivocal, and evidence that people want to do, and are doing, something about it is growing. Social researcher Hugh Mackay, while noting the social dangers inherent in the process of detachment and disengagement evident in Australia, says many Australians are using this 'retreat time' to explore the meaning of their lives and to connect with their most deeply held values. The gap between 'what I believe in' and 'how I live' is uncomfortably wide for many of us and we are looking for ways to narrow it, he says. 'We want to express our values more clearly and live in ways that make us feel better about ourselves.' Whether this search for meaning is expressed in religion, New Age mysticism, moral reflection or love and friendship, the goal is the same: 'To feel that our lives express who we are and that we are living in harmony with the values we claim to espouse.'

The *Yearning for Balance* study says Americans are upset about the course they are on, but find it difficult to imagine how that course could be altered. Yet the research identified a degree of consensus about the nature of the problem Americans face—an essential ingredient for creating broadly supported, meaningful and sustainable change. 'People from all walks of life share similar concerns about a culture of materialism and excess, and the consequences for future generations. Many are surprised and excited to find that others share their views.' People associated the public discourse with acrimony, divisiveness and gridlock; most did not want any part of it. 'When they hear each other

describe common concerns about misplaced values, children, and the environment, and have a chance to explain their longing for a more balanced life, a spark appears—people begin to imagine the possibility of change.'

And the possibility of change is becoming a reality. Recent studies by US researchers Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson reveal that a quarter of Americans are 'cultural creatives', people who have a made a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values and way of life. Surveys in European Union countries suggest there are at least as many cultural creatives there. 'They are disenchanted with "owning more stuff", materialism, greed, me-firstism, status display, glaring social inequalities of race and class, society's failure to care adequately for elders, women and children, and the hedonism and cynicism that pass for realism in modern society.' Instead, they are placing emphasis in their lives on relationships, communities, spirituality, nature and the environment, and real ecological sustainability.

Cultural creatives represent a coalescence of social movements that reflects the countervailing cultural trends discussed in chapter 3—environmentalism, feminism, universalism and spiritualism. These movements are not just concerned with influencing government, but with reframing issues in a way that changes how people understand the world. Ray and Anderson say that in the 1960s, less than 5 per cent of the population was making these momentous changes. In just over a generation, that proportion has grown to 26 per cent. 'That may not sound like much in this age of nanoseconds, but on the timescale of whole civilisations, where major developments are measured in centuries, it is shockingly quick.'

The 'cultural creatives' trend is consistent with the views of American sociologist Ronald Inglehart. Drawing on surveys of people in the United States and several European nations in 1970 and 1994, he found a pronounced shift from 'materialist' to 'postmaterialist' values. The trend is one aspect of a broader shift from modern to

postmodern values taking place in advanced industrial societies. Postmaterialists are still interested in a high material standard of living, but take it for granted and place increasing emphasis on the quality of life. 'The economic outlook of modern industrial society emphasised economic growth and economic achievement above all,' Inglehart says. 'Postmodern values give priority to environmental protection and cultural issues, even when these goals conflict with maximising economic growth.'

This evolution in thinking, this coalition of movements, is also evident in the growing cooperation between religious and environmental groups in the push for sustainable development. Worldwatch Institute's Gary Gardner says in a 2002 report that the past decade has seen a small but growing number of joint activities by the two communities, which had long kept each other at arm's length because of mutual misperceptions and divergent worldviews. The collaboration is founded on complementary strengths, he says. 'Environmentalists have a strong grounding in science. Religious institutions enjoy moral authority and a grassroots presence that shape the worldviews and lifestyles of billions.' He cites the example of 3500 Protestant congregations in the United States that have committed to buying fairly traded, often organically grown, coffee. With these steps, Gardner says, 'a new ethics encompassing humans, the divine and nature can help usher in a just and sustainable civilisation'.

