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# *The Science of Wellbeing*

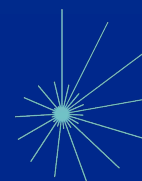
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February, 2022

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## INTRODUCTION

In the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century, “wellbeing” occupies a special place. It is an ideal of personal and communal living, as well as a concept to help us move beyond the tired old categories of progress. An oft-cited articulation of this sentiment is Bobby Kennedy’s remarks at the University of Kansas in 1968:

Our gross national product ... counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

Noble words. But despite their intuitive appeal, moving beyond GDP has been slow in theory as well as in practice. This is in part because what exactly wellbeing is and how we should measure it remains elusive. Certainly not for lack of effort. The last thirty years have seen a huge rise of investigations into wellbeing in the social sciences and humanities. This academic work has been institutionalized, with new journals, professional societies, and research centers. It is now making successful inroads into the worlds of public policy, commercial self-help, and HR management.

Has this latest wave been a success? In Part I of this report, we argue that it has. Formal study of wellbeing enabled researchers to formulate and test previous intuitions and to build new knowledge in the process. However, there is grounds for criticism, too. The recent science of wellbeing comes with distinctive straightjackets that, as well as enabling progress in some directions, have held it back in others. Its most charismatic proponents have been either psychologists or economists, and they brought along their methodological outlook and their distinctive politics. They established the study of wellbeing largely as a quantitative enterprise driven by surveys and statistics and they espoused a technocratic ethos of “improvement” either via self-help or via top-down policy interventions. These disciplinary and ethical blinders have constrained knowledge about wellbeing and made the transition to public policy less morally transformative than it ought to be. Our message of Part II is that it is time for the sciences of wellbeing to enter a new era characterized by greater methodological diversity, theoretical sophistication, and engagement with ethics and politics of good life. Now is the time to prosecute the beyond GDP agenda in earnest.

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## **PART I: THE STATE OF WELLBEING RESEARCH**

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## 1. What Is Wellbeing?

Our goal in Part I is an overview of the headline findings and perspectives from each of the main fields in wellbeing research: philosophy, economics, and psychology. We hope to do justice to the enormous strides these fields have made, while also highlighting the relative narrowness of this progress.

It makes sense to start with a few words on the term “wellbeing.” It is a capacious umbrella term that gets filled in differently in different disciplines and even in different projects within the same discipline. Such vagueness and diversity is to be expected and no existing attempts to standardize its usage have so far succeeded. In the broadest sense, wellbeing denotes how well a person is doing, all things considered. But the term can also be applied to non-human animals and communities, which brings different assumptions about level of analysis and detectability of wellbeing. In any case, defining wellbeing requires making a value judgment about what is “good for” somebody, and variations in discipline or context can alter what counts as good. All this results in radically different operationalizations of “wellbeing” and arguably even in different concepts.

Perhaps the central distinction is between subjective and objective senses of wellbeing, where the former is supposed to capture wellbeing as judged or experienced by the person herself (or by an organism or by a community), while the latter denotes the features of life essential to wellbeing. For example, imagine someone in their prime who is terminally ill and thus at the end of a full and rich life. They might say that they have had a good life and that they are satisfied with it. Subjectively then, they are well, but objectively, the terminal illness suggests otherwise.

Both subjective and objective senses capture something important, but it is far from clear which one is the true wellbeing and which one is a mere indicator. The subjective sense, operationalized as wellbeing reported in survey questions, became central to the ongoing explosion of empirical research in the social, psychological, and medical sciences. The sheer volume of work that adopts a subjective definition of wellbeing may create the impression that the objective sense of the word has lost its importance. But that would be a hasty conclusion. How lives are actually going, independently of how anyone thinks they are going, is still a perfectly tractable and important concept. It is used by economists who study consumption, sociologists who study quality of life, and developmental psychologists who study child wellbeing. Perhaps most prominently, it is the principal conception of wellbeing informing the sustainable development goals that guide the UN and other major international organizations. In what follows we recognize the diversity of meanings of wellbeing by noting how researchers in different fields use this term and by showing that their findings do not always mesh with one another because of that diversity.

## 2. Wellbeing in Philosophy

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A short but famous appendix to Derek Parfit's *Reason and Persons* is entitled "What Makes Someone's Life Go Best" (Parfit 1985, 493–502). Parfit's focus there—on *intrinsic value to a person*—characterizes the distinct preoccupation of analytic philosophers who write on well-being. Parfit distinguished three classes of wellbeing theory. These are mental state accounts, desire fulfilment accounts, and objective-list theories of well-being. This way of carving up the options, let's call it the Big Three, remains largely valid.<sup>1</sup>

When philosophers theorise about wellbeing their debates are not about what sort of life to pursue and what choices to make in order to be well. It is rarely a *how to* debate. Philosophical theories are not typically practical: while they can be helpful, their objective is not to provide advice. That objective is much more central to counselling or to positive psychology, which we encounter in chapter four. Philosophers would see such practical advice as an *applied* question that can only be answered once a theory of wellbeing is specified. This specification at a fairly abstract level is taken to be the business of philosophers. Application is left to others, though philosophers can often become incensed when others proceed with this project without first consulting philosophers.

This attitude among philosophers is only just beginning to be challenged. Valerie Tiberius, for instance, distinguishes between "target" discussions of well-being (the focus identified above) and "process" discussions (Tiberius 2008). The latter involve telling a *how to* story: what sort of values and attitudes should regulate my life? Tiberius (2018) offers such a story, discussed below. Michael Bishop (2015) also tries to upend the philosophical status quo by identifying well-being with a "positive causal network" that involves elements of all three components identified by the Big Three. Well-being is the groove where all these elements keep causing each other and none is more essential than the others. Tiberius and Bishop both attempt to reorient the philosophy of well-being, and we discuss the consequences of their work below in the section, "New Directions in Wellbeing Research." For now, we will concentrate on the standard "target" theories that define the status quo in the philosophy of wellbeing.

### *Hedonism*

Hedonists identify wellbeing with our mental states and only our mental states. Not just any mental state, of course, but only experiences with a *positive valence*, for example, pleasure, satisfaction, enjoyment. Here is Roger Crisp, a leading hedonist: "what is good for any individual is the enjoyable experience in her life, what is bad is the suffering in that life, and the life best for an individual is that with the greatest balance of enjoyment over suffering" (Crisp 2006, 622).<sup>2</sup> A hedonistic theory can accept that things other than enjoyment can be good for us, *but only due to their enjoyability*. Great art, friendship, virtue can all benefit us, but only via their causal effect on our experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> More precise classifications can be found in Haybron 2008 chapter 2, Woodard 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For other versions of hedonism, see Fred Feldman (2002) and Ben Bradley (2009).

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What makes an experience pleasurable? Is it pleasurable by virtue of how it feels or in our liking it? The first option is to identify pleasures by their internal quality, whereas in the second—by something external to the pleasure—our liking it (Sumner 1996).<sup>3</sup> This is a non-trivial question because the latter version of hedonism has more affinities with desire fulfilment theories than with the original hedonism. If pleasure is that which you desire, then the hedonist view that pleasure is good for us becomes a version of a desire satisfaction view. That is, the view that it is good for us to satisfy our desires, of which pleasure is one. But in that case why focus only on pleasures? We might as well conceive of well-being as having access to *any* desired object. If you also specify that desires must be actually rather than subjectively satisfied, you'd be squarely in the territory of desire fulfilment or more generally subjectivist views of well-being.

### *Desire Fulfillment*

Desire-fulfilment theories have two key selling points. The experience machine argument first put forward by Robert Nozick and universally considered the greatest challenge to hedonism is not a challenge for desire fulfilment. Consider two people with identical experiences. One has these experiences because they live their life “for real,” the other only by being connected to a machine that simulates their brain in precise ways. An honest hedonist will bite the bullet – these two people have the same quality and quantity of wellbeing. Some find this conclusion repellent. The desire fulfilment theorist can claim that the denizen of the experience machine has not *really* got their desires fulfilled, they only think they have.

Another advantage is that desires have a special connection to subjectivity - they engage us, they resonate with us, they are genuinely ours.<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to classical hedonism in which it makes no difference how the agent herself feels about her pleasures. Desire fulfilment theorists counter with thought experiments of ascetic monks, tortured artists or even Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely, anyone with no desire (nor other kinds of relevant attitude) for pleasure and yet a great satisfaction with their lives.

A basic version of the theory says it is good for you to get what you want and actually get it, not just think you do. More sophisticated versions recognize that people want all sorts of things for themselves, including those that do them no good whatsoever. This could be due to misinformation, indoctrination, or desires that have nothing to do with wellbeing, like survival of polar bears, or trivial things like chewing gum. Philosophers have augmented desire-fulfilment accounts with many bells and whistles to deal with such cases. The most popular modification is to restrict the relevant desires only

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Bentham treated pleasure as a special unanalyzable quality of an experience, the *feeling good* quality. Henry Sidgwick, on the other hand, saw no common quality in pleasures as distinct as, say, eating and singing, and hence argued that pleasure is to be identified by the fact that it is desired by an agent. For the more recent iterations of this debate, see Kagan 1992 and Crisp 2006 on the internalist side and Feldman 2002 and Heathwood 2006 of the externalist side.

<sup>4</sup> This is referred to in various ways as the resonance constraint (Brink 2008), or agent sovereignty (Arneson 1999), or subject-relativity (Sumner 1996).



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to those that are informed, thought through, or acquired without manipulation – an intuitive requirement, albeit very hard to satisfy in practice.<sup>5</sup>

### *Objective-List Theories*

Consider a grass-counter, mused John Rawls. With full information and sincerity, the grass-counter avows that their goal in life is to count blades of grass on a lawn. If the grass-counter succeeds, are they doing well for themselves? It strikes many people as absurd that the fulfilment of this inane desire could promote the person's wellbeing. But if you want your theory of well-being to exclude the grass-counter you seem to be admitting that there must be something objective about wellbeing. You seem to suggest that well-being cannot encompass some things (be they fulfilled desires or pleasures) and that, conversely, some goods, like not wasting your life counting grass, benefit a person no matter what their attitudes, life plans, or tastes are.

Arguably the first and most famous such theory is Aristotle's perfectionism – the best life for a person is to function at the highest level a normal human could, which means exercising distinctly human virtues of justice, friendship, contemplation. Some aspects of this theory are clearly biased toward a certain kind of human – namely, an able-bodied male Athenian citizen. But Aristotle's basic setup can be preserved even when the less palatable aspects of it are rejected. The main idea – that some things are good for us whatever we may initially think – has lasted. Specifying these objectively valuable things fully is a challenge, but it is hard to argue with such obvious candidates such as appreciating the beautiful, acquiring knowledge and understanding, forming relationships, loving, and discovering ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Some objectivists do not have specific links to Aristotle. They just take well-being to be constituted by goods that are valuable no matter the agent's or anyone else's attitude. These goods are part of a list arranged in order of importance, hence the name Objective List theory of well-being (Fletcher 2013, 2016).

The capabilities approach, which informs the sustainable development goals and much policymaking besides, is perhaps the most prominent operationalization of this way of thinking about wellbeing (Nussbaum 2000, Sen 1999, Robeyns 2017). Capabilities are positive freedoms available to an

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<sup>5</sup> For versions of the theory in terms of *goals* or *values* rather than desires, see Scanlon 1998 and Dorsey 2012. Actual desires are defended by Keller 2009. Desires one would have after a good reflection or psychotherapy are prized by Brandt 1979. Desires that a fully informed agent would want her actual self to have is the famous version by Railton 1986. These are known as *idealized* or full information versions of desire fulfilment accounts. Finally, some restrict the content of these valuing attitudes, for example, to concern only life projects (Dorsey 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Among contemporary versions of Aristotelian perfectionism are Stephen Darwall's (2002) proposal that well-being consists in "valuing activities," i.e., the activities that bring us into contact with objects of worth, where worth is understood independently of anyone's desires. Understanding art, bringing up children, and building a relationship are all examples of valuing activities. Richard Kraut (2007) emphasizes development of skills appropriate to the being's nature and stage of growth. For Haybron (2008, ch. 9), well-being is living in accordance with your own emotional nature—a view he calls self-fulfilment. For Neera Badhwar (2014), well-being is living in accordance with moral virtue (Badhwar 2014).

