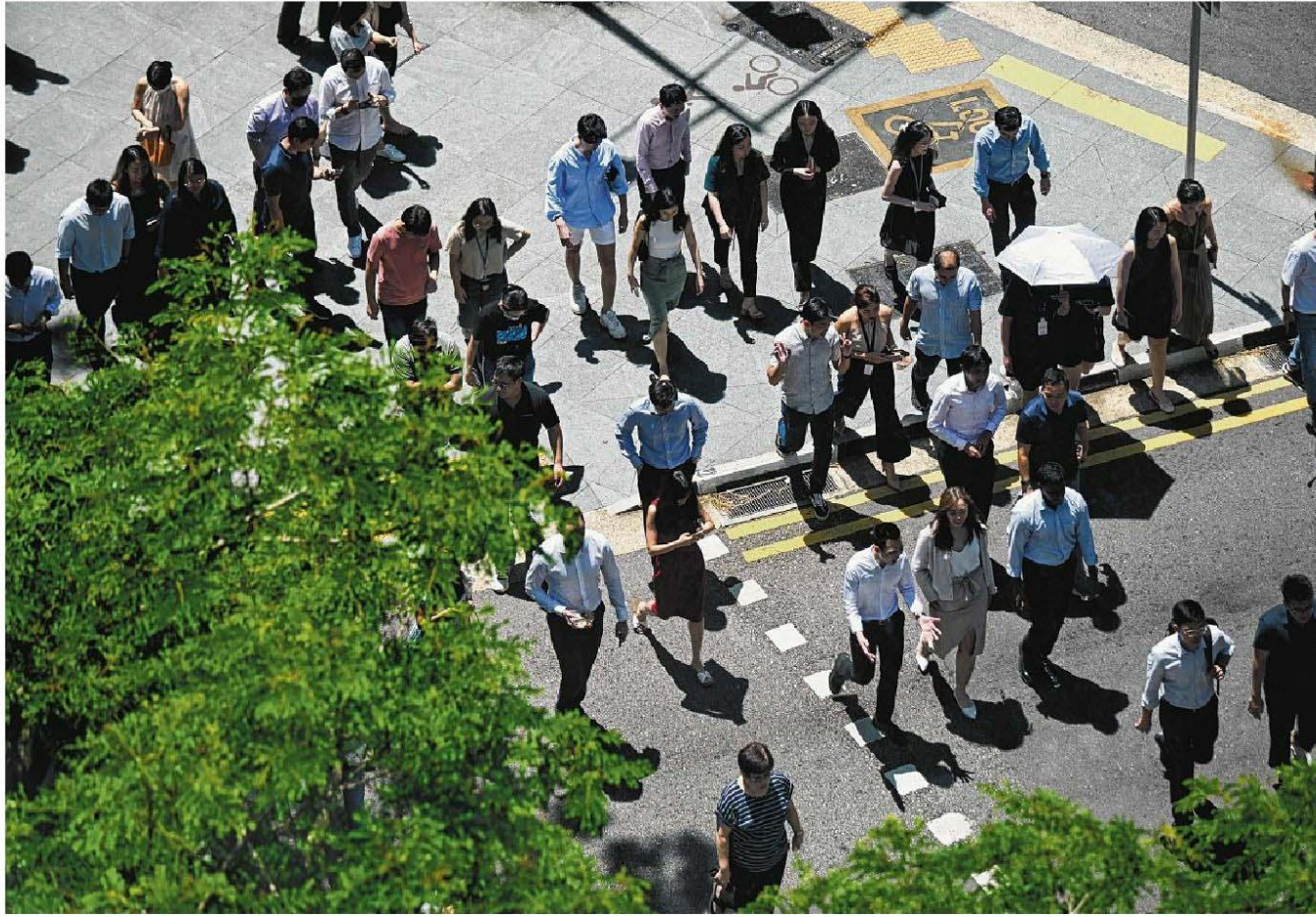


Chasing success is problematic because the markers of success are shaped by external forces. What causes an economy to boom and what "others" value tend to feature excessively in this calculus. We go unthinkingly with the flow when we could have found meaning in something else, if we had asked ourselves what we really want, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO



graduate on the paternal side of my family – and made it all the way to doctoral level at Harvard Law School on scholarships.

However, the significance accorded to one's performance in narrow terms, although serving the nation and blessing some of us with such aptitudes, can exact a price from a people who begin to hanker after the limited indicators of success. We think primarily efficiently and pragmatically.

Many Singaporeans are compassionate. But there is also a problematic drive to perform. Recognising this helps us to forge a more complete way of living and contribute to the national narrative to reshape our ethos. It requires a hard look at ourselves.