While Australians haven't yet been measured for their 'cultural creativity', a 2003 study by the Australia Institute suggests the proportion of cultural creatives here is likely to be similar to that in the United States and Europe, perhaps even higher. It found that 23 per cent of Australians aged 30–59 had 'downshifted' in the past ten years: that is, voluntarily made a long-term change in their lifestyle that had resulted in their earning less money. The means included cutting back work hours, taking a lower-paid job, stopping work and changing careers. The reasons were to spend more time with the family, live a healthier lifestyle, seek more

balance or fulfilment, and to lead a less materialistic and more environ-
mentally friendly life. While most cited personal reasons as the most
important, rather than an articulated postmaterialist ideology or philos-
ophy, these individual choices, taken together, are still socially and
politically significant. The study did not count as downshifters people
who retired, returned to study, set up their own business or left work to
have a child. If some of the excluded are included as legitimate down-
shifters, along with those who have opted for a 'cultural creative' lifestyle
from the beginning, the proportion of Australians who are challenging
the dominant culture of our times is likely to be substantially higher.

(I am a downshifter myself. Once rapidly upwardly mobile, I
became precipitously downwardly mobile when I had to give up a
senior, full-time, permanent position at CSIRO, Australia's national
research organisation, to focus on this work. In the past six years, I have
had four short-term, part-time appointments at the Australian National
University, earning between a quarter and a half of my career-high
salary as a senior adviser to a Commonwealth government minister.)

Still, these civilisational shifts are not necessarily straightforward
and one-dimensional. We don't have a fixed quantum of social energy
so that if pressure mounts in one area, it must ease in another. Pressures
can rise in several conflicting realms, increasing social tensions. More
people are disenchanted with consumerism, yet we continue to
consume more. Reflecting the values tension discussed above, the
American economist Juliet Schor has identified a more virulent form
of consumerism in the United States marked by 'competitive acquisi-
tion'. In *The Overspent American*, she says large numbers of Americans
spend more than they say they would like to, more than they realise
they are spending, more than is fiscally prudent, and in ways that are
collectively, if not individually, self-defeating. A good example of
competitive acquisition in Australia (and elsewhere) is the increasing
size of new houses, even as the size of households shrinks. Growing
numbers of people, often quite young and with children, are paying

upwards of $750,000 for 400-square-metre 'McMansions' in the outer suburbs of our capital cities. The bar for middle-class aspirations—for feeling and demonstrating that you've made it—keeps getting raised.

Annual surveys of almost 250,000 new college students in the United States show that the proportion saying it was 'very important or essential' that they become 'very well off financially' rose from about 40 per cent in the late 1960s to over 70 per cent in the 1990s, making it the top objective, while the proportion saying it was important to 'develop a meaningful philosophy of life' showed a corresponding decline from over 80 per cent to about 40 per cent. The trend lines show the biggest changes between the late 1960s and late 1980s—crossing in the mid-1970s—and have remained fairly stable since then. Declines were also recorded in fractions saying it was important to 'keep up-to-date with politics', 'be involved in environmental cleanup' and 'participate in community action'. As social psychologist Dave Myers says: 'To young Americans of the 1990s, money matters.' Or, as *Rolling Stone* magazine put it in 2001, today's hot strategy is 'milking it': 'The smart money is on getting it while you can, however you can, as fast as you can.'

In Australia, almost two-thirds (62 per cent) of people surveyed in a 2002 Australia Institute study agreed they could not afford to buy 'everything you really need'; this included almost half of the highest income group. Over half (56 per cent) agreed they spent almost all of their money on 'the basic necessities of life'—including over a quarter of the highest income group. The author, institute director Clive Hamilton, links the findings to a phenomenon of overconsumption that has been labelled 'luxury fever' or 'affluenza'. A substantial majority of Australians who experience no real hardship, and even live lives of abundance, believe that they are 'doing it tough', he says. 'The little Aussie battler has turned into the great Australian whinger.'

Presenting a slightly different perspective because the questions were worded differently, a 2002 survey for Australian Unity Wellbeing

Index found Australians were, on average, 79 per cent satisfied with their 'ability to pay for household essentials', but only 65 per cent satisfied (a relatively low score) with their 'ability to afford the things you would like to have'. They recorded an even lower score (59 per cent) for their satisfaction with their 'ability to save money'. The results suggest that despite our growing wealth most people feel they are only getting by; they can pay for 'essentials', but cannot afford all that they'd like, or to save. It appears people are caught between the desire to spend and the wish to put some money aside.

There are, then, paradoxes and contradictions in the evidence about social preferences and directions. These reflect the inevitable incompleteness of any study, a focus on only part of the story; they also reveal the very real ambivalence in people's minds and the state of flux in modern societies. All in all, most people may still be obeying the cultural imperative to consume, but growing numbers are opting out of a way of life they feel is becoming increasingly destructive to health and wellbeing, both personally and socially. There are now more and more conversations taking place about these issues; there are a thousand brushfires of revolution breaking out as more people reassess their priorities and explore different ways of thinking about and living their lives. However, it is not yet clear that these fires will continue to grow and spread; the tension remains.

