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Against Contextualism about Prudential Discourse

1. Introduction

Philosophers have urged that we embrace contextualism about many forms of evaluative language.[1] In recent times, there has been a surge of interest in, and enthusiasm for, contextualist views about *prudential* discourse — thought and talk about what has prudential value or contributes to someone's well-being. In this paper I examine in detail, and seek to reject, two recent cases for radical forms of prudential contextualism, proposed by Anna Alexandrova and Steve Campbell. Alexandrova argues for the view that the semantic content of terms like 'well-being' and 'doing well' varies across different contexts. Campbell proposes that there are plural prudential *concepts* at play in prudential discourse (and in philosophical reflection upon such discourse) despite the general assumption of uniformity and that we find evidence of this by looking at the conflicting commitments of prudential discourse.

The negative aim of the paper is to show that Alexandrova and Campbell have not given us a good case for ambitious forms of contextualism about prudential discourse. The positive aim of the paper is to provide alternative, non-contextualist, explanations of the features of prudential discourse that their discussions highlight.

The paper proceeds as follows. In sections 2 and 3, I outline Alexandrova's *contextualism*, arguing that although she draws our attention to one element of prudential discourse that *is* context-sensitive (judgements and claims about someone 'doing well') we should reject her deeper, more radical, kind of contextualism about prudential discourse. I do so by showing how all of the relevant data is better accommodated by a non-contextualist alternative which I call *Aspectualism*. I then (§§4-5) turn to Campbell's arguments for conceptual pluralism, arguing that he fails to identify mutually-conflicting, fundamental, commitments of prudential discourse.

[1] For a small sample of such proposals see: Baker (2012), Björnsson & Finlay (2010), DeRose (1992), Dowell (2011), Finlay (2014), Jenkins & Nolan (2010), Sundell (2011).

2. ALEXANDROVA'S CONTEXTUALISM

Anna Alexandrova has recently outlined a radical form of contextualism about prudential discourse. Let me first describe the data that she introduces before outlining and assessing the range of options that she considers in response to it.

First, Alexandrova points out that people make apparently prudential claims, and ask (e.g.) 'how are you doing?', in a variety of contexts. She gives three cases where someone asks someone, Masha, how she is doing: (1) a Good Samaritan when Masha has fallen on ice (2) a good friend in confidence (3) a social worker checking on Masha as a new parent. In each case, it is stipulated that the interlocutor asks Masha how she is doing. Alexandrova contends that:

> [W]e witness three judgements that are ostensibly about Masha's well-being. Nothing changes in her life, and yet in each case a different standard of well-being is used. The Good Samaritan has in mind neither flourishing nor positive mental states but rather the physical comfort of a heavily pregnant woman walking on ice. So long as Masha is not terribly in pain and can get home all right, the Good Samaritan is justified in judging her to be well. In the second case, the caring friend's concern is a richer notion of well-being—probably closest to what philosophers call 'well-being'. When she asks Masha how she is doing, she has in mind whether Masha is fulfilling her hopes and whether she is depressed. So the friend justifiably concludes that Masha is not doing well. Finally, the social worker is employing yet another notion of well-being, most akin to quality of life. […] Masha is a member of the *patrimonial middle class*, which makes it likely that she will not fall through the cracks when she hits a vulnerable stage in life. She also has lots of people and resources to count on. Those two things are enough for well-being as far as the social worker is concerned.

> [T]he threshold that separates well-being from ill-being—that is, how much of a given good Masha must have in order to qualify as doing well—and the factors that count for well-being

appear to vary across our three cases. I call these *threshold* and *constitutive* dependence, respectively. How should philosophy accommodate them?[2]

It is important to distinguish the *data* that Alexandrova identifies from the best *explanation of* that data. In order not to prejudge the latter issue, I will characterise the data points in quite rough terms. The first one is:

> **Data point 1:** Across different contexts, the uses of (i) 'doing well' and (ii) 'are you ok?' seem importantly different.

A second datum that Alexandrova introduces is the plurality of ways in which 'well-being' is used across different academic *disciplines*:

> This problem is magnified when we turn our attention to the scientific, rather than the everyday, context. Here, we do not even need to assume that 'How are you doing?' is a question about well-being. Researchers all across the social and medical sciences use the term 'well-being' freely and abundantly…It is a term used to refer to a minimal quality of life in development economics; to a health-related quality of life in medicine; to a child's access to decent schooling, healthcare, and parental love in disciplines that study children; to mental health in psychiatry and clinical psychology; and so on and so forth.[3]

Let me recast this as follows:

> **Data point 2:** the uses of 'well-being' across different disciplines seem importantly different.

[2] Alexandrova (2017: 8).

[3] Alexandrova (2017: 9).

To make things maximally clear up front, my strategy in the subsequent discussion is to agree with Alexandrova about the data points (as I have characterised them) but to mostly disagree with her about the best explanation of them.

Alexandrova describes three possible views that one could take in response to these observations: Circumscriptionism, Differential Realisation, and, her preferred view, Contextualism. She outlines these as follows:

Circumscriptionism

> The first possibility is just to deny the significance of the diversity in question. One could claim that this diversity, to the extent that it exists, is a mistake or an instance of linguistic carelessness on the part of those who use 'well-being' outside its proper context. Well-being proper is that general, all-things-considered evaluation that philosophers have been concerned about.[4]

Differential Realisation

> Another possibility is to accommodate the diversity that the Circumscriptionist rejects. Perhaps there is a stable content for well-being expressions (an assumption shared with the Circumscriptionist), but different states realise well-being in different circumstances […] For instance, well-being might consist purely in one's emotional balance when ascribed to a depression sufferer, or in one's access to basic medicine and education in an environment of deep poverty, or in realisation of one's dreams and ideals when we evaluate someone's life as a whole. On this view, the semantic content of the term 'well-being' does not change with each change in the environment. Only the truth-makers of the state 'is doing well' (or 'is not doing well') change with context.[5]

Contextualism

[4] Alexandrova (2017: 5).

