

Friday, February 25, 2011

Thoughts on Gallup's Religious Wellbeing Polls

Christian apologist Rick Warden has posted numerous comments on my blog (see my blogs [here](#) and [here](#)), reaching for virtually any desperate means of attacking Objectivism that he can concoct on the spur of the moment. To his credit, Rick rightly recognizes that Objectivism poses a philosophical threat to theism, and his choice to dig in his heels to protect his god-belief from the very existence of other human beings who do not buy into the bible's bull, has motivated him to deploy numerous deliberately distorting and, I dare say, underhanded tirades on my blog. His latest barrage of comments were posted in mid January on [this blog](#), and I debated whether or not to respond yet again to someone who has proven to be quite unteachable on philosophical matters. Since I realize that some of my readers might benefit from points I have in response to Rick's rants, and since I haven't been posting much on my blog in recent months, I have decided to publish my reaction.

In the present entry, I will focus on some polling results published by Gallup which Rick apparently thinks are important to the debate.

Now when Rick Warden, in his continuing effort to find fault with Objectivism, seeks to turn our attention to Gallup's polling data, this is a clear sign that he's on the ropes. It indicates nothing more than that he senses his own position's futility in trying to seal any philosophical case against Objectivism. If one cannot win his case by means of legitimate argument, focus your sights the latest Gallup survey.

But I'm happy to oblige and check out the surveys' results.

Rick himself has posted an entry on his own blog regarding the polling data. His blog can be found here:

[Gallup Polls Highlight Happiness, Health and Logic in Spirituality](#)

Gallup's own release of the polling results can be found here:

[Religious Americans Enjoy Higher Wellbeing](#)

[Very Religious Americans Report Less Depression, Worry](#)

Now I have never granted very much importance to polls. I'm of the considered opinion that one could pretty much create a poll to achieve whatever result he wants. But this is not the first time I've seen a theist point to polling data or popularity contests as a means of defending theism. What's notable about the two Gallup polls which Rick Warden cites, is that religiosity as it is understood and measured in both polls is not specific to any particular religion. Both polls assume the following definitions:

Very religious -- Religion is an important part of daily life and church/synagogue/mosque attendance occurs at least every week or almost every week. This group constitutes 43.7% of the adult population.

Moderately religious -- All others who do not fall into the very religious or nonreligious groups but who gave valid responses on both religion questions. This group constitutes 26.6% of the adult population.

Nonreligious -- Religion is not an important part of daily life and church/synagogue/mosque attendance occurs seldom or never. This group constitutes 29.7% of the adult population.

At minimum, "religion" as Gallup measures it could be either Christianity ("church"), Judaism ("synagogue") or Islam ("mosque"), and presumably could be any other religion for that matter. While I have not seen the questions which survey respondents were asked to answer in either poll, the definitions here suggest that "religion" as it is understood is widely open-ended. The poll also makes a point to indicate that religiosity is defined in part as "self-reported importance of religion," and that this single criterion can by itself measure a

respondent's religiosity. So depending on how the question is asked, a person reporting that religion is very important - whatever that might mean to the respondent - would be classified by the survey in the "very religious" bucket.

Another point of note that I find troubling is that it is not clear what specifically is meant by "wellbeing" as the Gallup polls understand it. I'm sure Gallup has a worked-out understanding of what this is supposed to mean, but I could not find it in my review of the documentation (then again, I just "skimmed" it - a talent I learned from [Sye Ten Bruggencate](#)). Now the Gallup poll page does have a link to an advertisement for a book on wellbeing titled *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements*, by Tom Rath and John Harter. When I clicked on [the link](#), the book's advertisement showcases five boxes presumably corresponding to the "five essential elements" mentioned in the book's title. Those elements are: career wellbeing, social wellbeing, financial wellbeing, physical wellbeing, community wellbeing. Lacking from these "essential elements" are personal wellbeing and philosophical wellbeing, the very categories that I would think are as important (if not more so) as physical wellbeing and career wellbeing. So if this is any indication of what Gallup means by "wellbeing," perhaps it should come as no surprise that those who the survey categorizes as "very religious" might score high.

But clearly Rick Warden wants us to take Gallup's polling results seriously. And his interpretation of the polling results is highly suspect. For example, in the comments section of [this blog](#), he wrote:

If you look at my recent blog article on spirituality and happiness, you will find Gallup polls that show selfishness and materialism are not conducive to happiness, but spirituality is. Ayn Rand chose atheism at age 13, according to her personal notes. In her so-called "philosophy for life" she ended up addicted to meth as she wrote the *Fountainhead*.