History offers us hopeful stories that show that deep and positive change does happen. The historian W. H. McNeill says of life in Greece during the sixth century BCE that the measure of a good man and citizen became the modest life of an independent farmer, owning enough land to live decently, and ready to play his part manfully on the battlefield:

> As this ideal won increasing acceptance, the amassing of private wealth lost much of its attractiveness; and by the close of the century, even wealthy aristocrats had begun to live and dress simply. Competitive conspicuous consumption which had been

characteristic of the nobility in the seventh century was directed into new channels, as men of wealth began to take pride in financing public buildings and services with a munificence they no longer dared or cared to lavish upon themselves.

A lively spirit of egalitarianism and civic solidarity began to distinguish Greek from foreign ways of life, paving the way for the extraordinary surge in cultural development in the fifth century BCE. Might this also be happening in the twenty-first century CE?

Ultimately, we need to see the emergence of a new *Weltanschauung*: a new view of the world, a new framework of ideas within which to make choices and decisions. Such a change would affect just about every facet of our private and public lives: how and why citizens vote, consumers buy, governments govern, public servants serve and business does business. My sense is that if we removed growth—becoming ever richer, regardless of where and how—as the centrepiece of our worldview, things would fall into place, the tensions would be resolved, a sense of coherence and balance would be restored. This sounds much simpler than it is. There is a huge social inertia that resists this change. Worldviews tend to be 'transparent' or 'invisible' to those who hold them because of the deeply internalised assumptions on which they are based. And if individuals find change difficult, institutions find it even harder, running along grooves cut deep by past ways of doing things: this is the way we do things because it is the way we've done things.

So those who challenge the status quo must mount sound and sustained arguments for change; those who defend the current orthodoxy have an easier task because they have on their side this massive force of inertia in our social institutions. We need, in whatever way we can, to widen the agenda of public and political debate. The US economist Kenneth Boulding wrote over thirty years ago that there seemed to be a fundamental disposition in mankind to limit agendas, often quite arbitrarily:

…limiting the agenda is always costly and is sometimes very costly, and there is something about this process which prevents us from realising how costly it is, simply because we cannot know the cost of limiting the agenda unless we widen it, which act, of course, the very process of limiting the agenda forbids.

In *A Distant Mirror,* historian Barbara Tuchman acknowledges our inability to enter genuinely into 'the mental and emotional values' of the Middle Ages, so dominated by the Christian religion, which provided the matrix and law of medieval life. Its insistent principle was that the life of the spirit and of the afterworld was superior to the here and now, to material life on Earth, she says. 'The rupture of this principle and its replacement by belief in the worth of the individual and of an active life not necessarily focused on God is, in fact, what created the modern world and ended the Middle Ages.' We face, then, another rupture or discontinuity, akin to the Renaissance or the Enlightenment—periods that saw profound shifts in our view of ourselves, in what it was to be human. And flowing from these shifts, the great social and political movements of the nineteenth century shattered many assumptions of what was 'normal' at that time: recurrent epidemics of typhoid and cholera, child labour, the buying and selling of human life, the oppressed status of women, the appalling working conditions in 'dark, Satanic mills'.

If all of this is hard to see from within our current 'go for growth' worldview, think of it this way: given what you know about the state of the world, current social conditions and trends, what you feel about your own life and what is important to your wellbeing, would becoming twice as rich in about twenty years in order to consume twice as much be your number one priority, your highest goal? No? Well, for our governments, which we elect, it is. This gives us an idea of the tensions being created by an increasingly outdated and dysfunctional *Weltanschauung*. It's time for a new one.

14>   global change and personal choice

So, to come back to my original question: is life getting better or worse?

When we examine this question, drawing on a wide range of disciplines—economics, psychology, sociology, epidemiology, ecology, anthropology, history and philosophy—we learn a number of things. The first is that it is not a simple question, but one of astonishing complexity. So much depends on our perspective, and on the evidence on which we draw. Contradictions abound. Despite this, several things stand out.