[5] Alexandrova (2017: 5).

> [C]ontextualism about well-being would maintain that the semantic content of sentences in which 'well-being' and its cognates occur depends, at least in part, on the context in which it is uttered. A developmental economist might just mean something different by 'well-being' than does a clinical psychologist. On this view it is impossible to speak of well-being *simpliciter*. Rather, the content of well-being assertions needs to be indexed to specific circumstances (doctor's visit, poverty relief on country-wide scale, heart-to-heart conversation with a friend, etc.). Since these circumstances will inevitably differ from situation to situation, so will the semantic content of 'well-being'. In one situation it will connote a concern of a doctor for their patient, in another of a social worker for his clients, or of a therapist for her depressed patient, and so on and so forth. The context of an all-things-considered evaluation privileged by philosophers is just that: *one* of the *many* contexts in which well-being is in question.[6]

Alexandrova rejects circumscriptionism and differential realisation, holding that *contextualism* is the best explanation of the relevant data. I think that this is a mistake. Before explaining why, I will first present the three alternatives in a slightly different way, to make the differences between them maximally clear:

> **Circumscriptionism**: "well-being" (like 'doing well') only ever refers to exactly one state type, regardless of context.

> **Differential Realization:** (1) "well-being" (like 'doing well') only ever refers to exactly one state type, regardless of context. (2) different properties ground that property across different contexts.

The following schematic example helps to illustrate differential realisation:

In context A, "X is doing well" ascribes property **P**, whose grounds are X, Y, Z.

In context B, "X is doing well" ascribes property **P**, whose grounds are A, B, C.

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[6] Alexandrova (2017: 5).

The third alternative that Alexandrova introduces is contextualism:

> **Contextualism:** (1) "well-being" (like 'doing well') refers to different state types across different contexts. (2) different properties ground the relevant property across different contexts.

The following schematic example helps us to understand contextualism:

In context A, "X is doing well" ascribes property **P**, whose grounds are X, Y, Z.
In context B, "X is doing well" ascribes property **Q**, whose grounds are A, B, C.

3. ASSESSING ALEXANDROVAN CONTEXTUALISM

I intend to argue that Alexandrova's Contextualism, as outlined above, is *not* the best explanation of the data points that she presents. Let me state my specific theses up front, to aid the reader. My first main claim is that the use of 'doing well' *is* context sensitive. Different levels of well-being count as doing well in different contexts. My second main claim is that, *pace* Alexandrova, the use of 'well-being' etc in different academic contexts is best explained by an innocent form of circumscriptionism. Finally, *pace* Alexandrova, I hold that in everyday contexts we make judgements about different *aspects* of well-being and how well someone is doing with respect to those aspects. I now move on to assessing Alexandrova's contextualism and arguing that my view is superior.

Let us start by considering data point 2. It is undeniable that people from diverse subjects label that which they study as 'well-being'. The view that this is best explained by (something like) circumscriptionism might seem to manifest dogmatism. However, we see that this is not the case once we realise the close connection between the distinct subjects of these studies.

We can distinguish between at least the following. Firstly, a person's *level of well-being,* either at a time or over a period of time (including a whole life). Secondly, the positive and negative *constituents* of well-being (that which has *non-instrumental* prudential value and disvalue). Thirdly, there are instrumental *means* to improving a person's well-being. Fourthly, there are *necessary means or pre-conditions* to a person either having a level of well-being or their level of well-being improving. There are also *reliable indicators* of well-being. Finally there are different *levels* of well-being that we might be interested in. One of these is the level of a person's well-being that qualifies as a *good* life or doing *well*. Another one is the level of a person's well-being that qualifies as a *minimally good life*. (There are, of course, further distinctions we could make).

These distinctions are subtle and, crucially, unimportant for many subjects beyond philosophy because the practical difference between them is minimal or non-existent. For example, the difference between constituents of well-being, means to improving well-being, and necessary preconditions of having or improving a level of well-being, would (presumably) not be very important to many outside of philosophy. After all, the general point holds across these categories that in general the more someone has of the relevant thing, the better off they are.

I think circumscriptionism, minus the claims of carelessness, is true for the use of 'well-being' across different subjects, such as the social and medical sciences. When people in different subjects use these terms they refer to distinct things (and usually things distinct from well-being itself). These might be something from one, or more than one, of the categories identified above or from categories that require further similar distinctions. They may also simply function as stipulated technical terms, ones not intended to play the same role as the everyday term 'well-being'.

Contrary to Alexandrova's formulation of circumscriptionism, it is not that these other subjects manifest *carelessness*. It is rather that the theoretical and practical purposes served by these subjects make it appropriate for them to label different — but closely related — things as 'well-being'. Some subjects are interested in particular *constituents of well-being*, or in particular *ways of promoting well-being*, some are interested in particular *levels of well-being*. Other subjects are interested in these questions but restricted to sub-groups of the population, such as children. Thus they are talking about a cluster of closely related things, all of which are the subject of study because they are connected to well-being or aspects of it. It is thus no accident, and no grounds for criticism, that different subjects label these different things 'well-being'.[7] This is a perfectly innocent kind of loose talk.

[7] Similar patterns are observable for 'utility', 'welfare', 'happiness' and the like.

Having discussed the second data point, I will now examine Alexandrova's first data point. Looking at data point 1, Alexandrova provides this useful distinction between two different kinds of contextual variation where each is essential to her contextualism:

> [T]he threshold that separates well-being from ill-being—that is, how much of a given good Masha must have in order to qualify as doing well—and the factors that count for well-being appear to vary across our three cases. I call these *threshold* and *constitutive* dependence[.]