In my review of both Gallup polls which Rick cites, I found no mention whatsoever about selfishness or materialism. This seems to be Rick's own interpretation of the data. And yet Rick himself does not produce any rational basis for this interpretation of the data presented in these studies. Rick's own blog entry on the topic does not make any mention of either selfishness or materialism either. And yet, here he is telling us that these studies indicate that neither selfishness nor materialism is "conducive to happiness." But from what I can see, the studies in no way state this.

While I would not be surprised by any study finding that materialism - if taken seriously and applied consistently - resulted in depression, ennui, mental agitation, or emotional emptiness, it's hard to see how a genuinely anti-selfish disposition and code of conduct could result in happiness. Happiness is the emotional result of achieving one's own values. By its very nature happiness is selfish.

Let's be clear on the meaning of these terms. Selfishness, as Objectivism informs it, is essentially concern for one's own interests. When someone takes care of himself, works to earn his way through life, purchases a home for himself and his family to live in, buys his family food and clothing, pays the energy bill, educates himself and improves his talents and abilities, and the like, he's acting selfishly.

Some dictionaries will define selfishness as concern *exclusively* for oneself while deliberately ignoring or even thwarting the values of others. But this is clearly not a suitable definition, for caring for another's values could very well be in a person's own self-interest. I look after my wife's interests and my daughter's interests, just as I look after my own immediate interests, because they too are among my interests. Their welfare is definitely very high in my hierarchy of values. When I tend to my wife's and daughter's needs, I am being just as selfish as when I tend to my own immediate needs. So, to be sure, there are some very persistent misconceptions about the meaning and nature of selfishness. Rand points this out in the Introduction to her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*:

The meaning ascribed in popular usage to the word "selfishness" is not merely wrong: it represents a devastating intellectual "package-deal," which is responsible, more than any other single factor, for the arrested moral development of mankind.

In popular usage, the word "selfishness" is a synonym of evil; the image it conjures is of a murderous brute who tramples over piles of corpses to achieve his own ends, who cares for no living being and pursues nothing but the gratification of the mindless whims of any immediate moment. (vii)

The opposite of selfishness is *selflessness*. Selflessness is essentially indifference to values as such. A selfish person is someone who looks out for his values: he takes those actions which achieve and secure those values which he needs in order to live, including those which make his life worth living (for they offer the incentive he needs in order to continue living). He recognizes that values are not automatically achieved, but must be achieved and protected by means of chosen action guided by rational judgment.

A truly selfless person, if such a thing could exist, would take no interest in what he needs in order to live. He would be indifferent to his need for food, clothing, shelter from the elements, knowledge, ability, judgment, social relationships, etc. Obviously such a person would have minimal life expectancy. But this is the ideal which is offered by the anti-selfishness crowd: they don't want *you* to be the primary beneficiary of your own actions; they want someone or something else to enjoy that role.

It should be noted that those who preach self-sacrifice often appeal to emergencies as the backdrop for making their points. For instance, a selfish man, it may be claimed, would not risk his life by running into a burning building to save his wife or children. He's only going to look out for his own skin, and not worry about others. So he'd let them burn up. But this is not necessarily true, nor is it a just representation of what selfishness truly is. A selfish man may very well run into a burning house, especially if (a) something he values is threatened by the flames engulfing the house (especially if it's an irreplaceable value, such as a family member or close friend), and (b) he believes, on what little assessment the situation allows, that he might have some chance at succeeding in saving his values. And while a truly *selfless* person would not care either way if persons and things were destroyed in a house fire (since he is to reject his self, and with it anything that could potentially be a value relating to his self), emergencies are not the norm of human life, and therefore not the standard condition for evaluating moral behavior. A person acting in response to an emergency does not have the luxury of being able to consider all available alternatives, scrutinizing the situation's particular circumstances and subsequently weighing the pros and cons of his actions with adequate knowledge of their appropriateness. On the contrary, in an emergency, where life and limb face immediate threat, one must act without being able to assess the situation. The moral is the chosen under *normal conditions*, not what one might be compelled to do in an emergency.

Given these points, consider the lunacy of someone who says something to the effect that you need to sacrifice yourself in order to achieve something you want, such as happiness. If one sacrifices himself, he sacrifices everything he wants, including happiness. To suppose that happiness is only possible on the condition that one sacrifice himself - which would include everything he values, wants, and enjoys - is to distort happiness beyond recognition. On such a view, what is "happiness" and why would it be important? The mystic can say "If you want happiness, you need to deny yourself" all he wants. But he ignores the facts that "wanting" is of the self to begin with, and happiness requires a self which can enjoy it.

Now consider what must be the motivation of those who condemn selfishness and urge you to renounce your concern for your own interests. Could it be the case that they hope to gain something - anything - by means of your sacrifice? Even if it's some form of satisfaction or sense of validation - as perverse as either would be - that they are seeking, such a goal is itself borne of a desire to gain. In such a case, we have clear case of hypocrisy.