If we take the three dominant measures of the human condition—population, life expectancy and per capita income—we can conclude that many more people are living much richer, longer lives today than ever before. In the year 1000, there were about 270 million people in the world who, on average, could expect to live about 24 years and earn US$435 a year. Today there are over six billion people on Earth who, on average, can expect to live about 67 years and earn almost US$6000 a year. All parts of the world have shared in the gains. In the developed world in the past two hundred years, per capita GDP has risen about twenty-fold, and life expectancy has more than doubled. In the rest of the world, per capita GDP has increased more

than five-fold and life expectancy has also more than doubled. In the past one hundred years, Australians have, on average and in real terms, become about five times richer, generating benefits in many areas of life. We are living, on average, more than 25 years longer. There have also been advances in other areas such as human freedoms and rights, both nationally and globally. Democracy is spreading, civil and human rights are increasingly acknowledged.

So is all well and good? Not exactly. There is growing evidence that quality of life is not the same as standard of living, and that how well we live is not just a matter of how long we live, especially in rich nations such as Australia. Nor do constitutional rights and the rule of law encompass all other dimensions of human life that bear on well-being. Against the gains we have to set the following qualifications:

- The benefits have been unevenly distributed globally and there have been recent reversals in both per capita income and life expectancy in some nations, notably in the former Soviet Union and in sub-Saharan Africa.

- The benefits of rising income to quality of life diminish as income increases, and in rich nations health and happiness are at best only weakly related to average income levels.

- Economic growth is not the only, or perhaps even the main, factor behind improving health and wellbeing. Increased knowledge, better education and institutional reforms have also made major contributions, even in the absence of sustained growth. The happiness of populations shows a clearer relationship to democratic freedoms than it does to income.

- Increases in life expectancy partly reflect biomedical advances and individual lifestyle choices that say little about changes in social conditions and may be offsetting the adverse health impacts of these changes.

Beyond these qualifications of the benefits of material progress, we must also acknowledge several formidable and growing costs related to sustainability, opportunity and meaning:

- The destruction of the natural environment of which we are an intrinsic part. However much we seem to be able to defer or side-step ecological limits through increased wealth and technological innovation, the evidence suggests we are disrupting planetary systems on a scale that grows ever greater and more pervasive. These impacts have potentially immense implications for human health and wellbeing.

- Increasing inequality, sustained high unemployment, the growth in under-employment and overwork, pressures on public services such as health and education, and the geographic concentration of disadvantage. These developments in Australia and many other developed nations are leading to deeper and more entrenched divisions within society. In contrast to earlier times, when economic and social development worked to break cycles of poverty, today these inequalities are being perpetuated from one generation to the next. Some of these problems, notably increasing income inequality, are also affecting developing countries.

- Psychic costs that relate to what might be called meaning in life— a sense of purpose, autonomy, identity, belonging and hope. These qualities derive primarily from our personal relationships, social roles and spiritual beliefs. In Australia and other Western nations, meaning in life has become more individualised and materialistic, reducing social cohesion, confidence, trust and stability, and leaving us personally more isolated and vulnerable.

I have focused in this book on the last—the loss of meaning. This cost might seem nebulous and trivial compared to the material hardship and deprivation suffered by many people in the developing world

and indigenous people here in Australia. However, as I've shown, its impacts on wellbeing are as real as those of material need. Furthermore, its source—the culture of modern Western societies—is also a cause of material harm, especially in the form of environmental damage. While the cost is not yet obvious in aggregate measures of population health and happiness, it is revealed in the trends in young people's psychosocial wellbeing and in surveys of public perceptions of life today. And when we look at the causes and correlates of wellbeing, the evidence is also compelling that focusing on the material and the individual—and especially on both together—produces an existential emptiness that distresses and disturbs us. I have referred to this situation as cultural fraud, where cultural images and ideals no longer meet psychological needs or reflect social realities, so placing our psyche under strain.

The many paradoxes and contradictions of the 'big picture' reflect not just its inherent complexity and our incomplete understanding of it, but also parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic struggle as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human strive for definition and acceptance. Hope for the future, I have suggested, rests on several crucial developments: a potent synergy between scientific and spiritual understandings of the world and life; our unprecedented potential as individuals to make our own moral choices and to accept responsibility for these choices; and the evidence that the necessary cultural changes are already taking place.