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individual to live. For example, having a wheelchair grants a disabled person the capability of mobility. In practice, the capabilities approach is about ensuring that social, political, and economic circumstances allow people to live their best lives. These circumstances are operationalized by measuring things like health, political enfranchisement, access to electricity and clean water, women's empowerment, and so forth.<sup>7</sup>

Of course you can make up a hybrid theory of well-being, joining two or more of the accounts above into one.<sup>8</sup> Hybrid theories are not a panacea – if you build into your theory the necessity of both pleasure and achievement, at which level should these components be present? A lot of the recent work in philosophy continues in the tradition of searching conceptual space for better formulations of the Big Three or for new ways of unifying them, or for more compelling defences of these theories.<sup>9</sup>

Theories of wellbeing in contemporary analytic philosophy are often very abstract and conceptually intricate in ways that makes them forbidding and give them the air of irrelevance to the applied sides of wellbeing research. As we shall see in Part II, this does not have to be so. As wellbeing research grows increasingly interdisciplinary, the main contribution of philosophy is an awareness of and sophistication around the value judgments involved in defining wellbeing. Philosophical perspectives on wellbeing conceive wellbeing as the prudential good—what is “good for” somebody. There is no attempt to shirk the ethical significance of this as in the technical definitions of wellbeing employed by the psychological sciences. This clarity is important for future progress of this field, a theme to which we return in Part II.

### **3. Wellbeing in Economics**

Well-being concepts enter into economics in several ways. First, and most significantly, the fundamental building block of microeconomic theory is the utility-maximizing agent, with utility historically understood as a quantity close enough to wellbeing. Via this route well-being enters theoretical and empirical studies of judgment, choice, and strategic interaction. Second, from this microeconomic foundation, notions of wellbeing feed into economic tools of cost-benefit analysis, social welfare functions, and discussions of distribution and how to compensate losers from economic change. This branch of economics is unsurprisingly referred to as welfare or normative economics. Third, measures of growth in macroeconomics sometimes refer to well-being or welfare, especially in discussions of the goals of development. Happiness economics got started in this space when Richard Easterlin first noted that GDP growth does not seem to increase life satisfaction in the long run. The

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<sup>7</sup> Because the capabilities approach prides itself on being sensitive to differences between people, it can often in practice collapse into using subjective indicators (van der Deijl 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Hybrids between hedonism and objective list are hard to tell apart from those objective list theories that list enjoyment as one of the goods (Darwall 2002, Griffin 1986, Parfit 1985). There are also hybrids of subjectivism and hedonism (Hawkins 2010, Heathwood 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Keller 2004, Woodard 2015, Sarch 2012, Bramble 2016, van der Deijl 2021, Fletcher 2015, 2021, Lin 2017, 2018, 2021, Campbell 2013.



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capabilities account of wellbeing, too, got started as a way of thinking about progress in richer terms than just income growth.

What exactly is the traditional view that all these newcomers oppose? Because utility theory is formulated in terms of preferences, it is a natural step to identify satisfaction of these preferences with wellbeing (a version of desire fulfilment). What we prefer is what's good for us. And because economists take preferences to be revealed through choices, what you want is, roughly, what you choose when given an opportunity. Welfare economics is a theoretical system based on this simple (to many philosophers, dangerously simple) premise. The choices may be self-defeating, weak-willed, based on false information. But none of this can be represented in orthodox welfare economics. This package of ideas is also the prime input into evaluation of social states by means of cost-benefit analysis. This exercise determines the value of alternative courses of action, for example, of alternative policies, by their present monetary value as revealed by market prices of similar states, or else willingness to pay, or stated preferences.<sup>10</sup> Economists invest enormous efforts into developing new techniques of measuring benefit, living standards and poverty using these methods. National accounts such as GDP often give strikingly different answers than surveys of household consumption, even though both are inspired by the preference satisfaction tradition (Deaton 2016).

Economists still endorse this standard view as “the moral heart of economics:”

Improvements in welfare occur when there are improvements in utility, and those occur only when an individual gets an option that wasn't previously available. We typically prove that someone's welfare has increased when the person has an increased set of choices. When we make that assumption (which is hotly contested by some people, especially psychologists), we essentially assume that the fundamental objective of public policy is to increase freedom of choice.” (Glaeser 2011)

But if this moral heart was not under pressure, as Glaeser acknowledges, it would not be formulated so forcefully. Its most vulnerable piece is the assumption that people have stable and consistent preferences and act rationally to get the most of what they prefer. Psychologists and behavioral economists have been documenting violations of this assumption since at least the 1970s. Kahneman and Tversky's famous research into “heuristics and biases” has undermined the existence of stable preferences and of choices that maximize them, demonstrating the distinction between experienced utility and decision utility (Kahneman 1999). As a result, it is now widely recognized, even by orthodox economists, that actual choices do not always reveal what is truly good for people. But what other conception of well-being is fit for economics?

One approach is to supplement the standard economic framework with data on subjective well-being as we have seen psychologists advocate. A recent volume by Frijters and Krekel (2021) explains this

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<sup>10</sup> The UK Treasury's Green Book mandates this procedure for all policy (Treasury 2003).

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methodology in detail. Instead of determining the value of a good by people's willingness to pay for it, they urge that this value be inferred from how much life satisfaction this good brings about. So happiness economics of this stripe advocates replacing preference satisfaction with a mental state account, namely, life satisfaction. Fritjers and Krekel's methodology is thus a major technical change and a major ethical change.

Another option is to clean up the conditions under which revealed and satisfied preferences are considered welfare relevant. Similarly to the idealized version of desire-fulfilment, only some preferences, typically those that are 'fully informed' and 'fully rational', and only those revealed when people make thoughtful and important decisions, are indicative of their well-being.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the third option is to move away from preferences altogether. Not all economists are wedded to a preference satisfaction view. Development economics, for instance, has its own robust tradition of theorizing about well-being along entirely different lines, typically leaning on the capabilities approach (Sen 1999). Even economists who do not subscribe to the capabilities approach sometimes advocate an objective understanding of well-being for development contexts. Partha Dasgupta proposes the notion of *aggregate quality of life* (Dasgupta 2001). It is aggregate in two senses: first, it represents the state of many people and, second, their quality of life is constituted by several elements. Dasgupta writes: "a minimal set of indices for spanning a reasonable conception of current well-being in a poor country includes private consumption per head, life expectancy at birth, literacy, and civil and political liberties" (Dasgupta 2001, 54). Private consumption is food, shelter, clothing, and basic legal aid. Life expectancy at birth is the best indicator of health, while literacy of basic primary education. Civil and political rights allow people to function independently of the state and their communities. According to Dasgupta, each of these is necessary. They cannot be reduced to some one item or replaced by a monetary value, for they may be undervalued by the market.

When we ask "How well is a country doing?" we do not only mean current quality of life. Sometimes, and with the climate change increasingly, we also inquire about the *sustainability* of this current lifestyle—how well does a country balance the needs of its current population with the needs of its future generations? A high quality of life at a time may conceal the fact that a community is consuming its resources without an adequate provision for the future. Sustainable well-being is a pattern of consumption that strikes the best balance between current and future quality of life. For Dasgupta, its cause and the best measure is a country's *wealth*, which is distinguished from income by being a stock, rather than a flow. Wealth can be represented by an index comprising the social value of a country's natural resources, manufactured capital, its human and social capital (which includes public

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<sup>11</sup> See Hausman 2015 for a most recent defence. Laundering of preferences is already part of normal cost-benefit analysis (Adler and Posner 2006). There are also ingenious methods for eliciting such preferences (Benjamin et al. 2014, van der Deijl 2018). Choices should not be too far in the future, they should be about important rather than trivial things, with proper reflection and ideally with prior practice (Beshears et al. 2008).

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knowledge, institutions, etc.), minus this country's liabilities. Sustainability can then be defined as future generations having no less wealth than current generations.

### *Key Findings from Happiness Economics*

So far we have discussed theoretical considerations around wellbeing in economics. There is a second body of literature that we must account for—empirical findings from the study of subjective wellbeing by happiness economists. We discuss some of the headline findings below.

Graham (2017) provides a thorough review of the existing literature on the relationship between hope, optimism, stress, life satisfaction, and economic outcomes (see also De Neve and Oswald 2012, De Neve et al. 2013). People who are more hopeful and optimistic have lower discount rates and invest more in the future than pessimistic and anxious people. They also appear to be more resilient to negative shocks, both in terms of their behavior and their life satisfaction (Favara and Sanchez 2017). Poor people and rich people appear to experience different kinds of stress, on average. The poor suffer from “bad stress” associated with insecurity and desperation (Graham and Chattopadhyay 2010). They rely on social networks to mitigate these effects. In contrast, wealthy people experience “good stress,” which is associated with goal pursuit and striving more generally (Graham and Lora 2009).

Extending earlier work on loss aversion, Graham (2017) finds that previously rich, typically white, typically regional or semi-rural communities in America that have declined because of deindustrialization express large declines in subjective wellbeing, both in terms of life satisfaction and affective states. In contrast, historically poor, typically black, typically inner-city communities are optimistic about the future and report relatively high subjective wellbeing despite being poorer on average than many of the declining white communities.

Finally, Graham finds that inequality can have positive effects on optimism, investment, and work ethic if it is perceived to be the result of genuine economic opportunities (Graham 2011). People seem to take these circumstances as indicating that hard work will see them get ahead (Graham and Nikolova 2015). By contrast, inequality discourages people if it is perceived to be a function of inequality of opportunity or corrupt institutions.

The effects of unemployment on subjective wellbeing (hereafter SWB) are a long running area of study. The results are unequivocal: unemployment results in large decreases in SWB that are not entirely adapted to over time. Sustained unemployment also seems to have a scarring effect: even after the long-term unemployed return to work, their SWB stays somewhat depressed (Knabe and Rätzl 2011).

Besides unemployment, the main subject of happiness economics remains the relationship between income and SWB. The seminal paper in this literature was Easterlin's aforementioned 1974 study of the relationship between life satisfaction and GDP using Gallup data. He found that while income explained differences in satisfaction *within* countries, it did not explain differences *between* countries. This finding became known as the Easterlin Paradox and it continues to animate SWB scholars. Easterlin speculated that the paradox might be due to adaptation and reference group effects.

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Relatively rich people *within* countries counted themselves wealthy even if they were poor by global standards. Similarly, poor people in wealthy countries did not compare themselves to even poorer people in other countries and so reported low levels of satisfaction.

Pushback against Easterlin's argument rose in the late 2000s. Most important, Stevenson and Wolfers (2009, 2013) used updated Gallup data from the World Values Survey to demonstrate that there is a consistent linear relationship between the log of income and life satisfaction, and that a satiation point for income does not exist (see also Veenhoven and Hagerty 2006). As income grows life satisfaction continues to improve, albeit at a decelerating pace. Stevenson and Wolfers argued that the Easterlin Paradox was an artifact of bad data from the early Gallup surveys. These typically suffered from sampling bias associated with only interviewing wealthy people in poor nations (only they had telephones) and not including enough poor nations.