But neither of the two Gallup polls which Rick cites suggests that one should go about seeking and achieving happiness by giving up himself, his ideals, his principles, his character, his self. In no way is self-sacrifice indicated as the proper means to happiness in any of these polls. Likewise, in no way do either poll indicate that selfishness is anathema or hostile to happiness.

What I found interesting in the polls were the results reported among those categorized by Gallup as "Very Religious." In the poll [measuring well-being](#), the "very religious" participants of the poll achieved a score of only 68.7 on the Well-Being Index. Assuming that the maximum score achievable is 100 (which may or may not be the case), why did the "Very Religious" category achieve such a mediocre score? On a traditional grading system, this score out of 100 would amount to a D+ at best. For those claiming to be filled with a divine spirit that's supposed to be omniscient, infallible and omnibenevolent, that's hardly something to brag about.

At any rate, why did the "very religious" score only a 68.7? Why did they not achieve an overall higher score?

Similarly I was struck by the results of [the poll measuring depression](#) among the surveyed populations. According to this poll, 15.6% of those answering to the criteria defining “very religious” were diagnosed with depression. Gallup’s own assessment says that “Nearly one in six (15.6%) very religious American adults have been diagnosed with depression in their lifetime.” One in six?! Why is the frequency of depression diagnosis for this portion of the population so high? Why would there be *any* depression among those who are “very religious” if their religious views actually contained the secret to better wellbeing? If the religious view of the world were in fact so superior to any non-religious view, as religious apologists like Rick Warren insist, such findings are in painful need for explanation.

Perhaps the depression reported by those in the “very religious” category could be explained as having been experienced prior to becoming “very religious.” If that is the case (and it’s not clear if the poll allows for such responses), perhaps it was depression which influenced their decision to become religious in the first place. I know from firsthand experience how religious proselytizers often seek to exploit difficulties in a person’s life in order to woo them into the religious fold. It is often the case that a person turns to religion when he is at a low point in his life. After all, one typically does not refocus his hopes on the supernatural when things in the natural world are going well. I’m reminded of one of Danny Barker’s tunes, which includes the observant statement, “before you can sell salvation, you have to sell damnation.” And damnation is a lot easier to sell when someone is deep in the doldrums of life.

But folks like Rick don’t want us to focus exclusively on the “very religious” results. Rather, they want us to be impressed by comparisons between the different groups that the surveys categorize and measure. In the [well-being survey](#), for instance, we’re supposed to be preoccupied by the difference between those categorized as “very religious” - who collectively scored 68.7 on the Well-Being Index- and those categorized as “non-religious” - who collectively scored only 64.2. Apparently we’re supposed to be excited (or *quicken*) by the “Our group scored higher than your group” chorus of the “very religious,” even though the difference between the two scores is hardly significant. While the “non-religious” score may be a solid D, the “very religious” score is at best only a D+. And a D+ is hardly something to shout about. Indeed, one would think that, if the “truths” which the “very religious” have traditionally championed were in fact true, the divide between these respective scores would be considerably wider. We might even expect the “very religious” to be consistently scoring an A+ while the “non-religious” are hopelessly suffocating in the low Fs.

The survey also states that

Well-Being Index scores do not vary widely across sub-groups of the U.S. population. For example, across all 50 states, the range in Well-Being Index scores from the highest scoring state to the lowest scoring state is about 10 points.

In other words, as I understand this, the broadest range in score differential is about 10 points across the US, and yet the differential between “very religious” and “non-religious” is statistically averaged at less than half of this! If that’s the case, I’m even less impressed by the poll’s results, especially given the fact that the vast majority of Americans are products of a miserable educational system, and also the fact that most “non-religious” persons in the United States very probably accept many religious premises, whether they realize it or not, and thus float through their existence with little if any rational bearing on the course of their lives. On that note, a sure formula for depression would involve accepting religion’s man-damning premises on the one hand, and the futile belief that one could never measure up to religion’s standards, that one could never earn his dignity or sanctity, regardless of what he does or attempts to accomplish. Accepting such premises in one’s worldview would drastically reduce one’s philosophical capacity for achieving genuine happiness.

In the end, however, all that Gallup really gives us are some polling results, with little to no indication that I could readily find as to what questions the respondents were asked to consider. And the fact that neither poll measures for happiness among those self-identifying specifically as Objectivists only tells me that this distinction is ignored by the surveying process. Had the polls included this additional category, what would their results look like? I guess we’ll never know.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Psychopathy](#), [Selfishness](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [12:30 AM](#)