One of the difficulties in understanding the 'big picture'—in linking the social to the personal, the objective to the subjective—is that people react differently to the same situation and circumstances. Faced with the pressures for systemic change, we are responding in at least three different ways. We can attempt to show that things are not as I have described them—as the economist John Kenneth Galbraith said:

'Given the choice between changing and proving that change is not necessary, most people will get busy on the proof.' Or we can divert ourselves in distractions—as comedian Woody Allen said: 'Don't underestimate the power of distraction to keep our minds off the truth of our situation.' Or we can change—as the anthropologist Margaret Mead said: 'A small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'

The growing tensions between these three responses—characterised by inertia (or resistance), avoidance and activism—are defining features of modern politics. Social commentaries, studies and surveys suggest all three tendencies are growing in power and intensity. It makes for a confusing time, one in which it is impossible to see a clear direction or to predict the outcome.

Our political and business leadership continues to try to convince us that 'go for growth' strategies are the key to a better world. But many people, perceiving that this approach isn't working and frustrated by the blinkered political response, are disengaging from a wider participation in national affairs and focusing on their own lives and welfare. And they may be happier for it—it is an effective coping strategy. At the same time, however, there is growing evidence that a cultural upheaval is taking place, a profound reorientation in attitudes as people become more aware of the problems our present course is creating, at both a personal and global level. The old way of life still dominates, but more and more people are dumping what they sense is an obsolete world-view and are searching for a new one.

Surveys suggest about a quarter to a third of people in Western nations—the cultural creatives and downshifters discussed in the previous chapter—are making this leap of faith. We can characterise this paradigm shift as one between material progress and sustainable development; between linear optimists, who believe we are on track to a better future, and systemic optimists, who believe we need whole-system change. The shift is also one from dominant cultural qualities such as

individualism, consumerism and economism, to the countervailing characteristics of universalism, environmentalism, feminism and spiritualism.

When I ask often very different, but mostly well-educated, professional or student audiences about how they line up on this issue, the proportions choosing systemic over linear optimism, or sustainable development over material progress, usually range from a large minority to a substantial majority (in one audience, the vote was unanimous). I am sometimes asked why this shift in thinking isn't more politically obvious. There are several ways to answer this question, reflecting inertia, avoidance and activism. Politics, even in democracies, is a very imperfect and distorted representation of the people's will, especially when it comes to such deep change; government is, in the main, about fine-tuning the status quo. The disillusion that has resulted is most commonly expressed in disengagement, which favours minimalist government. Nevertheless, it is also true that the change in thinking is being expressed in developments such as the rise of the green vote and the growing geopolitical significance of environmental issues such as global warming.

In disregarding the fundamental tensions that are building in Western societies, politicians and political commentators are time and again wrong-footed by political developments: the deepening political cynicism and voter anger or apathy, the wild swings in the tally room, the sudden emergence of new political players. Seemingly blind to the deep crosscurrents of the cultural mainstream, they watch the surface swirls and eddies, puzzled and confused.

People have asked me why I don't say more about capitalism (or neoliberalism or economic rationalism) in examining the sources of the problems and challenges we face. I think the reason lies in my background in the natural sciences. Despite the times (it was the late sixties) I was not at all political in my student days, believing—naively—that

I was pursuing the higher, purer truth of science. At the 2002 national Art of Dissent conference, I participated in a panel discussion on democratising culture. One of the other speakers commented that his dissent went back to his student days when he was taking psychedelic drugs and reading Marx. When he was doing drugs and Marx, I said, I was in the lab studying the endocrinology of thermal tolerance in goldfish ('Same thing, same thing,' he interjected). So I never learned to look at the world primarily through the lens of ideology. To see our situation as the result of 'the evils of capitalism' is too limited, and does not go deeply enough into the cultural roots of our situation; it lets too many of us off the hook.

Like a growing number of commentators and analysts, I also believe the appropriate political responses to our situation do not fit the traditional prescriptions of the liberal-progressive-socialist left and the conservative-capitalist right. Attempting such a fit is, for me, a recipe for paralysing confusion. Issues of culture and values, which I have emphasised, are the traditional preserve of conservatives; my concerns for social equity and environmental sustainability are usually associated with the progressive left. Not surprisingly, I have been criticised by some on the left as a 'cultural pessimist' yearning for 'the good old days' that never existed, and by others on the right as an 'anti-growth, left-wing greenie'. The right, in emphasising the individual and personal responsibility, tends to downplay the importance of social conditions in shaping people's abilities and opportunities, and so to underestimate the importance of the state; the left errs the other way. Traditionally, the right has favoured economic liberalisation but cultural control, the left economic regulation but cultural freedom—making a distinction I've never quite understood. But the fundamental flaw in both left and right perspectives is that they stem from an essentially economistic or materialistic worldview, reflected in a preoccupation with how material wealth is created and distributed.

