

DID CIVILIZATION ADD TO THE QUALITY OF HUMAN LIFE?

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1 INTRODUCTION

Civilization is commonly seen to involve a better quality of life, but there are also qualms about the benefits of civilization. One is that it typically involves the dominance of one particular culture over others, which may not be the most livable one. A related reservation is that civilization may go against human nature. In this presentation, I take stock the available evidence for these views. A preliminary step is to specify the concepts.

2 CIVILISATION

The word “civilization” is used to mean different things and is applied both at the macro level of societies and the micro level of individuals. When applied at the macro level, the word often denotes societal development and is in that context associated with advanced technology, fine-grained division of labor, hierarchical organization and globalization. In this evolutionary perspective, “great civilizations” are seen as societies that were ahead of their time and have pushed humankind to a higher level. At the macro level, the term is also used in a narrower sense, suggesting development towards a more “decent” society and is, in that context, associated with taboos on cannibalism, respect for human rights, peacefulness and the flourishing of arts and sciences. When applied at the micro level of individuals, the term “civilization” denotes decent behavior and is associated with control of emotions, observance of codes of conduct, intellectual development and refined taste.

The phenomena denoted by these three meanings tend to go together, but do not necessarily do so. Advanced societies are not always the most decent ones and individuals living in a civilized society do not always behave decently. In this essay, I will consider all three meanings of the word “civilization”.

3 QUALITY OF LIFE

The term “quality of life” applies only to the micro level of individuals, since societies have no “life” as such. One cannot meaningfully speak about quality of life *of* a society, but only of quality of human life *in* a society. In that case, the term is typically used for aggregates, such as the quality of life of most of the inhabitants. In this application, the term quality of life is used in two ways.

3.1 Assumed Quality of Life

The term “quality of life” is commonly used to denote living conditions deemed good for people, like material affluence, clean air and social support. This is commonly measured using

point systems to rate presence of such desirables, which are then combined in an index. Many such indices exist and these provide different mixes of living conditions in different aggregates, for example Estes' (1984) Index of Social Progress (ISP) that measures the quality of living conditions in nations and the Dutch Life Situation Index (LSI) that sums up the life chances of individuals (Boelhouwer, 2010). One of the problems with this view of quality of life is that it involves a-priori assumptions about good living conditions, such as the principle that education is good and that more of it is better than less. I call this "assumed quality of life".

3.2 Apparent Quality of Life

By contrast, I distinguish "apparent quality of life", which is how well people actually flourish. How well people flourish manifests in their health and happiness, which can be quantified in "Happy Life Years" (Veenhoven, 2005).

For this analysis of the relation between civilization and quality of life, we better not use notions of assumed quality of life, because of the conceptual overlap with notions of civilization. This is the case with education, which figures in both notions of civilization and quality of life. Therefore, I focus on "apparent quality of life" and inspect whether people live longer and happier in "civilized" social conditions than under barbarism.

4 APPARENT QUALITY OF LIFE IN CIVILIZED SOCIETY

Two strands of research provide information on this issue: one is historical anthropology, which provides estimates of health and longevity of our ancestors in different phases of societal development. The other is comprised of research into social indicators that assesses health and happiness in contemporary societies.

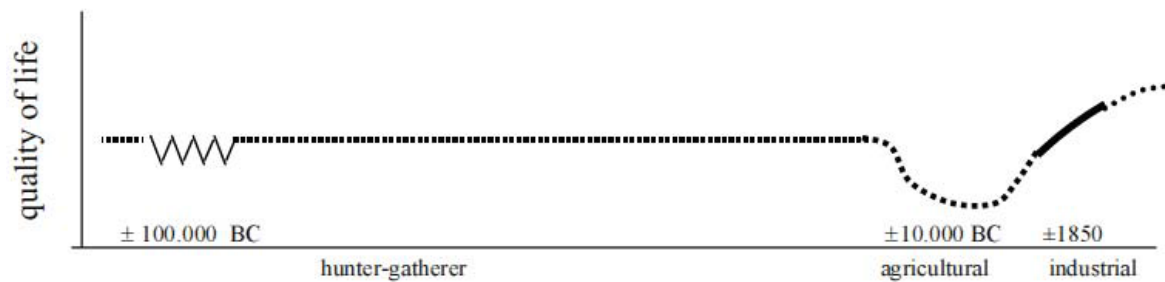
4.1 Big History: healthy life years over societal evolution