However, the log-linear relationship between income and happiness means that once you're moderately well off, it takes immense sums of money to marginally improve life satisfaction. This means that beyond middle income there are likely cheaper, easier, and more sustainable ways of generating bigger improvements in SWB than earning more money. Stevenson and Wolfers' studies also do not refute either adaptation or reference group effects. Indeed, as we discuss below in the section on hedonic psychology, the evidence for these phenomena is substantial.

One important new angle on the relationship between income and SWB is research exploring changes in life satisfaction as a result of macroeconomic fluctuations (Boyce et al. 2018). Initial findings suggest that recessions have larger negative effects on SWB than booms have positive effects. De Neve et al. (2018, p. 366) note that "a 10% economic contraction corresponds to a 0.135 standard deviation drop in life satisfaction, but an equivalent 10% expansion...only to a statistically ill-defined increase of around 0.023 standard deviations." The reasons for this divergence are unclear.

### *Wellbeing at Work*

One emerging area of economic research concerns wellbeing in the workplace. A working paper by Bellet et al. (2019) finds that happier workers are more productive. A win-win! However, Bellet et al. use random variation in the weather to experimentally vary the mood of workers. Workers might be more cynical toward managerial efforts to improve happiness if they suspect it is merely an attempt to work them harder. In a separate study using correlational rather than experimental evidence, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) found that workers who find their work meaningful and whose work nourishes their basic psychological needs typically work harder, earn more, quit less, and rarely call in sick. Similar evidence has emerged from studies of workplace well-being in self-determination theory. Another win-win. But here we must be concerned about selection bias - it's not clear whether businesses make their workplaces meaningful or whether employees select into jobs they subjectively find meaningful. Research into the underpinnings of job satisfaction and its relationship to life satisfaction find that work hour mismatches are deleterious to both (Drago et al. 2009). This is where workers aren't able to work their preferred number of hours, either underworking and thus not earning their desired incomes, or overworking and missing out on work-life balance (Fabian & Breunig 2019).

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### *The “Happiness” Equation*

A final body of work from happiness economists that is worth highlighting is efforts to estimate a “happiness equation.” This involves regressing life satisfaction as the dependent variable on a range of macro-level covariates like income, health, political institutions, satisfaction with health and community, inequality, and so forth. The most recent such effort, Clark et al. (2018), uses UK data. They find a modest, positive association between life satisfaction and income and physical health. In contrast, poor mental health has a very large, negative association. While the results are quite clear, it is worth underlining that happiness equations typically do very poorly at explaining variation in life satisfaction. Clark et al.’s (2018) principal regression, for example, explains less than 15 percent of the variation in UK adult life satisfaction, and only 3 percent of the variation in children’s emotional wellbeing. This is perhaps because the determinants of life satisfaction lie in deeper and more individual variables than those that typically enter happiness equations.

It is hard to deny that the social and economic conditions as represented by official statistics matter for wellbeing. But they hardly amount to an explanation of wellbeing. To understand, even life satisfaction on its own at a deeper level, our attention must turn to nuanced psychological factors like goal setting and achievement, values, basic psychological need fulfilment, and psychological skills like mindfulness and gratitude. We turn to psychology now.

## **4. Wellbeing in Psychology**

Subjective wellbeing was an implicit theme of early psychology and especially psychoanalysis, but quickly faded from Anglophone psychology with the advent of behaviorism in the 1920s. The next 50 years or so were characterized by a strong emphasis on objectively observable phenomena. Things like feelings, cognitions, and judgments, which are today central features of wellbeing research, were considered scientifically unapproachable in all but the most applied and clinical sides of psychology (Angner 2011). Even the cognitive revolution was too narrow for wellbeing science to take off. It was only with the affective revolution, which saw moods, emotions, and feelings as central to understanding a range of psychological phenomena, that the study of subjective wellbeing re-emerged in psychology (Diener et al. 2009, p. 15).

Due to the strong emphasis on empirical observation in previous decades, psychological science took a radically different approach to philosophy. As numerous commentators have noted (Cohen Kaminitiz 2018, Ryff 1989, Argyle 2001), the study of subjective wellbeing has proceeded almost entirely atheoretically. Scholars defined subjective wellbeing in a technical way stripped of its normative relationship to the prudential good. Subjective wellbeing was defined as a combination of affective experiences and evaluative judgments about life quality. The evidence for this definition came from factor analysis of survey responses rather than from any underlying conception of wellbeing.

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Whether these things are “good” for people in an ethical sense was largely left to one side.<sup>12</sup> Scholars then sought to develop measurement instruments for these experiences and evaluations, experience sampling and day reconstruction methods for the former, and life satisfaction scales for the latter. Experience sampling involves paging people regularly throughout the day and asking them how they feel and what they are doing. Day reconstruction is a bit less invasive and technologically intensive and involves simply recalling the previous day’s activities and experiences. Life satisfaction scales come in various guises, but the most common is something like the following, from Australia’s world class Household Labour and Income Dynamics (HILDA) panel: All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life at this time on a scale from 1–10?<sup>13</sup> Data collected using these instruments were analyzed to derive generalizations about subjective wellbeing. The first major statement of these research findings was Kahneman et al.’s (1999) landmark volume, *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*. Subjective well-being has since been associated with the “hedonic” school of psychology, in contrast to the eudaimonic school.

The eudaimonic school began to emerge in the late 1980s, notably with the publication of Carol Ryff’s (1989) Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire. After an extensive review of philosophical and psychological theories about wellbeing, this instrument defined wellbeing as a combination of self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. A common grievance of scholars in the eudaimonic camp is that subjective wellbeing as defined by hedonic psychologists is an incomplete and inaccurate account of *wellbeing*. It says little about good or healthy psychological functioning. This is perhaps because, according to Carol Diener in the introduction to Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008), Ed Diener wanted to study “happiness,” not wellbeing, but thought that his colleagues in psychology would have more respect for the technical-sounding “subjective wellbeing. In any case, a slew of papers followed Ryff’s, including the works of Waterman on wellbeing as self-expression (1990, 1993, 2013), Vittersø on wellbeing as good functioning (2009, 2010), and self-determination theory (Ryan et al. 2008) on wellbeing as living in accordance with the nature of the human organism. There are tropes common to all these perspectives, including a conceptualization of wellbeing as a way of living more so than a way of being, an emphasis on what sort of lives fit our psychological and biological natures, and an interest in the role of self-actualization and individuation in bringing about positive psychology. Many of these tropes overlap with tropes in the Aristotelian tradition of thinking about wellbeing, hence why they both share the label of “eudaimonic” theories of wellbeing.

In the rest of this section, we review the key findings of hedonic psychology and the key ideas of eudaimonic psychology, which has strongly coalesced around the self-determination theory perspective on wellbeing in the past decade. Much of the research on life satisfaction has already been covered in our discussion of happiness economics, above, so here we focus predominantly on

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<sup>12</sup> See, however, Gruber et al. 2011 as well as section 2 herein.

<sup>13</sup> A longer scale is the famous Satisfaction with Life Scale developed and validated by Diener et al. (1985).



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experienced rather than evaluative wellbeing. In section 2, we examine recent efforts to integrate these two schools of thought on the nature of psychological wellbeing.

### *Key Findings About Subjective Wellbeing*

#### The Peak-End Rule and Hedonic Experience

An early finding to emerge from experience sampling studies of SWB was that people's memories of pleasure and pain were largely determined by how they felt at the peak of pain/pleasure during that experience, and how painful/pleasant the end of the experience was (Schreiber and Kahneman 2000, Frederickson 2000). People seem to remember long and painful events with low peak pain as more pleasant than shorter and less painful events with higher peak pain (Kahneman et al. 1993). Similarly, they have more pleasant memories of long and painful events with relatively pleasant conclusions than shorter and less painful events with very unpleasant ends (Do et al. 2008).

#### Reference Points, Focusing Illusions, and Loss Aversion

Another early finding in hedonic psychology was that subjective wellbeing judgments seemed to depend heavily on a *reference level*, which is often just their present circumstances. Kahneman (1999) uses the example of paraplegics to illustrate this. Most people are surprised to learn that people who become paraplegics appear to recover close to pre-accident levels of life satisfaction within two years (Brickman et al. 1978 was the seminal study of this phenomenon). Kahneman posits that this is because people focus on the event of *becoming* a paraplegic, where the reference point is being able-bodied, and pay insufficient attention to the experience of *being* a paraplegic, where the reference point is being a paraplegic.

A related phenomenon is “focusing illusions.” This is where items that are cognitively salient during SWB assessments then bias those judgments by anchoring responses. A famous example is that citizens of the American Midwest anticipated that they would be happier if they lived in California because the weather there is better (Schkade and Kahneman 1998). However, residents of California and the Midwest report similarly high levels of SWB. California perhaps has some drawbacks, like high house prices and long commutes, that offset the good weather effect. Strack et al. (1988) found that priming respondents to think about how many dates they had been on recently caused them to significantly re-evaluate their life satisfaction relative to a control group. Similar anchoring effects have been observed for priming people with health issues or the quality of their marriage (Schwarz et al. 1991, Smith et al. 2006).

#### The Hedonic Treadmill, Adaptation, and Homeostatically Protected Mood

A major topic of inquiry in SWB research is the adaptation hypothesis. This is the claim that people get used to changes in their circumstances. Consequently, the effects of those changing circumstances on SWB fade with time and people return to a long run “set point.” Adaptation is clearly visible in longitudinal life satisfaction data. Oswald and Powdthavee (2008) find substantial adaptation to

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disability, and Powdthavee and Stutzer (2014) find similar effects for income growth. Other studies have found relatively rapid adaptation to childbirth and marriage and slower adaptation to the death of a spouse and divorce (Clark et al. 2008a, Dyrdal and Lucas 2013, Lucas et al. 2003, Stutzer and Frey 2006, Specht et al. 2011). Some circumstantial changes, such as cosmetic surgery and unemployment (Clark 2006, Powdthavee 2012), are severe enough to have lasting effects, but some degree of adaptation is typically observed even for these items.

Set point theory is a relatively more recent addition to the adaptation hypothesis. It posits a baseline level of SWB (in terms of both affect and life satisfaction) that people return to as they adapt to shocks (Lucas et al. 2004, Lucas and Donnellan 2007, Lykken 1999, Heady 2010, Heady et al. 2014). This set point is a kind of average level of SWB that is apparent when looking at life satisfaction scale data. There is some evidence that set-points are substantially genetically determined, and that they vary substantially with personality (Lykken and Tellegen 1996, Røysamb et al. 2014). Extroverts tend to have higher set points than introverts and other people high on neuroticism. Finally, there is some evidence that set points, at least those for mood, are homeostatically protected (Cummins et al. 2014, Capic et al. 2017). This means that our neurochemistry brings us back to a mild level of background positivity following both positive and negative shocks. A failure for mood to rebound implies homeostatic defeat, which is typically associated with ongoing stressors like poverty.

Alongside homeostasis, adaptation is conjectured to be driven by two forces: changing reference points and the hedonic treadmill (Layard 2005). Reference points like relative rank have been shown to influence people's satisfaction with their circumstances (Frijters and Mujcic 2013, Boyce et al. 2010, Brown et al. 2008, Bhuiyan 2018). One might think that an improvement in objective life circumstances would result in an improvement in SWB. However, structural changes in life circumstances can also change people's reference points, such that they now assess their position within some new ranking (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2012). For example, imagine an individual from a working-class background who becomes CEO of a midsized company. We might expect their high income-rank to result in high SWB. Yet it is possible that this individual will now judge their income by where it sits in a ranking composed only of other CEO salaries, not the salaries of the general population. Their SWB might consequently decline.