According to Alexandrova, 'doing well' judgements manifest *threshold dependence* whereas 'well-being' judgements manifest *constitutive dependence*. It will be useful to examine these separately, partly because I want to grant threshold dependence for 'doing well' judgements (and similar ones) as a genuine phenomenon, but deny constitutive dependence, the genuinely radical element of Alexandrova's contextualism.

Threshold dependence

Alexandrova is right that whether someone counts as *doing well* depends upon context. This is analogous to the way that whether someone counts as *tall* depends on the context. In different contexts, there are different minimum heights that one must be to qualify as tall.[8]

In a similar fashion, different levels of well-being will count as *doing well* in different contexts because the relevant qualifying level of well-being will be different. For example, take the question of whether our friend Jules is doing well. In one context it is true to say that Jules is not doing well. Perhaps Jules is, by far, the worst off of our friends. However, in another context it will be true to say that Jules is doing well because, of the people alive presently, they have one of the highest levels of well-being (it is just that all of their friends are doing even better). There are thus two different judgements that can be made of Jules. They are doing well *for someone alive right now* but they are not doing well *for someone in their friendship group*.

[8] Compare here the contextualist view of Jenkins & Nolan (2010) for 'is permissible' and the like.

Here is another example in support of threshold dependence. You are in an accident and severely injured. After a few days your injuries have begun responding to treatment and you are recovering in bed. Your friend comes to visit you a few days apart and, upon returning, remarks "You're doing really well." In context it is clear that the threshold for doing well has been shifted down. You are not doing well on the everyday standard for doing well but you are doing well *for someone who was recently in a bad accident*.

There will be countless other ways in which we can set a minimum level of well-being such that someone counts as doing well or not doing well. This can be achieved by implicit or explicit indexing of these judgements as in 'doing well for an X' where 'X' can be related to sex, age, occupation, the period of history the person lives, or any other way of categorising. For example we might say that "Jules is doing well *for an older man*". The addition of 'for an older man' adjusts the level of well-being that the subject must have in order to count as doing well. How does it do this? Presumably by provoking us to make our judgements sensitive to our antecedent expectations of someone in that group's level of well-being. For example, (suppose) we judge that older men typically have lower levels of well-being than the general population of humans and then assess Jules' level of well-being against this particular standard.

Thus I agree with Alexandrova that our judgements about whether someone is doing well, doing ok, or doing badly, manifest context-dependence. That is because in addition to a fully general assessment of someone's level of well-being we can, and commonly do, commonly assess that level against a contextually determined threshold for doing well. Threshold dependence is thus a real phenomenon. But notice that it does not support Alexandrova's contextualism, given that that view encompasses two claims:

> **Contextualism:** (1) "well-being" (like 'doing well') refers to different state types across different contexts. (2) different properties ground the relevant property across different contexts.

We've seen that (1) is true, applied to 'doing well', by seeing that 'doing well' refers to different levels of well-being across different contexts. But nothing so far has shown that (2) is true. The explanation of threshold dependence — that different levels of well-being count as doing well across different contexts and that we can often index someone's level of well-being (against e.g. people of the same age or gender) — was entirely compatible with well-being itself being context-insensitive (like height). We thus need to examine (2), by examining constitutive dependence.

Constitutive Dependence

Alexandrova argues that different *goods* are relevant to different assessments of well-being in different contexts. Let us remember the three cases that Alexandrova gives to motivate this claim:

> The Good Samaritan […] So long as Masha is not terribly in pain and can get home all right, the Good Samaritan is justified in judging her to be well. In the second case, the caring friend's concern is a richer notion of well-being—probably closest to what philosophers call 'well-being'. When she asks Masha how she is doing, she has in mind whether Masha is fulfilling her hopes and whether she is depressed. So the friend justifiably concludes that Masha is not doing well. Finally, the social worker is employing yet another notion of well-being, most akin to quality of life. To use Thomas Piketty's term, Masha is a member of the *patrimonial middle class*, which makes it likely that she will not fall through the cracks when she hits a vulnerable stage in life. She also has lots of people and resources to count on. Those two things are enough for well-being as far as the social worker is concerned.[9]

No single response adequately explains all of these data points. The last case, the social worker, seems one for which circumscriptionism is plausible. As we saw above, a cluster of closely-related things are called 'well-being' across different subject matters and it is plausible that the social worker's job is to assess the extent to which one has certain resources that are (at least) instrumental means to well-being.

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[9] Alexandrova (2017: 7).

She is there to assess the extent to which people have these resources, on the presumption that they are reliable means to (or preconditions of) sufficient prudential value for parents and infants.

Here is evidence for this interpretation. Suppose that the social worker reports "Masha is doing well" and a passing philosopher interjects and presses the social worker on whether she really knows that Masha is doing well. Presumably, if pressed like this, the social worker would *not* reply (e.g.) that these goods that (she has verified that) Masha has access to are, *really*, the only constituents of well-being and so yes Masha is, *ipso facto*, doing well. After all, it is clear that one could have money and people close to you but not live well. Rather, it seems likely that the social worker would reply by saying that her job is to see that Masha has these things (on the assumption that they are relevant to, because reliable sources of, well-being) and that everything beyond this is outside her remit. Her 'doing well' report was just loose talk about reliable means to well-being.

The different contexts where well-being reports are made will sometimes exhibit (perfectly reasonable) loose talk for which circumscriptionism is plausible. That explains what goes on in the social worker case. The other two cases, however, manifest a different kind of variation, one for which circumscription (alone) as a response is implausible but which, I will argue, do not tell in favour of contextualism (or differential realisation). Instead, these cases show how we focus on different *aspects* of well-being in different contexts, depending on what is salient.