Karl-Henrik Robert, the Swedish founder of The Natural Step,

an international sustainability organisation, argues that developing and achieving a new vision for the world requires several preconditions. The first is that we can successfully maintain democracy and the necessary balance between right and left. The second is that this balance must be 'operationalised' through new institutions and traditions that are relevant for the problems at hand. But Robert goes further with his third precondition, the most difficult, which is also at the core of my argument: the need to find a 'story of meaning', a 'story of what it is all about' that fits modern society and provides the basis of new cultures.

The relationship between culture and ideology is an interesting one. I suspect capitalism has triumphed because it fits the modern Western culture of individual freedom and personal gratification. Capitalism has helped to shape this culture, but it has not created it alone; the left has also contributed, for example, though its association with cultural liberalisation. Socialism, with its emphasis on the collective and the state, lacks this cultural resonance, so it is not surprising that it has withered. But this may now be about to change.

American sociologist Ann Swidler says that in stable periods culture exerts a pervasive but diffuse influence on actions, providing the underlying assumptions of an entire way of life. In unsettled times, cultural change can become focused into an ideological contest, in which ideologies exert a powerful, clearly articulated, but more restricted, basis for social action. It appears that this focusing may now be happening, and that the momentous events of the past few years, especially the rise of global terrorism and the war being waged against it, are having a profound impact on the political expression of the interplay between inertia, avoidance and activism. So while the social transformation that is needed, and may now be occurring, will always go beyond ideology, it is becoming reflected in ideology.

After several decades of narrowing and blurring at the political level, recent events are forging a sharper distinction between left and

right. There are signs the ideologies of the right and left are aligning themselves more closely along the lines of linear optimism and systemic optimism, material progress and sustainable development. While not yet obvious at the level of the major political parties, signs of this ideological separation are beginning to appear. However, the allegiances that go with this realignment are not necessarily obvious or traditional, and there could be a significant change of membership as it takes place, including between political parties and within the corporate sector. This is because the issues that are driving the process are not, fundamentally, matters of policy or even ideology, but of morality.

The defining issues here go beyond the war on terrorism and include environmental, social and economic concerns at local, national and global levels. The massive public protests against the invasion of Iraq drew together a wide cross-section of the public and a broad coalition of interests that extended well beyond the question of war. Conversely, the stance of the American and Australian governments on the war is part of a 'neo-conservative' position on a range of global issues, including trade, governance, the environment and sustainability (this is less true of Britain, however). But as the protests demonstrated, it is the war that has escalated the process of ideological intensification.

In the wake of September 11, some have argued we must rethink our social balances, priorities and directions, while others are determined to defend the status quo. In one camp are those who say that the United States' persistent, often self-interested, meddling in the affairs of other nations and the gross global inequalities in wealth and power make the attacks on the United States explicable (although not justifiable); the American people may be 'innocent' victims of the attacks, but the American nation is not. In the other camp are those who say the terrorists (and many in the first camp) are driven by a hatred of America (and Western modernity more generally) and all it stands for: its lifestyle, its values—and its success; the war on terror must be relentless and unwavering.

There is another perspective on the war on terror that in some sense straddles the two dominant positions. It seems to have been missing from the analysis, which is not surprising given that it is, at first glance, far removed from the terrible events of September 11 and October 12 and requires a different frame of reference. It concerns the evidence that, as I have argued throughout this book, those in the West, including many Americans, have their own deep concerns about their societies, cultures and lifestyles, in particular the excesses of materialism and individualism.

This, then, is the 'soft' cultural core behind the hard political stand on terror. And while, for some, the drama and urgency of events may have pushed the deeper issues into the background, for others they have driven them to the fore, pushing some to the right, others to the left, and so gouging a deepening ideological cleavage. Disengagement, which has been a popular response to political disillusion and disappointment until now, may be a receding option as both terrorism, and the abuses of power terrorism makes more likely, show it to be futile and hollow.

