

THE BIG QUESTION:

Quality of Life

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

HOW SHOULD WE MEASURE IT?

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On Happiness

“Quality of life” can be understood in three main ways. First, there is the wealth or purchasing power of citizens, and the quality and accessibility of goods provided in the community—including education, healthcare, parks, public roads, air, and water. A supplement to this first category are social and political goods, such as democracy, rule of law, political and religious freedom, the lack of discrimination, and a sense of community.

But quality of life can also suggest happiness—a subjective state of mind. Using that metric, the citizens of some developing countries, such as Bhutan, score high. Finally, quality of life can refer to a more objective sense of happiness that is related to the meaningfulness of one’s profession or work. A physician who joins Doctors Without Borders may be happier than one who earns a larger income, because the first—by working to alleviate the pain and suffering in the Third World—is devoted to a cause that is more meaningful.

There are methods for measuring quality of life in terms of wealth or material goods. One can also obtain a rough measure of people’s subjective happiness by simply asking them how happy they are. However, it is much more difficult to measure

meaningfulness. One way to do so would be to evaluate the extent to which individuals believe they have fulfilled their own ideals.

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