The Good Samaritan asks (fallen) Masha if she is ok. How should we interpret this?[10] Plausibly, the Samaritan is asking something about Masha's *present* level of well-being, in light of the highly salient fact that Masha has just fallen over on ice. I suggest that the Good Samaritan is asking about one *aspect of* Masha's well-being, her hedonic state (balance of pleasure over pain).[11] When the Samaritan judges, or reports, that Masha is doing ok they are not judging her *overall* level of well-being. They are judging her to be doing sufficiently well in one respect, or along one dimension, of well-being.

We see evidence for this by imagining two different ways that the conversation could go.

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[10] There's *some* plausibility to circumscriptionism here, given that Masha's inquiry might be about something related to, but distinct from well-being, such as whether Masha has broken something.

[11] Perhaps coupled with her physical state (on the assumption that this is a productive means to prudential value and disvalue or perhaps even a constituent).

Version 1

Samaritan: "Are you ok?"

Masha: "I'm fine, thanks."

Samaritan: "I'm glad you're ok."

Samaritan (later, to third party): "I checked on her and she was ok."

Third party: "No she isn't. I've seen her around looking sad, and she doesn't seem to have any friends around here, and her partner just lost their job."

Samaritan: "Right, fine. But *physically* she is doing ok."

Version 2

Samaritan: "Are you ok?"

Masha: "I'm fine, thanks. But my life is going terribly. I don't have any friends or money and my partner just lost their job."

In version 1, Good Samaritan makes a judgement about an *aspect* of well-being — Masha's hedonic condition and perhaps also her physical condition. For the sake of brevity they will express this by saying that she's 'doing ok' but their judgement is that she is *doing ok in this respect.* Evidence for this comes from what they will say when pressed by a third party — namely that, in spite of the surface appearance, they are not making a judgement about her *overall* well-being, only one aspect of it.

In version 2, Masha's first sentence allows Samaritan to form a judgement about one aspect of her well-being. Masha's second sentence, however, changes the focus of the conversation by making salient her well-being *as a whole*, making that the focus of the conversation.[12] Once Masha does this, Samaritan cannot, as in version 1, simply address one aspect of her well-being and say "I'm glad you're ok". Such an utterance would seem both bizarre and callous. Similarly, Samaritan will have to report the

[12] On the idea of the common-ground of the conversation see especially: Grice (1989), Lewis (1979), Stalnaker (2002).

incident to a third party differently from in version 1, by saying something such as "Physically she was ok, but she was doing very badly overall".

My proposal is that Masha's falling over, and this being common knowledge to both parties, makes salient one *aspect* or *dimension* of her well-being — the hedonic aspect. Samaritan's inquiries into how Masha is doing are then treated as inquiries into how she is doing *in that respect*. But this is not fixed. Either party can shift the conversation to a more general, or fully general, assessment of well-being.

Here is an analogy to support the point. Suppose an electrician is employed by the government to provide free wiring checks for those soon to be having children living with them. The electrician checks an apartment and reports to their supervisor "the apartment is safe". Clearly, though, there are sources of danger for a child beyond electrical faults, so the electrician has not determined that it is safe *overall*. Suppose that a passer-by points this out. Presumably the electrician will concede that their talk was loose — they haven't verified that the apartment is safe *overall* — but clarify that their job is to assess one aspect of overall safety and that everything else is beyond their remit and was excluded from what they were reporting.

I have offered an account of what goes on in the cases of the social worker and the Good Samaritan. In each case the context is one where they are focused on either one *aspect* of well-being or some particular set of productive or constitutive means to well-being. In each case this is not a fixed feature of the conversation. It is easy for it to shift to a more, or less, general assessment of the relevant person's well-being.

How does this analysis compare with Alexandrova's? Importantly, my analysis contradicts Alexandrova's constitutive dependence claim and thus her contextualism:

> **Contextualism:** (1) "well-being" refers to different state types across different contexts. (2) different properties ground the relevant property across different contexts.

According to Alexandrova, across these different contexts, 'well-being' refers to *different states* which are, in turn, grounded by different properties. My alternative proposal is that, across these different contexts, people refer to different *aspects* of one common thing: well-being. There is not a plurality of states ascribed by 'well-being' with a plurality of grounds. Rather there is contextually-determined focus on different aspects of well-being combined with a certain degree of loose talk.

How can we tell the difference between these two views? Note, first, that on Alexandrova's view there will be *a lot* of talking past each other. For example, suppose that the friend in the Masha story meets the Samaritan. In response to the question: "how is Masha doing?" the friend will say: "Masha is not doing ok" whereas the Good Samaritan would say "Masha is doing ok." On Alexandrova's view there is no tension whatsoever between these two judgements or their expression in this fashion by the two interlocutors. According to Alexandrova, the Good Samaritan attributes property P, whose grounds are X, Y, Z, whereas the friend denies the attribution of property *Q*, whose grounds are A, B, C. Given that P and Q are, according to Alexandrova, distinct properties,[13] there is no real disagreement here. Put schematically, the situation is thus:

In context A, "X is doing well" ascribes property **P**, whose grounds are X, Y, Z.
In context B, "X is not doing well" is to refuse to ascribe property **Q**, whose grounds are A, B, C.

This generates the prediction that the following exchange should be perfectly felicitous:

Samaritan: "Masha is doing ok."

Friend: "Yes. And Masha is not doing ok."

I assume that we do *not* think that Friend's reply is perfectly appropriate. Rather, it seems that the conversation should go something like this:

Samaritan: "Masha is doing ok."