Estimates of how long and healthy humans have lived in the past are summarized in Figure 1. The square dotted line on the left side of the picture is based on analysis of human remains. It shows that in the long phase of hunter gatherer societies, humans lived short but fairly healthy lives. The agrarian revolution did not result in greater longevity, but did reduce average health in several ways, such as more epidemics, manslaughter and chronic malnutrition (Mariansky & Turner 1992, Lensky et al, 1995). The first "great civilizations" emerged in the agrarian phase of societal development, in which quality of life was lower than in the earlier hunter-gatherer phase. So civilization has not always resulted in a better life.

Yet after the industrial revolution, a steady rise in longevity has set in, which continues today. Since short it is also clear that much of the gained life years are spent in good health. This upward trend is indicated with the solid up-going line at the right in figure 1. The point dotted continuation of that line denotes the expected development of healthy life years.

Figure 1

Healthy life years over human history



Source: Veenhoven (2010)

4.2 Happiness in Modern Society

Though we now live longer and healthier lives than ever before in human history, it could still be that we enjoy life less. If so, increased longevity may be a mixed blessing. Several critics of modernization see evidence of such a negative trend in rising rates of depression and declining trust in institutions. An exemplary book is Robert Lane's *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (2000).

Yet a comparison across contemporary nations shows that people live happiest lives in the most modern ones. This is easily visible on the world map of happiness on figure 2 and also appears in strong correlations of average happiness with various aspects of modernity, such as income per head, level of education, industrialization, urbanization, globalization and size of the service sector (Veenhoven & Berg 2013). Likewise, comparisons over time within modern nations reveal an upward trend (Veenhoven & Vergunst 2014). So the solid upward line in figure 1 applies also to happiness.

Figure 2

Average happiness in contemporary nations



Source: Veenhoven 2013

4.3 Happiness in the Most “Decent” Societies

Comparisons across nations also reveal strong correlations between average happiness and several indicators of societal decency that are not necessarily part of economic development. These indicators are respect of human rights, gender equality, absence of corruption and trust in fellow citizens. Research findings on that matter is summarized in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2013) in the collection of correlational findings entitled “Happiness and the Condition of the Nation”.

Yet there is no clear correlation between average happiness and homicide rates in nations (Veenhoven 2012), nor with the scope of the welfare state, which is sometimes considered as a hallmark of civilization (Veenhoven 2000).

5. THE APPARENT QUALITY OF LIFE OF CIVILIZED PEOPLE

Analysis of differences in happiness of individuals has also shown correlations with indicators of decency. For instance, happy people cheat less on taxes and engage more in voluntary work. Happy people are also more tolerant and less politically extreme. Yet happy people do not stand out as supporters of high-brow culture. An overview of research findings is presented on table 1.

Table 1

Average correlation between individual happiness and aspects of civilization in modern nations as observed in various studies

<i>Aspect of civilization</i>	<i>Correlation with happiness</i>	<i>Section in findings archive</i>
<i>Cultural development (Bildung)</i>		
Education	+	E1.2
Intelligence	0	I3.2
Cultural consumption	+	C11.2.1
High-brow cultural taste	0	C11.2.3
Reading	+	L3.3.2.7
<i>Personality</i>		
Conscientious	+	P4.16
Emphatic	+	P4.33
Kind, Cooperative	++	P4.64, P4.107
Self controlled	+	P4.58
<i>Social behavior</i>		
Aggression	—	A5.2.2
Helping	+	H10.2
Volunteering	+	S7.2.3
<i>Values</i>		
Self development	+	V2.1.1.2
Knowledge	±	V2.2.6
Sociability	+	V2.2.2

6. CONCLUSION

Over time, civilization has improved the quality of human life in human societies, but not in a linear way, since it reduced quality of life during the time of the great ancient civilizations. Among modern societies, the most civilized ones provide their citizens the best quality of life and, within these societies, the most civilized people live the happiest lives.

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