The Hedonic Treadmill is about getting used to *sensations* rather than circumstances. Sensations here are to be understood broadly to include things like the pride that comes with achieving career goals. Kahneman (1999) uses comparisons to the psychology of color and absolute length to explain treadmill effects and differentiate them from reference group effects. In experiments pertaining to people's perception of the intensity of color, people's sensory mechanisms adapt to the brightness and richness of hues and experience them less intensely under repeated stress. In length experiments, people are given two lines in each phase of an experiment: short and medium, and then medium and long. In the first phase, people will describe the medium line as, for example, "neither long nor short." In the second, they will describe it as, for example, "short" or "very short." This is a context effect. The different outcomes in these two experiments are "produced by different processes: color adaptation reflects a change in the sensory mechanism, whereas the context effect observed in size judgments is

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derived by the requirements of effective communication” (ibid. p. 11). Reference points are context effects. The hedonic treadmill is about sensory effects. The hedonic treadmill is like acclimatizing to a hot bath—scalding at first, then pleasant. The temperature of the water doesn’t change and neither does the individual’s reference point. Instead, their sensory instruments adjust.

## Time use and wellbeing

This section briefly reviews our current understanding of what activities (as distinct from techniques) affect mood and emotional responses. The findings are drawn from studies using experience sampling (Stone et al. 1999, Hektner et al. 2007) and day reconstruction methods (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). The former involves paging respondents over short, regular intervals (hourly, for example) and having them report their mood and current activity. The latter asks respondents to describe their mood and activities over the course of the previous day. Both methods are considered valid and effective measurement tools (Schwarz et al. 2008).

Using the day reconstruction method and a large sample of women in Ohio, Kahneman et al. (2004a) found that people had the highest levels of affect while engaged in sex, socializing, relaxing, eating, exercising, practicing religion, and watching television. They reported relatively lower levels of affect while talking on the phone and napping, and while engaged in chores including cooking, shopping, and computer tasks. The lowest levels of affect were reported for housework, childcare, commuting, and working. Similar results are reported by Argyle and Lu (1990).

White and Dolan (2009) and Dolan (2014) used experience sampling methods to extend this analysis by distinguishing between activities that give pleasure and those that give purpose. They find that some relatively less pleasurable activities like household chores and working are high in purpose, while some pleasurable activities like watching television are low in purpose. Two items that were relatively high in both pleasure and purpose were spending time with kids and volunteering activities.

### *Techniques for Improving Subjective Wellbeing*

Hedonic psychologists have developed a large body of techniques for improving SWB, especially mood. This is perhaps the most publicly recognizable output of this field and it is sometimes referred to as “positive psychology,” though that is a broader movement aimed at studying psychological flourishing rather than only pathology. Here we review some of the most established techniques. It is worth noting that this is a very young field where the evidence base is in many cases quite thin. The replication crisis in psychological science, which has engulfed many of the generalizations about SWB we outlined above, is also affecting the areas we discuss below (Agterén et al. 2021). This is alongside powerful ethical and conceptual critiques of many of these interventions.<sup>14</sup> As such, while we try to report the contemporary research landscape in this area, we caution against jumping on its conclusions with too much enthusiasm.

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<sup>14</sup> We recommend especially Nussbaum 2012, Kristjánsson 2013, Haybron 2013.

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## Positive Activity Interventions

Positive activity interventions (PAIs) are “simple, self-administered cognitive and behavioral strategies that can increase subjective well-being (happiness) by promoting positive feelings, positive thoughts, and positive behaviours” (Shin and Lyubomirsky 2014). Examples of positive activities include writing letters of gratitude, counting one’s blessings, practicing optimism, using one’s strengths in a new way, affirming one’s most important values (“experimental disclosure”) and meditating on positive feelings toward oneself and others. These are all distinct from simply doing something pleasant, like eating some cake.

The mechanism by which PAIs work to improve mood is theorized to be a combination of stimulating positive emotions and thoughts and satisfying basic psychological needs, specifically for autonomy and relatedness (Frederickson et al. 2008, Boehm et al. 2012). Many PAIs encourage pro-social behavior and an awareness of others and their role in our lives, which encourages and reinforces feelings of relatedness. PAIs are also an active therapy, which provides patients with a sense of autonomous control over their psychological state. PAIs protect against negative affect by discouraging rumination and loneliness (Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009).

## Gratitude

The most well-known PAI is gratitude (McCullough et al. 2002). In Western psychological science, gratitude is defined as “the recognition of a positive outcome from an external source, including a sense of wonder or thankfulness for the benefit received” (Nelson and Lyubomirsky 2016). If you are grateful for the good things in your life or for something like a beautiful sunset, psychological science says you have “appreciation.” Gratitude refers more specifically to thankfulness for positive things you receive from *other people*, especially in the form of altruistic acts that are privately costly for the Samaritan (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006). Interventions to boost gratitude include counting one’s blessings (Emmons and McCullough 2003), keeping a gratitude journal where you write down the things you are grateful for, and simply encouraging people to notice when people do them favors and react by saying “thanks” (Emmons 2008).

The mechanisms through which gratitude affects well-being are unclear (Wood et al. 2010), but there is some empirical support for the following causal theories. First, focusing on positive rather than negative things inevitably increases the salience of positive feelings in one’s conscious mind. Second, gratitude instigates cognitive processes that see people reframe negative things in positive ways, such as “COVID-19 lockdowns helped me spend more time with my children” (Nelson and Lyubomirsky 2016). Finally, gratitude reinforces a range of prosocial behaviors and outcomes. Cultivating gratitude makes you more aware of the altruism of others, which illuminates your social networks and encourages you to reciprocate. This inspires a virtuous cycle of mutual support. In general, gratitude deepens interpersonal connections, satisfying our need for relatedness (Algoe 2012).

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## Maximizing Versus Satisficing

Studies of the behavioural tendencies of happy people have revealed that they tend to look for and quickly take “good enough” options when making decisions rather than investing time and resources to find the best possible option (Abbe et al. 2003). This is the distinction between satisficers and maximizers. Several studies have demonstrated that maximizing is negatively associated with happiness (Schartz et al. 2002). This is not because maximizers make worse decisions. Indeed, the opposite seems to be the case. It is because they agonize over those decisions, even after they have been made. There is a cost in cognitive resources to this, not to mention an unnecessary anxiety burden.

## Experimental Disclosure

Experimental disclosure involves writing and talking about life events as a form of therapy. In theory, disclosing the fact of such events and any feelings associated with them may allow people to free their mind of unwanted thoughts, help them to make sense of upsetting events, teach them to better regulate their emotions, habituate them to negative emotions, and improve their connection with their social world. Experimental disclosure is what happens on psychiatrist’s couches. One meta-analysis found statistically significant effects from experimental disclosure on emotional wellbeing, but the effect size was trivial, explaining only 0.56 percent of the variance (not half, but half of one percent) in measured outcomes (Frattaroli 2006).

The issue might be that the ambit of experimental disclosure is too broad. There is evidence that writing and talking is required for processing *negative* events, whereas simply thinking about *positive* ones has similar effects (Lyubomirsky et al. 2006). Writing and talking involve “organizing, integrating and analysing one’s problems with a focus on solution generation or at least acceptance.” This processing can satisfy the desire to understand the meaning of an event, enhance understanding of its significance and create a narrative that links into the individual’s identity (Singer 2004; Smyth et al. 2001). Processing takes the emotion out of events, which allows them to be reflected on without triggering distress. Obviously thinking is involved in both writing and talking, but their structured nature obviates against deleterious rumination in a way that thinking on one’s own does not (Hixon and Swann 1993). Thinking rather than writing or talking about positive events is useful precisely because it limits processing and allows the individual to instead wallow in the positive emotional valence of pleasant past experiences (Lyubomirsky et al. 2006).

## The Hedonic Adaptation Prevention Model

This idea of retaining the emotional valence of positive experiences so that they can be replayed and reducing it for negative experiences so that they fade from consciousness is the basic idea behind the hedonic adaptation prevention (HAP) model (Armenta et al. 2014). The HAP was developed to counteract the natural tendency of individuals to adapt to positive experiences while accelerating adaptation to negative ones (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2012). One of its principal insights is that

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experiences that generate a variety of positive thoughts and feelings have a more prolonged effect than those that generate only a single positive effect (Fritz et al. 2017). The effect of most material goods tends to fade because they provide only one sensation. By contrast, a new and enjoyable job can provide a plethora of positive things to reflect on, such as colleagues, location, the work itself, pay, and a meaningful mission. In general, experiences have been found to produce longer lasting positive emotional valence than goods (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003).

Two other techniques frequently covered in discussions of the HAP are appreciation and living in the moment. Appreciation in this context is the same as gratitude. Namely, reflecting on what's good in life brings positive emotions to the fore, reducing cognitive space for negative emotions. Living in the moment breaks down into four items: savoring, basking, marveling, and awe. When something good is happening to you, focus your attention on the positive feelings and do not think of the future. This is savoring, and it prevents the emotion from fading. If you can act on the experience by, say, throwing a party, that's even better, and referred to as capitalization. Basking is the same technique as savoring applied when positive things are happening to *other people* that you have positive feelings for. Marveling and awe are essentially savoring applied to things that are amazing or staggering, typically in nature, like a beautiful sunset or sublime athleticism (Bryant and Veroff 2006).

### Bringing in the Good and the HEAL Method

Hanson's (2013) "bringing in the good" and associated "HEAL" method is another integrated strategy for improving affect balance. Bringing in the good is "the deliberate internalization of positive experiences in implicit memory." Like the HAP, it is a suite of techniques that help individuals to focus on and thereby increase the intensity and duration of good feelings. Bringing in the good also emphasizes the possibility of using positive experiences to overwrite negative associations embedded in memory. For example, consider someone who suffers anxiety because of past bullying that occurred when they attempted to join a new social circle. This individual can focus on positive feelings associated with an enjoyable social experience in the present and use those feelings to actively replace the association between social interaction, bullying, and negative feelings they have in their subconscious. The HEAL method has four steps (Hanson, *ibid.* p. 61):

- **Have a positive experience:** this involves either noticing a pleasant experience underway, such as a feeling of wonder, or creating one yourself by, for example, thinking about things you are grateful for.
- **Enrich it:** stay with the feeling for a sustained period (10 seconds or longer) and try to bring it to the center of consciousness.
- **Absorb it:** Meditate on the feeling so that it occupies not just your consciousness but mind (and potentially body) more generally.



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- Link positive and negative material: bring negative associations into consciousness alongside your positive experience, thereby replacing those negative associations with the present positive ones.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a concept in Buddhist philosophy and practice that Jon Kabat-Zinn adapted for use as a treatment for stress (Kabat-Zinn 2006). It has also recently been adapted as a treatment for preventing depressive relapse (Barnhofer et al. 2009). Kabat-Zinn’s original definition of the term was, “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.” The definition employed in the Philadelphia mindfulness scale is “the tendency to be highly aware of one’s internal and external experiences in the context of an accepting, non-judgmental stance toward those experiences” (Cardaciotto et al. 2008).

These Western definitions of mindfulness are substantially more limited than the Buddhist one. Traditional definitions situate mindfulness within a broader suite of activities that help the individual practice Buddhist ethics, let go of the self, and attain enlightenment. The therapeutic effects of mindfulness derive from its ability to grant patients control over their conscious thoughts. In particular, mindfulness grants the ability to recognize emotions as not existing independently of mind. As we exercise some control over our minds, we can choose to let go of negative thoughts. This is referred to as renunciation (Ricard 2003). It can help individuals to avoid ruminative thoughts and control stress. Furthermore, the non-judgmental aspect of mindfulness allows people afflicted with stress and depression to manage these emotions without them provoking feelings of self-hate or hopelessness (Keng et al. 2011). Some studies suggest that mindfulness can also aid in values clarification and improve behavioral self-regulation (Roemer et al. 2009, Shapiro et al. 2006, Huppert and Yu 2020).