The pragmatic drive to be efficient and succeed is diametrically opposed to living an examined life in pursuit of human flourishing. Its prize tends to be materialistic acquisition rather than character building in virtues or moral growth that enables one to live wisely in accordance with reason.

Even the basic goods of human flourishing tend to be pursued instrumentally if we serve the hard master of success.

LET'S NOT DIMINISH WHAT MATTERS

Play and aesthetic experience may be pursued, but instrumentally. Rest, recreation and inspiration enhance productivity. But we fail to reap the full benefits of the goods if we view them merely instrumentally.

Sociability or friendship may be sought as useful networks. Yet in treating people as means to our ends, we view them in terms of utility, and diminish them, acting contrary to the good of friendship.

As for the good of religion, which Prof Finnis defines as addressing higher order metaphysical questions such as the meaning of life, we are not known to be a philosophical people. Yet answering such questions enables us to realise what we truly value.

Knowledge is not viewed as enriching for its own sake, as seen in our preference for education on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects over the humanities.

Practical reasonableness is the good of being able to apply our intelligence practically to make ethical decisions, but utilitarian, pragmatic thinking can push us in a different direction.

Living an examined life in pursuit of flourishing, with the goods actualised in our individual lives differently according to our talents and inclinations, is partially a good antidote to the pressure of narrow ideas of success. But it requires a national reset. We must give serious thought to what constitutes human flourishing without dismissing it as an airy-fairy philosophical question.

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What's success? And what is it that gives meaning to our lives?

Chasing material indicators of success can stop us from flourishing in the truest sense of the word.

Tan Seow Hon

At a recent forum at the Singapore Management University, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong urged youth in Singapore to find meaning and purpose in what they do, and thrive and flourish in their own ways.

Before this, in the Motion on Advancing Mental Health in Parliament in February, the mental wellness of youth came under the spotlight. The Government recognised the need to change the narrow mindset of success. While hard work and excellence are good, Singaporeans "should not be unwittingly drawn into a rat race of hyper-competition and endless comparisons with one another, just to get ahead of others", said

Mr Wong, who was then Deputy Prime Minister.

Similar points were emphasised in the country's vision for the future in the Forward Singapore Report 2023.

A reset is necessary when we have moved past the inflexion point in our society where we are content with materialistically chasing the 5Cs (condominium, cash, credit card, car and country club). Or, some might cynically jibe that some of these are unattainable to many in the next generation. Our materialism remains evident when we think in terms of the net worth of the successful.

But surely we all want to live examined lives – an almost trite idea attributed to Socrates.

The capacity to think about what confers meaning and purpose on the projects we

undertake and decide what values we hold dear, and will spend the finite number of years of our lives on, distinguishes humans from animals.

It does not take the philosopher in me to recognise that my two adorable poodles, exceedingly smart in my view, do not spend their days grappling with metaphysical questions. Indeed, research suggests that "man's best friend" is quite likely to be unaware of its very existence.

By chasing a narrow definition of success, however, many humans also risk going through life without asking these fundamental questions. The answers should guide our undertakings.

CHASING SUCCESS

Chasing success is problematic because the markers of success are shaped by external forces. What causes an economy to boom and what "others" value tend to feature excessively in this calculus. We go unthinkingly with the flow when we could have

found meaning in something else, if we had asked ourselves what we really want.

PM Wong encouraged all to thrive and flourish. But chasing success tends to diminish our capacities and desires to pursue what Aristotle calls eudaimonia, which can be translated as "living well" or "flourishing".

Many interdisciplinary research centres have popped up all over the world to examine what constitutes flourishing, with a view to advancing the well-being of human beings, helping us to actualise our potential and live optimally.

The Human Flourishing Programme at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science arrived at measures for human flourishing revolving around five areas: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.

Emeritus Professor John Finnis at the University of Oxford posits that there are basic goods of human flourishing: life,

knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability or friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion. Our actions make sense if we pursue these goods.

THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Human flourishing has not quite featured in our national narrative. Instead, our drive in the years of nation-building has been on how to stay ahead in the game given our lack of a hinterland, our geopolitics, and our dependence on outside sources for necessities such as food and water.

National pride has been built around how our airport, our container port, our national airline, the maths literacy of our schoolchildren, and our gardens have fared in world rankings.

Meritocracy is ingrained and not a bad thing: Rewarding the best and the brightest is better than nepotism. I, as with many in my generation from humble backgrounds such as PM Wong himself, was the beneficiary of meritocracy. I was the first