We face the choice between a 'surveillance state' and a 'cosmopolitan state', to use the terms of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck: a state that tries to become a fortress in which security and militancy loom large and freedom and democracy shrink, or an open state that seeks global solidarity and transnationality. The writer Pankaj Mishra said—after Afghanistan but before Iraq—that irresistible power of the kind wielded by the United States today presented an inescapable paradox, demonstrated in the past by empires more self-aware than America, 'that as they grow more oppressive, both internally and externally, in the hope of making the world safe for themselves, they succeed in making it a more dangerous place for everyone'.

The growing ideological divide extends well beyond government and the major political parties. Indeed, in nations such as the United States, Australia and Britain, the rift is perhaps less apparent at this

level than it is between nations—for example, some European states and the 'coalition of the willing'. The redefining and polarising of left and right are also apparent at many other levels in society. While Christian and Islamic fundamentalists grow in strength and are arrayed against each other in the war on terrorism, more mainstream and progressive religious groups have emerged as powerful opponents of the current course of action, as well as becoming more active in other issues such as the environment. Science, too, is being divided, with a resurgent military science and a strengthening sustainability science. The political inclinations of different media organisations are also being more sharply etched.

In the short term, the right appears triumphant. The left is widely seen to be in crisis, unable to articulate an alternative vision. Yet the right is veering towards fascism, and the cultural foundations for a new left agenda exist. In the longer term, the question may be less a matter of which side prevails than it is one of when increasing knowledge, shifting public sentiment and global events bring us to a tipping point, and a gradual movement becomes a rapid transformation. Here, then, is how the clash of worldviews, catalysed by terror and other shocks, is translated into ideological conflict.

In the many talks about progress and wellbeing I've given over the past decade or so, several things have struck me about people's reactions. One is that people have been relieved that these big issues are being examined and discussed, so affirming their own deep doubts about society's direction. Many have felt isolated because they don't see these doubts echoed in the mainstream media and political debate. A second reaction is one of frustration that I don't say more about solutions, about what we should do. I usually decline to be specific. Maybe it's a cop-out because, as they say, the devil is in the detail, and it is in the detail of policy prescriptions and proposed actions that the real tests occur. However, there are reasons why I don't go there.

First, going into details requires a technical or policy expertise in the many relevant subject areas that I don't have. Second, in most cases, these responses are, by necessity, specific to particular aspects of the overall transformation required, and so specifying what we must do would require detailing a thousand different things. Some of my work has this more focused orientation: developing a national index of subjective wellbeing; working with a small group of colleagues to establish a new type of research institution, Australia 21, to promote multidisciplinary approaches to addressing the big challenges of our time; improving our understanding of youth suicide and other problems. Many others are also contributing in their own way. Finally, the detailed prescriptions are not what we need most. In many cases they have already been worked out; the theoretical frameworks have already been created, the technological capacity is already there to do far more than we have. Well-developed models already exist, for example, of alternative, sustainable economic systems.

More fundamentally, the solutions are there in what I say about cultural trends and moral values. We have been conditioned by our society's emphasis on government policy and corporate practice to think of solutions in terms of ten-point strategies or ten-year plans, but none exists for the organic, dynamic process of cultural change I describe. The task goes beyond policies and programs, beyond doctrine and ideology, to the broad principles that guide our lives, and so to values. These provide the 'common denominator' of human behaviour, and we must decide, as a society, if we want to aim for the highest rather than settle for the lowest. Values give us power. Without a clear sense of what matters, there can be no conviction or commitment, no way of knowing what to do or having the resolve to do it.

The average person may not have the knowledge or skills to master the intricacies of economic, social and environmental policy. But they have the capacity to evaluate the broader dimensions of the challenge I have outlined in this book. This is why I have emphasised

values. Fundamentally, what we regard as progress depends on our values, and this is a debate everyone is qualified to participate in because we make value judgments and choices every day of our lives.

My approach has been borne out by another common reaction. Of all the graphs and diagrams I use in my talks, the one that many people most respond to and request copies of (and one I am often hesitant to use because of its 'Sunday school' flavour) is a table showing St Thomas Aquinas's seven deadly sins (pride, envy, avarice, anger, sloth, lust and gluttony) and cardinal virtues (faith, hope, charity, prudence, fortitude, temperance and religion) and their reversal by modern consumer society. I think this is because it encapsulates, simply yet profoundly, our predicament. A few years ago, I spoke to Canberra secondary college teachers, and one of those who came up to me later to request a copy of the table was, much to my surprise, an outdoor-education teacher. He explained that what I'd been talking about was the sort of thing the kids discussed around the campfire at night.