## *Meaning and Purpose*

In popular works about wellbeing a central motif is the question “what is the meaning of life?” Existentialist philosophy embraced the relationship between meaning and wellbeing, especially Nietzsche, who wrote:

Gradually, man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfil one more condition of existence than any other animal: man *has to* believe, to know, from time to time, *why* he exists; his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life—without faith in *reason in life*.  
(The Genealogy of Morals, s. 28)

Early psychoanalysis was also interested in this question. Notably, Victor Frankl (1959) developed the method of logotherapy, which is founded on the idea that people need meaning in their life to feel well. Finding ways to help people experience meaning by, say, caring for loved ones, participating in charity groups, or seeing the social value in their job, can often be transformative. However, while the logotherapy tradition operates to this day (Wong 2010), it found few fellow travelers among academic

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psychologists. The behavioral, cognitive, and even affective revolutions were generally unfavorable to vague notions like meaning, which are hard to observe and even harder to measure.

This has changed recently. Anglophone philosophers in the analytic tradition have reinvigorated discussions about the concept of a meaningful life and debated the substantive theories about what it takes to lead one (Metz 2021). As in the case of wellbeing, these theories typically come in either subjective or objective versions; but unlike wellbeing, analytic philosophers are less open to accepting purely subjective accounts of meaning (Kauppinen 2015). According to Kauppinen, the standard view due to Susan Wolf is that a life is meaningful when we wholeheartedly pursue goals and activities of objective worth (Wolf 2010). The subjective view is most prominent in existentialist tradition (Arp 2001, Reginster 2006). It is inevitable, however, that empirical psychology could only study subjective perceptions of meaning. Indeed, starting with Baumeister (1991), meaning is now a distinct field of research that strongly complements research in SWB.

The empirical study of meaning took off with the development of the meaning in life questionnaire (Steger et al. 2006). Many studies with this and related instruments indicate that a global sense of meaningfulness has three underlying factors: coherence, purpose, and significance (King and Hicks 2020). Coherence refers to the sense that one's life "makes sense" (Heintzelmann and King 2014). Purpose refers to "the feeling that one's life is guided by personally valued goals" (King and Hicks 2020). Finally, significance refers to the feeling that one's life will have a lasting impact on the world.

A relationship has been found empirically between positive affect and meaning (Keyes et al. 2002, King et al. 2006, Steger et al. 2006). Empirical studies have also found a correlation between meaning in life and life satisfaction (Bonebright et al. 2000, Ryff 1989, Steger 2006, Steger and Frazier 2005, Steger et al. 2008). More broadly, meaning has been linked to a range of desirable traits including autonomy, self-control, and sense of control (Steger et al. 2008, Garfield 1973, Newcomb and Harlow 1986, Reker and Peacock 1981), ego-resiliency (Tryon and Radzin 1972, Shek 1992), and positive perceptions of the world (Simon et al. 1998).

Other philosophical and sociological perspectives on meaning in life have stressed the role of religion and culture in undergirding feelings of meaning. A key channel for this is values, which are practiced, sustained, and enforced inter-subjectively (Baumeister 2005). It is much easier to feel a sense of purpose if those around you endorse your values and celebrate your accomplishments. It is similarly easier to feel a sense of coherence if your values are reflected back to you by your culture, as, say, for a Buddhist monk. And it is easier to feel significant if your acts are supposedly part of a cosmic plan or at least contribute to a culture that will live on after your death (Emmons 1999). There is certainly an effort to empirically link these issues in psychology, but the threads are only just starting to come together. One notable stream of research is worldview defence theory (Holbrook et al. 2011). This takes various forms, but a unifying element is that when people are existentially distressed by uncertainty, thoughts of death, or environmental stressors, they display exaggerated loyalty to their various cultural in-groups, like their national identity. This demonstrates the association between culture and meaning.

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## 5. Recap

Our overview has presented key achievements of the founding disciplines in wellbeing research: philosophy, economics, and psychology. More often than not, these fields are engaged in overlapping projects: to delineate the concepts relevant to wellbeing, to find valid ways of detecting its observable manifestations empirically, to locate and to test hypotheses about psychological or social factors that cause or correlate with wellbeing. Although aware of each others' existence, researchers in these fields have not typically sought to connect their respective methods and perspectives (apart from economists helping themselves to psychological surveys). Instead they have deployed the intellectual resources close to them to study wellbeing in a manner that is within their purview. Such parallel play has enabled researchers to pick some low-hanging fruit. Philosophy of wellbeing, even though it lacks agreement on the correct theory of it, has a reasonably tidy library of theoretical options and a good vision of the costs and benefits of each of the main approaches, hedonism, subjectivism, and objective list. Economics, taking the cue from the Easterlin Paradox, has assembled an impressive array of correlational knowledge about the links between income, consumption, and employment on one hand, and the various subjective indicators of wellbeing on the other. Psychology, which has dedicated comparatively the most resources to wellbeing, can show off a variety of perspectives (hedonic and eudaimonic) as well as an extensive record of empirical data about the relation between SWB, perception, personality, and activities.

However, in each case we see this parallel model running out of steam. There is only so much that philosophy, economics, and psychology can do on their own. Philosophers' theories of wellbeing remain too far from application and make little difference to practice. Economists and psychologists have been more successful at correlating SWB to other factors than at explaining the underlying dynamics. Practical enterprises such as positive psychology, even on the assumption that they are effective, make people feel better about situations that are possibly unjust, unacceptable, or unsustainable. Overcoming these problems will take some joined up thinking between philosophy, psychology and economics. It will also require attending to other social sciences like sociology and anthropology, which so far have been remarkably absent from the canon. We now turn to the ways in which integration is possible and desirable.

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## **PART II: CURRENT AND EMERGING TRENDS**

In this section we scan the horizon of wellbeing research to offer some guidance on what currently animates the field and what to expect from it in the near future. We present both influential recent publications and our thoughts as to where the gaps are in our understanding of wellbeing. We identify three currents around which this section is organized: policy, measurement, and integration.

### **6. Wellbeing Public Policy**

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What measure would capture that which makes life worthwhile at the level of a nation? That it should include more than the traditional economic indicators is slowly becoming the mainstream view. In 2009 three eminent economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean Paul Fitoussi, produced a report commissioned by the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy outlining a multi-dimensional measure of national well-being that includes even subjective well-being indicators (Stiglitz et al 2009). Since then, national and state governments have been busy developing their own indices of wellbeing, among them New Zealand, Bhutan, Canada, United Arab Emirates, Santa Monica California, the Australian Capital Territory, and Tasmania. These indices are rarely beholden to one particular theory of wellbeing. In the UK, the Office of National Statistics' measure of national well-being is a mongrel with room for all traditions. Naturally these metrics reflect the political cultures in which they are born. When researchers seek to make comparisons, as the World Happiness Report tries to, they have to standardize (Helliwell et al. 2020).

Two requirements seem to be crucial to a notion of national well-being. First, such a measure needs to capture the values and priorities of the people whose well-being it is supposed to represent. Haybron and Tiberius coin the term *pragmatic subjectivism* precisely for this purpose (Haybron & Tiberius 2015). They argue that even if one adopts an objectivist theory of well-being, when it comes to well-being policy at a governmental level one should adopt a kind of subjectivism. Not an actual preference satisfaction view, but a more sophisticated subjectivism: one that differentiates between stated or revealed preference and deeply held values and prioritizes the latter. Because policy contexts present special dangers of paternalism and oppression, governments defer on the nature of well-being to the individuals they represent. (None of this implies that governments should stay out of promoting well-being of its citizens). Second, a measure of national well-being needs to represent a certain level of consensus, not a mere sum of individual well-beings. This is what the Office of National Statistics sought in their 2011 public consultations. Together these two requirements appear to underlie the rationale behind the ONS approach and other multi-indicator proposals, such as the Prosperity Index of the Legatum Institute (Legatum 2015) and the OECD's Better Life Index. Whether these efforts are actually successful at reflecting people's values and at fostering a genuine deliberation is another question. In the case of UK there is some evidence that consultations were selective and largely symbolic (Oman 2016, Scott & Bell 2013).

So much for national indicators. What about policy based on these indicators, or wellbeing public policy (WPP)? Here too there are strong national differences that respond to differences in political cultures. In United Arab Emirates there is a dedicated Minister of Happiness. In Bhutan there is an index of Gross National Happiness. Many developed countries in the Global North, as well as New Zealand and Australia, have adopted national indicators of wellbeing and some, more or less loose, commitment to evaluate present and future spending on the basis of these indicators. Even in the absence of strong national impetus, for example in the United States, locally driven initiatives at the level of cities and regions also use the language and the science of wellbeing as an anchor in policy conversations. The typical interventions include choice architecture, such as nudges, social

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prescribing, development of green and public spaces, and volunteering activities (the UK's What Works Centre for Wellbeing maintains an extensive list of these interventions).

Rather than survey the specific initiatives, we survey the general issues that arise anytime a polity—national or local, democratic or otherwise - undertakes to improve wellbeing of their citizens through policy. Political theory uses the concept of “welfarism” to refer to the ideal that wellbeing, rather than justice or rights, is the proper goal of public policy (Sen 1979). Standard justifications of the pursuit of economic growth are welfarist. But wellbeing advocates pursue welfarism by reference to the Easterlin Paradox. If happiness stalls as income grows, focusing on economic growth to the exclusion of other goods seems wrong. We should instead focus on promoting subjective wellbeing directly. As we showed in Section 1, this equilibrium is now somewhat shaken, as the new data brought out forcefully by Stevenson and Wolfers (2013) appear to undermine the claim that increases in absolute income do after all predict increases in subjective well-being over time. If income is a fine long-term predictor of happiness, what policy role is there for indicators of subjective well-being? The enthusiasts are undaunted for several reasons. First, Stevenson and Wolfers rely on indicators focused on satisfaction with life relative to other possible lives, rather than on measures of emotional well-being. The latter does not track income as well. Second, income only predicts subjective well-being in conjunction with other social factors, such as health, social support, freedom, etc. The apparent demise of the Easterlin Paradox has not so far undermined prospects of WPP. Third, even if on average absolute income and subjective well-being rise and fall together, there are still striking cases of divergence, for example, the steady growth of GDP coupled with a steady fall in life satisfaction in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring (Clarke et al. 2012). Fourth, and perhaps most important, the relationship between income growth and life satisfaction becomes very weak above middle-class incomes. This has motivated the search for other, more powerful tools for improving life satisfaction, especially tools that do not exacerbate inequality or environmental degradation as growth-oriented ideologies are perceived to.

Suppose we grant that wellbeing and economic growth diverge and that therefore the policymaker is right to target wellbeing, WPP still faces many obstacles. Its advocates typically assume the stance of a social planner - a dispassionate expert who knows the causes of wellbeing and who advises the government which policies to adopt in order to maximize it. But this stance faces at least three problems. The first one is epistemic. The progress in wellbeing research notwithstanding, the social planner does not have a sufficient evidence base to tell governments at which rate they should be funding schools, versus housing, versus mental health clinics, versus green area, and so on. Most of the available knowledge is a) correlational rather than causal, and b) highly unstable and context-dependent (Fabian et al. 2021a, 2021c). That is, of course, true of policymaking in general, but our point is that some of the high-profile claims about the certainty and the strengths of policy implications of wellbeing science are highly exaggerated.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See for example, Alexandrova and Singh's 2018 and Fabian's 2018 reviews of Clark et al. 2018.