[13] One question for a radical form of contextualism like Alexandrova's is what makes these properties related, such that they are *both* well-being judgements. My hunch is that it will be difficult to answer this question in a plausible way without contextualism evolving into aspectualism.

Friend: "No, Masha is not doing ok. I've seen her around looking sad, and she doesn't seem to have any friends around here, and her partner just lost their job"

Samaritan: "Ok, but *physically* she's doing ok."

On my alternative, *aspectualist*, analysis, Friend and Samaritan are not *simply* talking past each other, as on Alexandrova's view. Rather, they have one common subject matter — well-being — and (at least one of them is) engaged in acceptable loose talk in expressing their view. So rather than simply proceeding as if their claims are not in tension with each other — "Yes. And Masha is not doing ok." — they instead recognise that at least one of them is engaged in loose talk and then make more explicit their non-conflicting propositions (Samaritan asserts that Masha is *doing ok physically speaking* whereas Friend asserts that Masha is *not doing ok overall*).

Remember the first of the data points that Alexandrova introduced:

Data point 1: Across different contexts, the uses of (i) 'doing well' and (ii) 'are you ok?' seem importantly different.

It seems plausible that there is *something* different between the judgements that Samaritan and friend make in the Masha cases. But Alexandrova's view explains this such that there is *too great* a difference. It is too great a difference because, on her contextualist view, there is no disagreement *at all* between:

Samaritan: "Masha is doing ok."

Friend: "Masha is not doing ok."

On the alternative view that I have developed here, we preserve the sense that Friend cannot reply to Samaritan like this because we have at least an initial appearance of disagreement, even if it turns out that this is explained as loose talk (and that the judgements that the interlocutors hold do not strictly conflict). They do not conflict because they are about different aspects of one common thing.

The aspectualist view I have described here thus does a better job of explaining data point 1 — that judgements of whether someone is doing ok exhibit variation across different contexts. It points out that we make judgements about different, particular, aspects or well-being but that, for reasons of conversational efficiency, we often express these as if they were judgements of the whole. Unlike Alexandrova's contextualism, this view explains both of the following things. First the need for Samaritan and Friend to clarify their utterances. Second, the fact that there is an important difference between their judgements.

By examining Alexandrova's case for contextualism about well-being we have seen some of the ways in which prudential discourse is context-sensitive. These were as follows:

(1) **Threshold dependence:** In different contexts, different levels of well-being count as doing well.

(2) **Aspectualism**: in different contexts (academic and everyday) we are interested in different aspects of well-being or in different close relations to well-being.

Let me summarise the preceding discussion. I have examined Anna Alexandrova's case for radical contextualism about well-being discourse. Alexandrova drew our attention to apparent differences in the way that terms such as 'is doing well', 'well-being', and 'doing ok' are used across different contexts. She argued that this data supports a radical form of contextualism about prudential discourse. I offered an alternative account which consisted of four claims. Firstly, that there is (perfectly innocent) looseness in use of 'well-being' across different academic subject matters. Secondly, that Alexandrova is correct that there is *threshold dependence* with respect to expressions such as 'doing well', so different levels of well-being count as doing well in different contexts. Thirdly, that we sometimes assess someone's level of well-being relative to groups to which they belong. Finally, that in different contexts we pick out different *aspects* of well-being and engage in loose talk when making claims about them. My alternative is a mild form of context-sensitivity, one that retains the idea that well-being is fundamentally context-insensitive, even if it is a matter of context which *aspects of* well-being we talk about and which levels of well-being count as doing well.

In the rest of the paper I will address another threat to the view that prudential value discourse is conceptually unitary and context-insensitive. This comes in the form of Steve Campbell's recent argument that there are plural prudential value *concepts*.

4. Campbell's Conceptual Pluralism

Campbell starts off by noting that work on well-being depends on the assumption of a single subject matter:

> Hedonists, desire-fulfillment theorists, perfectionists, and objective-list theorists generally take themselves to be in genuine disagreement with each other over a common subject matter that is both coherent and significant. Likewise, analyses of well-being are often presented as casting new light on *the* concept or property of well-being.[14]

This is undeniable as a claim about the literature. Campbell, however, thinks that we should reject the assumption. I will first present and explain Campbell's view before moving on to examine the justification he gives for it. Campbell's view is thus:

> **Conceptual pluralism**: despite the appearance of a univocal subject matter, prudential discourse involves distinct (sets of) concepts, meaning that at least some apparent instances of fundamental substantive prudential disagreements are, in fact, instances of talking past each other.

There is a clear affinity between this and Alexandrova's contextualism but Campbell's view is explicitly framed as a claim about distinct *concepts*. Here is a reconstruction of the first part of Campbell's argument for conceptual pluralism:

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[14] Campbell (2016: 408).

(1) Prudential discourse manifests mutually-conflicting commitments.[15]

(2) If prudential discourse manifests mutually-conflicting commitments there is no univocal subject matter.

(I will momentarily give some examples of the mutually-conflicting commitments referred to in (1).) Suppose for the moment that we accept (1) and (2). What could we conclude on their basis? There are at least two options. We might hold an *incoherentist error theory* about prudential discourse. On such a view, although, within prudential discourse, we presume that there is a single, coherent, subject matter for well-being, we actually use the concept in fundamentally inconsistent ways, resulting in the discourse being *incoherent*. Alternatively, we could conclude that despite the appearance of a single set of concepts, and so one subject matter, there is in fact a set of distinct concepts, so conceptual *pluralism* is true.

Campbell leaves aside the first, incoherentist error-theoretic, possibility. For the sake of tractability, I will also assume that we have reason to reject incoherentism, such that anyone who accepts (1) & (2) could infer conceptual pluralism.[16] Thus Campbell's argument can be interpreted thus:

(1) Prudential discourse manifests mutually-conflicting commitments.