Our situation demands a personal response. We must see responsibility for it in terms of 'us', not 'them'—meaning everyone else, or government, or business, or some other institution, or some other country. Each of us must reflect deeply on our own values, choices, goals and priorities. There is an understandable reluctance to accept this personal responsibility because it seems so great. Yet one of the most important lessons to emerge from my analysis is that what we need to do now to improve our own personal wellbeing, and that of those close to us, is what we need to do to improve global prospects over this next, critical century and beyond. For all its complexity, this is the beautiful simplicity and symmetry of 'the big picture'.

At the same time, our response must go beyond the personal; it involves more than personal growth or development (which in most cases has become just another form of consumption). It also requires social activism, but an activism that goes beyond the usual goals of

social justice. Specific injustices and disadvantages arising from inequalities between groups in our society require attention, but addressing them is not, in itself, enough. Giving the poor and excluded the opportunities and privileges enjoyed by the majority will not meet the broader challenge.

The evidence I have discussed in this book boils down to this: nourish your heart, mind and soul, not just your body. Cherish intimacy, participate socially, engage politically and believe spiritually. Apply what one of my colleagues calls the 'grandchildren test': How will the choices you make shape the world they inherit? Vote in the national and global interest, not your own. Be discerning in your use of the media. Consume modestly. Regard flaunted wealth and extravagant consumption as poor taste. Obey the golden rule of treating others as you would have them treat you. Beware of simple solutions (especially those that blame others for the problems). Think for yourself.

If this advice is not enough, and you want more guidance, then here is a set of goals for action that impressed me with its simplicity and comprehensiveness—at least with respect to the social dimensions of the task confronting us. Fairshare International, an Australian-based global community group, has come up with a formula—5.10.5.10—for people who refuse to be bystanders and want to take actions that matter:

- Give at least 5 per cent of your gross income to organisations that assist the poor and disadvantaged and help to protect the environment.

- Reduce use of resources, including water and energy, to at least 10 per cent below the national per capita average—and preferably by more.

- Spend at least 5 per cent of your leisure time in voluntary work helping others or tackling social and environmental challenges.

- Take significant democratic action to correct bad practices at least 10 times a year, including writing letters to politicians, the media or corporations.

There can be no grand plan or strategy for bringing about whole-system change. It is a dynamic process of public and political debate, discussion and action that is messy, difficult, disturbing and protracted, undertaken at many levels in many different ways, with the eventual outcomes always uncertain. We are living in the turmoil of a profound transformation in Western culture. It is this hope in a new beginning, this excitement of the challenge, this imperative to look beyond our personal horizons that we must embrace.

In contemplating what is happening in the world, it is easy to feel that we are in the grip of powerful historical currents whose origins go back centuries, perhaps millennia, and against which individuals, and even governments, can only struggle punily. Yet it is also true that people, collectively and individually, can stand against those currents—and even change their course.

author's note

For much of my career, the work that has led to this book was a sideline, fitted around other duties. Ultimately, I could not resist the pull to make it my main 'job', whatever the costs to career prospects and remunerations. While this work has been a personal passion, I'd like to thank several bosses who made it possible. They include: the first director of the Australian Commission for the Future, Rhonda Galbally, and the former chief executive of CSIRO, Keith Boardman, who allowed me to start down the path of broad multidisciplinary analysis; the former director of the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Bob Douglas, who threw me a slender lifeline when I had to leave CSIRO to continue the work; and the current director, Tony McMichael, who extended that line.

I am indebted to Hugh Mackay for allowing me to use his valuable work on Australians' attitudes and perceptions. I would also like to acknowledge all those other researchers and scholars—too numerous to mention—on whose work I have drawn. I benefited from, and was encouraged by, the feedback from many readers of newspaper and journal articles, journal reviewers and conference participants. I am especially grateful to three colleagues—Bob Cummins, Gavin Turrell and Colin Butler—who read and commented on drafts of several of the more scientifically detailed chapters. Finally, I want to express my thanks to Text Publishing's editor, Mandy Brett, for her very helpful feedback on early drafts of the book.

notes on sources

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