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The second problem the social planner faces is an ethical one. Inheriting the ethos of utilitarianism, the social planner treats people as containers of wellbeing to be filled to the brim or as high as possible, rather than as agents in their own right with ideas of their own (Smart & Williams 1973). The social planner, we might say, does wellbeing to people. In the case of life satisfaction maximization, this approach to WPP also inherits from classical utilitarianism an emphasis on mental states as definitive and exhaustive of wellbeing. There is no room in this picture for rights, entitlements, constitutional constraints, or obligations. The only value of, say, education, that the social planner can recognize is its ability to raise or lower life satisfaction, rather than its ability to fulfil governments' duties to the citizens or expand their agency. Finally, the social planner is blind to citizens' own ideas about what wellbeing is, how to improve it, and how not to improve it. They may not wish to be "fixed." This and other well-rehearsed issues were eloquently explored by Aldous Huxley in his famous *Brave New World*, but they are worth reiterating because the utilitarian ethos among wellbeing scientists remains strong.

Which brings us to the third problem, a political one. The proper role of experts in a democracy is a contentious one. It is hard enough for some to accept expertise of epidemiologists and vaccine scientists, but in the medical domain there are at least some key terms – infection rates, death rates, etc. – that can be defined technically with clear and uncontroversial value judgments. Not so for WPP. In the case of wellbeing then, skepticism about expertise and technocratic overreach is on much firmer grounds. Technocracy - or the ideal of governance by experts - is a troubling prospect. Libertarian and liberal critics worry about dangers of paternalism and coercion, when certain wellbeing policies become obligatory or unavoidable (Haybron and Tiberius 2015, Haybron & Alexandrova 2017). On the left, critics link wellbeing policy with the neoliberal conceit to turn social problems into personal ones - for example, making welfare benefits dependent on agreeing to a course of cognitive behavioral therapy or providing the disadvantaged people with resilience training instead of addressing structural injustices (Davies 2015).

On the positive side, the conversation surrounding WPP is undeniably growing in sophistication and scale. There is now an authoritative *Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy* (Adler and Fleurbaey 2016). A recent special issue entitled "On Happiness Being the Goal of Government" of the journal *Behavioural Public Policy* showed a wide range of views far more intricate than even ten years ago. The WPP enthusiasts now offer practical tools for estimating the wellbeing effects of policies (Frijters et al. 2020), while their critics suggest ways that these tools can fail and can be improved (Stutzer 2020, Durand 2020, Benjamin et al. 2020, among others.) A slew of new publications explore the limits of treating wellbeing as being within our control, the necessity of querying wellbeing data, the environmental sustainability of happiness, how to design informational technology compatible with human flourishing, and how to embed flourishing in education.<sup>16</sup> The rapid global warming and the COVID-19 pandemic have added urgency to new conceptions of economic progress, with some economists exploring the prospects of a "wellbeing economy" (Fioramonti et al 2022).

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<sup>16</sup> Wren-Lewis 2019, Oman 2021, Thin et al. 2017, Calvo and Peters 2014, Kristjansson 2019, Searle et al 2021.



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Our three objections notwithstanding, the ambition of wellbeing public policy is here to stay and its practice has enough good will behind it to overcome these challenges. The eagerness to conceptualize “the good life,” the “good society,” and “social progress” in more expansive terms than those driving 20<sup>th</sup> century policymaking is undeniable. Psychologists and happiness economists are increasingly embarking on robust and sensitive evaluations of well-specified interventions to improve wellbeing, especially in schools and workplaces. Increasingly sociologists and anthropologists are involved. Local governments and charities in the space are working with stakeholders across many areas of policy to coproduce theories of wellbeing and associated measures that can inform policymaking in specific areas like poverty reduction, drug rehabilitation, community wellbeing, and environmental quality. There are certainly many risky and controversial issues to work through in this fledgling field of wellbeing public policy, but the energy, enthusiasm, and goodwill that characterize the field should hopefully see these wrinkles ironed out in an efficacious manner in the coming decades.

## **7. Measurement**

We have seen so far the many different ways in which researchers define wellbeing and how these differences enable them to produce theories and claims at different levels of analysis and from different perspectives. What does this say about measurability of wellbeing in general?

If we could summarize the state of the art with one sentence it would be: wellbeing is measurable, but it depends on what you mean by measurement and by wellbeing. We have already seen that the field as a whole does not operate with a single definition of wellbeing and this matters for measurability because some definitions of wellbeing are far more amenable to measurement than others. To measure a phenomenon is to assign numerical values that represent meaningful variations in the level of this phenomenon. Beyond this minimal definition, scholarly literature and scientific practice allow for different ways of assigning these values and justifying them. Numerical scales sometimes merely order items, while at other times they also represent intervals between them. Justifying these scales is sometimes accomplished by proofs known as representation theorems and sometimes by statistical analysis known as psychometric validation.<sup>17</sup> While there are common criteria against which most scales are judged - reliability, consistency, construct validity - there is also plenty of variation in how these criteria are defined and applied. Such a variation is inevitable - what it takes to measure something is not written in the sky and instead these criteria must be guided by practical purposes. Diversity notwithstanding, there are at least three legitimate concerns about dominant practices in measurement of wellbeing.

The first concern is that the very requirement of measurement advantages those measures that summarize wellbeing in a single statistic over multidimensional measures. It is far easier to analyze and to publicize wellbeing research when it shows unambiguous and simple results, such as Scandinavians

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<sup>17</sup> For the latest on these requirements see Tal 2020, Angner 2011, 2013, 2015, Vessonen 2020, Larroulet-Philippli (forthcoming).

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are better off than Americans. Life satisfaction is often praised for yielding a unified overall summary number, which can conveniently be plugged into conventional statistics and displayed in easily digestible graphs. This convenience likely accounts at least somewhat for the dominance of this measure, but it does not indicate its greater validity (Mitchell and Alexandrova 2020). It is far more likely that wellbeing is multidimensional: that is, encompassing several domains of life such as health, freedom, dignity, etc. Plus there are well-known fundamental problems with life satisfaction as a construct – it more likely reflects our stance on life, rather than our emotional state relevant to wellbeing (Haybron 2011). Some measures of wellbeing are multidimensional, namely, measures of capabilities and of psychological strengths, but these raise distinct measurement challenges. Are all these dimensions measurable on comparable scales? Do they trade-off against one another? Even when researchers overcome these obstacles and put forward multidimensional measures, they suffer in comparison to unidimensional ones. But the key point is that this disadvantage does not reflect a greater validity of unidimensional measures, only their greater *convenience*. In this case the measurement tail wags the theory dog.

Another concern about existing measures is that they are developed and validated with minimal theoretical input. Normally in natural sciences measurement and theory go together - the more we know about how temperature works, the better our measures become.<sup>18</sup> But in the case of wellbeing, measurement runs far ahead of theorizing. Researchers know a lot about the statistical properties of wellbeing questionnaires - which ones correlate with each other and which ones do not - but they know a lot less about what actually happens when people are asked to make judgments of life satisfaction or of happiness. Do people consult their own internal standard? Does this standard come from their social environment? Most important, does this standard change over time? There have of course been attempts to model the interaction between the measurement instrument and the subjects (Fleurbaey & Blanchet 2013, McClimans et al 2012), but it is fair to say that overall, researchers who use these measures treat them as black boxes and place their faith in their statistical properties.

Whence this unwillingness to theorize and the retreat into statistics? This plausibly has to do with the awkward disciplinary politics of the science of wellbeing. Its public image from the outset depended on the backing of quantitative sciences such as economics and psychology. Moreover the measurement conventions all come from the technically forbidding domain of psychometrics and often from a very selective reliance on the techniques of construct validation.<sup>19</sup> But theorizing about wellbeing is inescapably philosophical, thrusting scientists into a domain where they must reflect on what matters and why and where the quantitative rigor will consequently often prove insufficient. Such a devil's bargain—perceived scientific rigor at the expense of validity - may well make sense, all things considered. But when it comes to measurement, it undermines the scientists' claims to measure

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<sup>18</sup> Chang 2004, van Fraassen 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Wijsen et al 2021 and Vessonon 2020 develop this critique.

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wellbeing as it really is. Hence the recent worries about “theory avoidance,” “correlation mongering,” or the search for a “theory-free lunch.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Fundamental Issues in the Measurement of Life Satisfaction*

A long dormant concern for the measurement of well-being that is roaring back to life is whether respondents interpret scales, specifically life satisfaction scales, uniformly. In other words, is the process of *reporting* latent life satisfaction on survey questions identical across respondents (Ingelström & van der Deijl 2021)? There are three elements to this, all of which are potentially pernicious to statistical analysis of life satisfaction data:

- Cardinality/linearity: do respondents perceive the intervals on scales (between 3-4 and 7-8) as being of the same size in terms of the amount of satisfaction required to move up or down a grade?
- Scale norming: do respondent’s change the qualitative meaning of the points on their scales over time?
- Scale consistency: do all respondents interpret scales in the same way?

Three recent papers (Plant 2021, Fabian 2021, Kaiser 2021) take on these issues. Plant focuses on cardinality and comes to an optimistic conclusion. While there is evidence that respondents might not use scales in a manner that is perfectly linear, scale responses appear sufficiently linear as to make cardinal analysis of scale responses meaningful. Fabian and Kaiser focus instead on scale norming and come to more pessimistic conclusions. Scale norming appears to be a relatively common occurrence, especially after substantial shocks to life satisfaction. However, it also appears to be relatively mild in terms of its overall impact. It seems to almost never change the sign of a shock (i.e., making a positive shock seem negative to a researcher), and it only alters the estimated size of effects modestly. Nonetheless, scale norming over time would compound measurement error and result in highly biased analysis of longitudinal life satisfaction. This would be pernicious to efforts to use life satisfaction in cost benefit calculations or to measure social progress. Investigating these issues empirically is very challenging but likely to be a topic of intense inquiry in the next decade or so, especially among happiness economists.

### *The Need For Cognitive Interviewing*

One research methodology that could help shed light on the three measurement issues outlined above is cognitive interviewing. This involves having respondents “think out loud” when answering survey questions and has been applied in health care and psychiatric research settings (Truijens et al. 2021, Taminau-Bloem et al. 2011). It could be used to understand the cognitive process that goes on when people assess and report their life satisfaction, revealing whether people use the scale linearly, the same way as other people, and consistently over time. It could also identify what items people consider

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<sup>20</sup> Alexandrova 2017, Alexandrova and Haybron 2015, Hersch 2020.

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relevant to their life satisfaction. At present, scholars of life satisfaction typically choose covariates to analyze based on what questions already exist in social surveys. It's possible that many important determinants of life satisfaction are completely overlooked because they are not in existing datasets and we rarely ask people directly what matters to them.

Subjective well-being scholars have historically avoided cognitive interviewing and similar exercises out of a fear that asking people to reflect on their life satisfaction could introduce various cognitive biases into responding (Stone & Mackie 2013). For example, respondents may be affected by social desirability bias to give dishonestly positive assessments of their life. Or they might be primed by their conversation with the researcher to focus on particular elements of their life, such as family, at the expense of other variables equally relevant to their satisfaction. These are reasonable concerns, but in the interests of gaining a more holistic understanding of what goes on, cognitively and linguistically, when people answer life satisfaction questions, it seems worthwhile to do at least some think-out-loud surveys.

Our overview of the challenges of wellbeing policy and wellbeing measurement brought out the necessity of a more joined up and a more interdisciplinary conversation. Thankfully this is happening.

## **8. Integration of Wellbeing Theories and Perspectives**

The history of well-being research has been characterized by disagreements, differentiations, and categorizations. In psychology, eudaimonic psychologists have sought to distinguish themselves from hedonic psychologists. In philosophy, advocates of preferences satisfaction accounts of wellbeing have sought to distinguish themselves from advocates of objective list, mental state, nature fulfilment, and other accounts of wellbeing, and vice versa. In economics, we've seen welfare and happiness economists argue over whether utility is best captured by revealed preferences or reported life satisfaction. In policy too, we see debates between capabilities theorists, economists, and psychologists over what metrics should be used to assess policy and gauge social progress, with battle lines drawn according to each camp's preferred theory of wellbeing.