(2) If prudential discourse manifests mutually-conflicting commitments then there is no univocal subject matter.

(3) If (1) and (2) then either an incoherentist error theory is true or conceptual pluralism is true.

(4) Incoherentist error theory is false.

Therefore,

(5) Conceptual pluralism is true.

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[15] Campbell's discussion is officially about prudential *theorising*, so officially he has in mind the context of philosophers discussing prudential value. I take the discussion in the first half of the paper to provide a case against conceptual pluralism among non-philosophers who engage in prudential discourse. For brevity, I will continue to discuss Campbell's view as if it is about prudential discourse in general but my arguments focus on the more theoretical context that he is officially focused upon.

[16] The case I give against Campbell's conceptual pluralism also tells against *incoherentist* prudential error theory.

I now move on to assessing Campbell's argument.

5. Assessing Campbell's Case for Premises (1) & (2)

Campbell is clearly correct that prudential thought and talk, both by philosophers and non-philosophers, manifests inconsistent commitments. On one interpretation of premise (1) it is made true by the fact that we find *first-order* prudential disagreements, such as on whether knowledge is beneficial for its own sake or only instrumentally. Given that we are not, for example, tempted by contextualism about 'economic growth' claims on the basis of disagreement within economic discourse, Campbell's argument needs more than simple first-order disagreement. Thus, for certain forms of disagreement, the truth of premise (1) is insufficient to justify premise (2). For Campbell's argument to work he must therefore identify deep, *fundamental*, disagreement within prudential discourse. This is clear from the way he seeks to justify premise (1). He aims to identify conflicting highly general commitments within prudential discourse and to show that these are incompatible.

Before outlining these putative conflicting commitments, let me outline the strategy for responding to them. I will argue that we do not find disagreements within prudential discourse of the sort that can justify premise (2) of Campbell's argument. This will be for different reasons for different putative commitments, thus my response is (of necessity) piecemeal. In some cases a kind of *defusing* strategy is available. This is because the commitments turn out, on closer inspection, to be genuine but non-conflicting. For other putative conflicts I argue that the commitments are non-fundamental and best explained in a way that does not favour conceptual pluralism. I will now examine the conflicting commitments within prudential discourse that Campbell puts forward in support of premise (1).

Putative Conflict (I) Relation to the subject's attitudes

Campbell claims that some of the ways in which we think about prudential value suggest that well-being is closely connected to the subject's attitudes whereas other ways we think about well-being suggest that well-being is *not* closely related to the subject's attitudes.

As examples of the former commitment, Campbell points to our tendency to think that self-sacrifice must be *felt* and that reward and punishment are necessarily connected to feelings:

> A concept of well-being that does not bear any essential connection to the attitudes of the person will be ill suited to characterize the sort of "benefits" and "costs" that we seek to bestow on others when we reward, give gifts, do favors, punish, and take revenge.[17]

As examples of the corresponding conflicting commitment, one that *downplays* a connection between well-being and subjects' attitudes, Campbell points to our willingness to think of certain states or properties of a person as deserving of pity, irrespective of the person's own attitude towards them. He gives the following example:

> [J]udgments of pitiability, enviability, and luckiness need not depend upon the subject's own attitudes toward these things. I can intelligibly think someone who is descended from one of the world's great novelists is enviable and lucky in that regard even if she herself is completely unmoved by this fact about her genealogy. I can believe that my neighbor is pitiable for lying to others even if she has no reservations or regrets about it, and even takes great pride in her skills of deception. This suggests that the concept of well-being must be quite broad and must allow for the possibility that something's being good or bad for a person bears no essential connection to his or her favorable or unfavorable attitudes.[18]

My reply is that, properly understood, the plausible ideas here do not conflict. I agree with Campbell that it is *intelligible* that someone is pitiable for lying to others or that it is enviable to be descended from one of the world's great novelists. My reservations therefore concern the other putative requirement, that well-being be essentially connected to the attitudes of the person as well as the claim that these two commitments are in conflict.

Campbell's description of the requirement suggests that it is a fundamental commitment of prudential discourse that for someone to be punished, or rewarded, or the subject of revenge, etc that

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[17] Campbell (2016: 411).

[18] Campbell (2016: 410).

must be partly explained by their having the relevant kinds of attitude (presumably a pro attitude for a reward, a con attitude for a punishment).

In reply, note, first, that it is not obvious that it is a fundamental commitment of prudential discourse that for someone to be punished, or rewarded, or the subject of revenge, etc that must be partly explained by their having the relevant kinds of attitude. Suppose that Y takes their revenge upon X by simply preventing good things from happening to X, unbeknownst to them. For example, they prevent some superior job offer which would have improved X's life from accruing. Similarly, suppose that a kindly benefactor rewards you by preventing something bad from happening to you. For example, your car gets an erroneous ticket but your benefactor, realising that it will be expensive for you to prove this, simply pays it for you (thus you never learn, or suspect, that you were to experience this setback). These are plausible cases of revenge and reward. If so, then it is not necessary for something to be revenge or reward that it bring about *actual* pro or con attitudes.

Furthermore, we can explain *away* such an essential connection, by explaining why it might seem like there is such a connection even where there is not. To do so we need only to note that it will *very often* be the case that punishments, favours, revenge, and reward will trigger and be partly constituted by pro and con attitudes. And that holds for two reasons. First, that many of the good and bad prudential states are themselves attitudinal at least in part (pain and pleasure being plausible examples). Second, that in typical cases we know that we are being punished etc and feel bad about that. But this is to stop far short of postulating the kind of essential connection Campbell suggests is a commitment of prudential discourse.