More recently, there has been a countervailing push to adopt more integrative attitudes to the study of wellbeing and these trends are worth attending to. Philosophers have always been somewhat aggrieved by psychologists' reluctance to engage with the evaluative dimensions of well-being. Well-being, they argue, is what is "good for" somebody. This cannot be defined without making value judgments as to what the "good" is. But equally, no normative theory can possibly succeed without fitting human psychology and human sociality. It took pioneers like Dan Haybron and Valerie Tiberius to get the interdisciplinary ball rolling.

Haybron's 2008 book, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* was the first to use a genuine variety of empirical, literary, cultural, and philosophical sources to articulate not just a theory of wellbeing, but also a rich account of what wellbeing feels like (happiness) and why this phenomenology eludes easy detection via indicators, surveys, or introspection. Because happiness is

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multidimensional and elusive, a proper study of wellbeing should marshal resources from all the fields in humanities and social sciences, including religious thought. Taking seriously our limited epistemic access to happiness also challenges prevailing political orthodoxies both on the right and the left (especially, Haybron argued, simple liberalism that insists on increasing option freedom). In connecting psychology, ethics, and political theory, Haybron modeled a genuinely joined up inquiry.

Tiberius, whose theory we discuss in more detail shortly, is also notable for a series of early interventions that increased awareness of the deep-seated and often controversial assumptions psychologists made in their seemingly purely empirical studies (for example, Tiberius 2006). The distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being was significant not just from a psychological point of view, she argued with Alicia Hall, but also from an evaluative point of view. Hedonic accounts make a simplistic value judgment to the effect that what is intrinsically good for people is positive mental states (Tiberius & Hall 2010). Eudaimonic accounts, in contrast, argue that what is intrinsically good for people is self-expression (Waterman 2013) or living in accordance with organismic tendencies toward integration (Ryan & Deci 2017). The implications for ethics in psychotherapy and counselling, among other things, are significant.

By and large, psychologists and economists have, understandably, been reluctant to embrace the value-laden nature of well-being because they worry it taints their scientific status. While the possibility of value free scientific inquiry is controversial in the philosophy of science, there are certainly some practitioners who strive to live up to this ideal. We see this, for example, in psychologists advocating for the use of subjective well-being metrics in public policy: “we believe that measures of well-being are—and must be— exactly as neutral politically as are economic indicators. The indicators are descriptive, not prescriptive, and must remain so” (Diener and Seligman 2004, p. 24). Of course, no indicators of wellbeing, economic or psychological, are politically neutral. They reflect a preferred theory of wellbeing, namely, preference satisfaction in economics, with income and prices being used as measures of revealed preference (Angner 2009). This is the evaluative underpinning of techniques like the evaluation of non-market goods like biodiversity using surveys that ask respondents to trade off goods against each other. SWB indicators reflect psychologists’ predilection for either experience or reflection about that experience (Loewenstein 2009). Economics, as we have seen, has an entire subfield, welfare economics, dedicated to the philosophical issues inherent to value judgments in economic practice. Psychology has, to date, not faced up to its own unavoidably ethical elements.

How do scholars resolve these conflicts between the normative and the scientific dimensions of wellbeing? Some seek complementarities between theories and develop those that combine multiple perspectives into coherent wholes. Others call for contextual theories at lower levels of abstraction. We review some of the most prominent works in this vein below.

### *The Contextual Approach*

There is a striking disconnect between the high level of abstraction at which traditional theories of wellbeing operate – they speak of human wellbeing in general – and the practical goals of wellbeing policy, public health, and service provision. The practical endeavors are not typically aimed at humans

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in general, but rather at kinds of people and kinds of communities, namely, children in need, vulnerable adults, single parents on welfare, and so on. Applying any abstract theory of wellbeing to particular cases is far from straightforward and it makes sense to pursue theories that are specifically suited to context. Such theories are already plentiful in health sciences where measures of quality of life are carefully adapted to patients living with a particular condition and where the question of how to flourish with a disability is especially live.<sup>21</sup> Anna Alexandrova (2017) argues that *mid-level theories*, that is theories relativized to contexts, as distinct from the typical high-level theories that are supposed to apply in general, are necessary for responsible wellbeing research and policy. She illustrates this point with a theory of child wellbeing that uses resources from high theories without reducing to one. Developing mid-level theories necessarily demands empirical engagement with the realities of living as a member of a particular kind (such as “child,” “disabled,” “impoverished,” “resident of Cornwall,” etc.) and a moral engagement with the question of what sort of wellbeing is worth promoting for that kind. Doing this well invites us to move down the ladder of abstraction from wellbeing in an all-things-considered sense to wellbeing in a some-things-considered sense. In practice this will take creative theory building exercises that include both scholars of wellbeing and also people with lived experience of being a member of the kind in question.<sup>22</sup>

Taking further the idea that useful concepts of wellbeing are not always already out there but need to be developed, we come to the approach of *conceptual engineering*. In a recent paper, Prinzling (2020) explicitly calls out psychology for negligently ignoring the evaluative aspects of psychological wellbeing. He deploys conceptual engineering to developing a theory of well-being fit for psychological science that is also sensitive to normative issues. Furthermore, he argues for a range of practical changes to wellbeing research and publication. Specifically:

- Evaluative claims and assumptions should be made fully explicit.
- Constructs should be validated both empirically and evaluatively (as argued earlier by Alexandrova & Haybron, 2016).
- Preferences for different constructs should be acknowledged as reflecting not merely differences in the interpretation of empirical results or the convenience of using different measures but substantive disagreements about what makes life go well.

### *The Inclusive Approach*

Michael Bishop’s *The Good Life: Unifying the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being* offers an alternate framework for conceptually engineering a theory of well-being, namely, his *inclusive approach*.

Typically philosophers judge theories by their descriptive, normative, and empirical adequacy. Descriptive adequacy refers to the extent to which a theory of well-being can make sense of our

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<sup>21</sup> Hall 2016, 2020, Hawkins forthcoming, Campbell and Stramondo 2017.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent example of a participatory approach to building a theory of thriving under poverty, see Fabian et al. 2021b.



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commonsense intuitions and judgments. For example, some philosophers argue that subjective theories are erroneous because they imply that someone happy but dying from a terminal illness is “well,” which seems counterintuitive. Normative adequacy is similar, but refers more specifically to whether the normative inferences that we can draw from a theory accord with our intuitions. For example, if well-being is pleasant mental states, then it would seem to behoove a benevolent government to spike the public water supply with antidepressants. This seems creepy, and that speaks against the theory. Finally, empirical adequacy refers to the extent to which a theory can make sense of scientific evidence. Imagine a nature-fulfilment theory of well-being that suggested women’s well-being was promoted by having many children. If women with many children were found to be typically more depressed, anxious, tired, unmotivated, and physically unwell than women with fewer children, this would suggest that dramatic procreation is in fact not in our nature, because the organism rebels against it.

Bishop argues that philosophers have typically over-prioritized descriptive and normative adequacy. They have thought themselves “insulated” from empirical adequacy because well-being must be defined before it can be measured. Bishop rejects this attitude, arguing that empirical observations have upended our intuitions through history. Empirical evidence from psychological studies and brain scans has substantially undermined some claims of moral philosophy (Haidt 2012, Greene 2012). Well-being should thus be theorized with full cognizance of relevant empirical evidence, which necessitates philosophers cooperating with psychologists.

Bishop argues instead for the inclusive approach, which assesses well-being theories according to their *explanatory power*: the correct theory of well-being must explain how all the different lines of inquiry into well-being could possibly be studying the same concept. The principal methodology of philosophy, which Tiberius (2018) neatly summarizes as “argument by counterexample,” goes nowhere in this context. Where it says “well-being is x, so much of this supposed study of well-being is actually the study of something else,” the inclusive approach instead asks, “all of this is the study of well-being, so what then is well-being?”

Bishop presents his “network theory of well-being” as the best theory, at least for positive psychology, according to the criteria of the inclusive approach. In Bishop’s (p. 8) words, “to have well-being is to be stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle of positive emotions, positive attitudes, positive traits, and successful engagement with the world.” Bishop refers to such self-perpetuating cycles as positive causal networks (PCNs). A simple example is that optimism, confidence, and social support undergird professional success, which in turn promotes optimism, confidence, and social support. A PCN is made up of PCN fragments. These differ from fully formed PCNs in that they are not self-perpetuating and not positive for everybody. Athletic achievement will be associated with minimal positive emotion in someone who does not value athleticism. Without this positive emotional accompaniment, such achievement is also less likely to be repeated cyclically.

In keeping with the inclusive approach, the network theory makes sense of themes and findings across philosophy and psychology. On the philosophy front, it gives a clear role for hedonism in describing

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positive emotion as symptomatic of well-being and involved in its perpetuation. Themes from preference-satisfaction accounts are present in the need for behaviors and goals to be valued to give rise to a self-perpetuating PCN. And ideas from objective list theories are present in the implicit recognition that certain conditions are required for well-being, like health and intrinsic motivation. Turning to psychology, PCNs explain how the themes of positive psychology cohere. Bishop notes that positive psychology appears to spend most of its time studying PCNs in the form of two-way causal relationships between items associated with well-being, such as meaning, satisfaction, affect, basic psychological needs, optimism, and engagement. The network theory identifies the “category in nature” that positive psychology is concerned with, namely, PCNs, much like cytology is the study of cells.

Where the network theory is relatively weak is that its notion of *positive* causal networks is arguably question begging. What is it that makes something *positive*? It is precisely this question that is at the heart of philosophical debates about the nature of the prudential good. Other recent attempts at integrating philosophical and psychological perspectives on well-being have more to say on this question and thereby complement Bishop’s take. We turn to these contributions now.

### *Wellbeing as Value Fulfillment*

A second effort at producing a psychologically-realistic theory of wellbeing from within philosophy is Tiberius’s (2018) notion of “well-being as value fulfilment.” She argues (p. 13): “Well-being consists in the fulfilment of an appropriate set of values over a lifetime...we can say that well-being is served by the successful pursuit of a relatively stable set of values that are emotionally, motivationally, and cognitively suited to the person.” Tiberius goes on to define “appropriate” values more precisely (p. 41): “appropriate values are (1) suited to our desires and emotions, (2) reflectively endorsed, and (3) capable of being fulfilled together over time...appropriate values are objects of relatively sustained and integrated emotions, desires, and judgements.”

In Tiberius’ account, what values are appropriate for a particular person are partially circumscribed by personality, disposition, biology (e.g., height), and talents, much as they are in the notion of “self-congruent” pursuits in self-determination theory. Affirming values that are incongruent, like, say, a homosexual trying to live a heterosexual lifestyle, will tend to result in dissonance, anxiety, compartmentalization, and despondency. As such, they will not integrate emotions and motivations, regardless of the extent to which an agent might reflectively endorse them. Similarly, affirming a strong instinctive desire to eat meat will not result in value fulfilment for someone who is compelled by vegetarian arguments, as the act will then integrate emotions and motivations but not judgments. Some values are of course difficult to reconcile. It is hard to be both an astronaut or other demanding profession and a stay-at-home parent. Sometimes one value will have to go. Other-times they can be traded-off: someone could fulfil their values for both tennis *and* soccer by playing each three days a week. It will take time and sustained effort to work through our values until they are appropriate and integrated. Tiberius’s account is thin on this process, but other works, such as Fabian’s (2019) account of self-actualization, outlined below, provide much of the missing material.