A natural reply here, on Campbell's behalf, is to appeal to either dispositional pro and con attitudes or hypothetical attitudes. That is, Campbell might argue that my cases work against only a crude understanding of this essential connection, namely one between punishment (etc) and *actual* and occurrent con (etc) attitudes but that they do not show that there is no connection between punishment (etc) and dispositional attitudes. This leads to my second reply.

Reply 2 - such a connection is not problematic

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is an essential connection between punishment (etc) and dispositional (or hypothetical) con and pro attitudes. How much does this show with respect to the concept of prudential value? Plausibly, not very much. After all, there is no incompatibility between holding that *some*, but not all, aspects of prudential value are essentially connected to the agent's pro or con attitudes. And one might argue that even if *revenge* has such a connection, this does little to establish that prudential value generally relates to the agent's attitudes in some deep way. One way of defending this manoeuvre is by arguing that we have a connection to the agent's pro and con attitudes in the case of punishment and reward because of the nature of punishment and reward themselves (namely that it is in the essential nature of *these things* that they are related to the agent's attitudes). On such a view, there is no deep conflict between (i) the idea that punishment and revenge have an essential relation to the agent's attitudes (albeit hypothetical or dispositional ones) and (ii) the idea that prudential value does not have such a connection in general.

Campbell's claim that we are deeply committed to an essential connection between attitudes and well-being, and that this is in tension with another commitment about well-being, can thus be resisted in two ways. First, we can deny that there is such a connection. Second, we can dispute that the connection demonstrates a fundamental feature of the concept of prudential value. If either of these is correct then Campbell has not identified a genuinely conflicting pair of commitments within prudential discourse.

<u>Putative Conflict (II) Relation to Morality</u>

Campbell puts forward a second candidate inconsistency in prudential discourse — that although we sometimes have a morality-*including* conception of well-being (such as in the passage above, where it seems *intelligible* that someone merits pity on account of lying), we also sometimes have a morality-*excluding* conception of well-being. As he puts it:

> Still other aspects of the standard picture suggest a more restrictive concept of well-being—in particular, one that screens off the possibility that acting morally, in and of itself, is good for us. The egoist is standardly defined as one whose sole ultimate aim is the promotion of his or her own well-being. Yet, many philosophers have seen the egoist as a natural critic of morality

> and someone who must be convinced that being moral can, by some indirect route, serve his or her own best interests. They do not seriously entertain the possibility that the egoist might view being moral as an important component of the good life. What may underlie this tendency is an assumption that well-being is morality-excluding in the following sense: it is either impossible or deeply implausible that being moral is intrinsically good for us.[19]

From these observations, he concludes:

> All of this appears to indicate that the standard picture of well-being is a conflation of two or more concepts. A single concept could not possibly satisfy all of these demands. It cannot be the concept of something that is both independent from *and* dependent upon the attitudes of the subject. It cannot both include *and* exclude being moral as a possible component of well-being.[20]

Pace Campbell, I think that there *could be* a single concept of well-being which both includes and excludes being moral as a possible component of well-being. To see this possibility, let us distinguish something's being a non-instrumental prudential value — its being non-instrumentally good for you — from its being in your *best interests*.[21] With this distinction in hand, one could hold that acting morally — or, more strongly, exemplifying *virtue* — is good for the agent *to some extent* while also holding that being moral is not always in our *best* interests. This would yield an explanation of how well-being can both include and exclude being moral, without the need to postulate multiple concepts.

Invoking this distinction between what is good for someone and what is in their best interests is not *ad hoc*. The distinction between something's being good for someone *to some extent* and its being *best* for them is one that ordinary prudential thought and historical work on well-being has been slow to recognise. It is perfectly coherent to hold that being moral is not always in one's best interests even if one thinks that some vices or some immoral behaviour are bad for the person who performs them and

19 Campbell (2016: 411).

20 Campbell (2016: 411).

21 For discussion of this distinction, but in the case of harm, see Bradley (2012).

thus worthy of pity.[22] Thus one might agree with Campbell's observation while denying that it shows that there is more than one concept of well-being.

Finally, note that the idea that it is not in one's best interests to be moral can be resisted. Aristotelian ethical theories aim to show that virtue and the good life are deeply compatible (if not identical).[23] But we can imagine any number of other theories that would reconcile these commitments. Suppose one held that friendship is a major source of prudential value, if not the only one, but that friendship (or the most *beneficial* kinds of friendship) are only possible between people who embody virtue. On such a view there would be a very close connection between acting well and living well. My point here is not to defend this conception. My point is only to show how there are resources from within ordinary prudential theorising to render these commitments consistent. Thus, *pace* Campbell, a single concept *could* satisfy all of these demands.[24]

So far I have shown how some of the putatively conflicting commitments offered by Campbell can be made consistent. I now move on to assessing a final, stronger, candidate for such conflicting commitments that might be offered, before showing how it too can be undermined.

Putative Conflict (III) Experience versus Desire Satisfaction

Two everyday prudential platitudes are that *what you do not know cannot hurt you* and that *it is always good for you to get what you want*. These claims exemplify two tendencies in prudential thought. The first is the tendency to think that prudential value is necessarily *experiential*, in the sense that everything that is non-instrumentally good or bad for you is experienced (or, at least, affects your experience). This is what motivate some to defend an 'experience requirement' on prudential value. Roughly put, this is the requirement that for something to be a non-instrumental prudential value it must either be experienced by the relevant agent or make some difference to their experience. If there is such a requirement then it

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[22] Note the way that the distinction is elided in the discussion at the beginning of Plato's *Republic*.

[23] Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Annas (1993), Hursthouse (1999).

[24] There is also the plausibility of treating our pity for someone's immoral behaviour as being directed towards the consequences of being known to be immoral: punishment, ostracisation and the like.

is true that what you do not know (more precisely, what you do not *experience*) cannot hurt you (non-instrumentally).[25]

The second tendency is to think that prudential value is necessarily a matter of getting what you want. It is clear that everyday prudential thought displays some commitment to the idea that getting what you want is good for you. This has led some philosophers to defend an anti-alienation constraint on prudential value (holding that having a pro attitude towards P is necessary for P being good for you) or, going further, to treat desire-satisfaction as necessary and sufficient for prudential value.[26]

These two constraints, however, cannot both be satisfied. Here are cases that illustrate the clash between them:

> **Case 1**: Delphine believes that she is married to a wonderful person and that they have a secure, loving relationship, all she ever wanted. However, and unbeknownst to her, a tragic case of mistaken identity means that she is in fact married to an undercover police officer. This person has deceived Delphine into loving them and does not care at all about her. All of her friends are also undercover officers who pretend to like her in order to monitor her. Her entire romantic and personal life is a sham.[27]

> **Case 2**: Hillary is a research scientist who desires three things. She wants Leicester City to win the Premier League, she wants her research to be recognised by her peers, and she wants her self-published fiction to be well received. All of these desires are satisfied but Hillary knows none of this. She is on a solo long-term research expedition to a remote location and cannot receive updates from the outside world. She is confident that her desires are not satisfied and when she left for the base she had excellent evidence that her desires would never be fulfilled. She is very unhappy.

In the first case, to the extent that one endorses the view that prudential value is necessarily *experiential* (and more specifically hedonic), one will hold that Delphine's life is going well. After all, it is a pleasant

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[25] For an overview of the debate on the experience requirement, see Hawkins (2016).

[26] On anti-alienation constraints see for example: Dorsey (2017), Hall & Tiberius (2016), Hawkins (2014), Fletcher (2013), Railton (2003). One of the most sophisticated proposed constraints — one which does not take prudential value to be constrained by the actual, present, attitudes of the person — comes from Rosati (1996). For discussion of her proposal see Sarch (2010).

[27] Case based on the infamous 'spycops' case in the UK. For details, see: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/20/met-police-apologise-women-had-relationships-with-undercover-officers .

sham and she never finds out (we can stipulate). By contrast, to the extent that one thinks that prudential value is a matter of getting what you want, one will judge that this life is going badly. In case 2, to the extent that well-being is experiential, Hillary's life is going badly. By contrast, to the extent that one thinks that prudential value is a matter of desire-fulfilment, it is going well.

This is, then, another place where the professed commitments of prudential discourse manifest an apparent inconsistency. Does this tell in favour of conceptual pluralism? Again, I think not. It is highly dubitable that prudential discourse manifests a deep commitment to the idea that getting what you want is, *ipso facto*, good for you. I thus want to grant that these ideas conflict but stand my ground against the idea that both commitments are really manifested within prudential discourse.

Cases like Hillary function in philosophical discussion as a *reductio* of the view that desire-satisfaction is, itself, of prudential value. For that reason, few philosophers hold the view that desire-satisfaction *per se* has prudential value.[28] And the reasons for this lack of attraction to the view are obvious. It yields implausible results in cases like Hillary, where the desire is fulfilled but the agent has no idea that it is. Furthermore, we can explain why people have typically closely associated desire fulfilment with well-being, through the simple observations that people typically desire that their lives go well and they typically desire the things that are plausible for candidates for prudential value (pleasure, friendship etc). Desire satisfaction is thus a useful *proxy* for what is good for someone, even if it is an imperfect indicator. Thus we can explain away the idea that prudential discourse is deeply committed to the idea that desire satisfaction per se has prudential value. By doing so we eliminate another candidate for a pair of mutually conflicting deep commitments within prudential discourse.

Campbell's argument concluded that conceptual pluralism is the best explanation of the disagreement we find when we examining prudential discourse. I have argued against the data he offered as evidence of conceptual pluralism. But I want to offer an independent argument for why conceptual pluralism is not the *best* explanation of prudential disagreement.

It is easy to overstate both the extent of prudential disagreement and the extent to which it is of the sort that would motivate *pluralism*. The sort of disagreement that would motivate pluralism

[28] The view has a peculiar status in the philosophical literature on well-being. It is a mainstay of discussion but has exceedingly few historical or contemporary defenders (in its *pure* form).

would be systematic divergence in the judgements that people make about *which things* are good and bad for people or which lives were going well or badly. But it seems clear that these kind of judgements are subject to wide *agreement*.

Where we find disagreement is in the *explanation of* prudential value, on the question of *why* things are good or bad for people, or *why* someone's life is going well or badly. But when it comes to these questions, a plausible explanation is, simply, that philosophical questions are difficult despite the fact that they can seem easy. Our disagreement about the explanatory questions of why *fundamentally* e.g. someone's life is going well or going badly reflects the difficulty of philosophical questions, and the subtlety of the difference between different substantive views of well-being, not the truth of conceptual pluralism about prudential value.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined two views of prudential discourse as radically context-sensitive. I argued that we do not have reason to favour Alexandrova's radical contextualism over an alternative aspectualist view, coupled with the concession that prudential discourse is context-sensitive in benign ways (such as loose talk as to what is meant by 'well-being' in different contexts and the fact that context determines who counts as 'doing well'). In the second part of the paper I argued, contrary to Campbell, that the inconsistent commitments and disagreement that we see in prudential discourse do not provide good evidence for conceptual pluralism about prudential discourse.

I do not pretend to have provided a master argument against prudential discourse contexualism. Rather, I hope to have shown that we do not yet have a good case for contextualism about prudential discourse, as well as providing both a license for pessimism in this regard and an alternative to contextualism in the form of aspectualism.

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