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### *Self-Actualization*

Self-actualization is a prominent theme in well-being theories across philosophy and psychology, popping up in eudaimonic thinking across both disciplines (Haybron 2008, Norton 1976, Waterman 2013), as well as in the classic psychoanalytic accounts of Jung (as individuation) and Rogers, and existentialist philosophy (Nietzsche *thus spoke*). Yet few theorists have ever provided much practical detail regarding how self-actualization is prosecuted. Fabian's (2020) model of self-actualization, which he styles "the coalescence of being," addresses this gap, with constructive implications for various well-being accounts. Notably Fabian's account explains *how* emotions, motivations, and judgments come to be integrated in "appropriate values" as in Tiberius (2018) and Raibley's (2013) theories of well-being as value fulfillment, and how many aspects of Bishop's positive causal network come to be linked up and "networked."

The core of coalescence comes from self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987). The basic idea of self-discrepancy theory is that people seek to harmonize their *actual self* (the person they believe themselves to be), their *ideal self* (the person they would like to be), and their *ought self* (the person they feel a responsibility to be). The ideal and ought selves can be fruitfully understood as collections of values and/or goals. In the case of the ought self, these values have a distinctly ethical tinge. All three self concepts can contain multitudes; that is, very many different and even incompatible fragments of a self. A college footballer might see their actual self as consisting of "athlete" and "nerd," for example, and ponder how to integrate these two sometimes dichotomous identities. Research in self-discrepancy theory finds that discrepancies between actual and ought selves lead to anxiety while discrepancies between actual and ideal selves lead to depression. Resolving discrepancies and promoting harmony reduces these negative feelings and is accompanied by positive affect (Silvia and Eddington 2012).

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides some texture regarding the nature of the actual, ideal, and ought selves that is grounded in SDT's theory of motivation. This is depicted in figure 2. The actual self is characterized by *intrinsic* and *integrated* motivation. These values and activities are autonomously engaged in for their own sake. The ideal self is composed of values, goals, and behaviors that are *identified* and in the process of being *integrated* into the actual self. The ought self, meanwhile, is composed of *introjected* (social pressure) and *identified* (ethics) values, goals, and behaviors. They typically require self-regulation to enact, even if they are autonomously endorsed. In the case of ethical values, this regulation emerges from the fact that ethical behavior is often privately costly at first blush. Instincts of crude self-interest must be overcome to affirm these values.

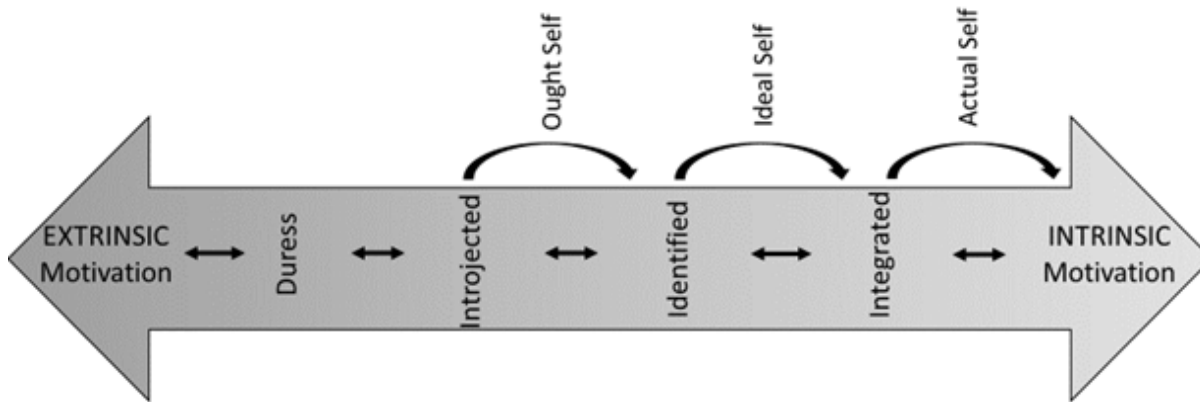


Figure 2: Self concepts and the motivation spectrum.

Both self-discrepancy theory and SDT, along with most other psychological theories of “self,” characterize the self as a dynamic, integrative system that develops in interaction with its social and natural environment through a process that is punctuated and guided by affective signals (Showers and Zeigler-Hill 2012, p. 116). Self-discrepancy theory emphasizes depression and anxiety as negative signals, and joy, fulfilment, and a sense of achievement as positive signals. SDT focuses more on affective signals associated with motivation. Boredom and frustration indicate controlled behaviors, whereas vitality indicates intrinsic motivation.

Coalescence begins with individuals noticing discrepancies between their actual selves and the values inherent to their ideal and ought selves. They then *identify* behaviors that will dissolve this discrepancy. Undertaking these behaviors brings with it affective and social feedback. The individual *introspects* on this feedback. If it is positive, they will likely invest further in their behavior and the values underlying it. Over time, it will become *integrated* with other values and behaviors associated with their actual, ideal, and ought self, increasing the extent to which it is intrinsically motivated. We can see here how “appropriate values” become identified over time: they are associated with positive affective feedback, relatively intrinsic varieties of motivation, and reflectively endorsed through introspection.

### *Eudaimonic Ethics*

Besser-Jones (2014) utilizes ideas from the eudaimonic psychology of wellbeing to develop a compelling new theory of virtue ethics, one of the three main classes of ethical theories in philosophy (alongside consequentialism and deontology). Besser-Jones’s theory of “eudaimonic ethics” is motivated by a desire to do moral philosophy in a way that is psychologically realistic. Most moral philosophy begins by trying to identify *ideal* morality, which is then used to inform right conduct. A key problem with this approach is that humans are incapable of living up to these ideals. Some moral theories, notably those of Christian scholasticism, bite the bullet on this, arguing that humans are inherently sinful and can only be redeemed through grace. Besser-Jones’s approach is instead to begin with a review of the broad spectrum of human behavior and discern from that what we ought to promote, subject to the constraint that people can in fact behave that way. This is not a purely descriptive exercise: how people *can* behave is much more ambitious than how people *do* behave. People often behave badly, both in terms of their moral goals and their wellbeing.

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Besser-Jones argues that identified motivation (as in SDT) is the optimal motivational stance for ethical conduct. Identification is autonomous rather than regulated, but is more than desire—it implies valuation, unlike intrinsic motivation, which can be purely a matter of interest. Philosophical accounts of virtue have arrived at similar positions in the past, but always floundered against hypothetical examples of people valuing “bad” things. Besser-Jones argues that these hypotheticals are unrealistic and thus should not be regarded as valid counterarguments. Basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and especially relatedness act as a constraint on what people can value in a psychologically sustainable way because only nourishing these needs ensures wellbeing in the long run. As “bad” values undermine basic needs, people with typical human psychology will naturally disconnect from them over time or become increasingly unwell.

Besser-Jones’s theory creates an appealing connection between self-interest and right conduct. Individuals want to live in accordance with their values, and doing so leads to wellbeing, which reinforces the appeal of those values. This perspective on morality shifts away from philosophy’s traditional focus on right and wrong moral beliefs to focus instead on why people do not act in accordance with their moral beliefs. The answer lies in motivation. Idealistic moral theory has failed to connect right conduct to organismic wellbeing. In particular, it has overemphasized controlled and self-regulated behavior and underappreciated the role of autonomy in sustained right conduct. Besser-Jones’s theory allows us to conceptualize moral values as autonomously chosen goals that we expend effort to achieve because they bring us wellbeing. This effort is not a “self-sacrifice” because it actually allows us to coincide with our values and thus be more “ourselves.” This behavior is, in fact, *self*-interested.

### *Psychologically Rich Life*

A final example of a collaborative effort between psychologists and philosophers is recent research into the “psychologically rich life.” Besser and Oishi (2020) define a psychologically rich life as (p. 1055):

A life full of experiences which generate a state of mental engagement and arousal. For most people, such a life will be characterised by complexity, in which people experience a variety of interesting things and feel and appreciate a variety of deep emotions via firsthand experience or vicarious experience such as novels, films, and sports on TV. These experiences generate a state of psychological arousal insofar as they activate and engage a subject’s cognitive and emotional states, and a life full of these experiences is a psychologically rich life. A psychologically rich life can be contrasted with a boring and monotonous life, in which one feels a singular emotion or feels that their lives are defined by routines that just aren’t that interesting.

Besser and Oishi argue that represents a “choice-worthy” life that is missing from both philosophical perspectives on well-being and the tendency to think of wellbeing as either a happy and/or meaningful life among positive psychologists. Oishi et al. (2019) validate a questionnaire to study the psychologically rich life and present empirical evidence that affirms its distinctiveness from the happy

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and meaningful life. Importantly, Oishi et al. (2020) present evidence that 28 percent of their sample of 1,611 American adults regret not living a more psychologically rich life, which underlines its choice worthiness.

While the notion of psychological richness is interesting and worthy of further study, the existing research leaves a lot to be desired. First, the construct bridges arguably distinct phenomena. Specifically, leading an “interesting” and “novel” life, and being in a state of mental engagement and arousal. It’s possible to attain the latter while doing the exact same thing every day. Piano virtuosos, for example, are able to consistently enter a flow state precisely because they have invested hours daily into piano practice. It is also possible to try many different things and not be engaged or aroused by most of them.

Second, as with a lot of self-report research in wellbeing, it is unclear whether respondents interpret the construct the same way researchers do. The majority of the psychological richness questionnaire refers to experiences, for example, “my life has been dramatic,” “on my deathbed, I am likely to say that I have seen and learned a lot,” and “my life is full of unique, unusual experiences.” There is only one question that refers to media consumption: “I experience a full range of emotions fairly regularly via literature, films, sports, and others.” So respondents might reasonably assume that psychological richness refers to variety. Yet Besser and Oishi (2020) emphasize that someone frequently reading literature could be living a good life and this isn’t appreciated by the happy/meaningful perspective. Indeed, this is the opening motivation of their paper. Why wouldn’t respondents regard someone who only reads or watches football in their spare time as living an interesting, varied life? How can Oishi et al. (2019) know that respondents have the same notion of psychological richness in mind as they do? Many of the questionnaire items also refer directly to “richness” but this term is never defined for respondents. Is it about frequency of experience? Intensity? Variety? There are also no items in the questionnaire referring to arousal or engagement despite this being the first part of the definition provided by Besser and Oishi (2020).

Finally, the three papers on this construct to date provide little argumentation as to why psychological richness is “good for” somebody. Just because it is a distinct kind of life, even a worthy one, doesn’t mean it is good for you. Goodness here would imply, among other things, that someone who really doesn’t want a variety of experiences and frequent arousal would nonetheless benefit from these things. Yet it seems unlikely that someone who derives meaning and happiness from their tranquil, repetitive monastic life, for example, would benefit from being wrenched away from that routine. Indeed, research in uncertainty and terror management theory (Dechesne & Kruglanski 2004, McGregor et al. 2001) suggests that many people are distressed by novelty. Samples of university students - people in their formative years provided security and encouragement to experiment - hardly seem appropriate for discerning a generalisable wellbeing concept pertaining to new experiences.



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Alongside efforts to integrate philosophical and psychological perspectives on wellbeing, recent years have seen greater integration of perspectives within psychology. In particular, psychologists have started to see eudaimonic and hedonic items as both being involved in wellbeing, though debate continues as to how best to model their relation.

Perhaps the most prominent effort at integration in the domain of measurement is the new Well-Being Profile (WB-Pro) developed by Marsh et al. (2021). This instrument posits 15 dimensions to psychological wellbeing: autonomy, competence, positive relations, meaning, vitality, emotional stability, positive emotions, optimism, resilience, engagement, self-esteem, acceptance, empathy, prosociality, and clear thinking. Many of the traditional items associated with psychological wellbeing are present here. These include the basic psychological needs of self-determination theory, a preponderance of positive over negative affect, meaning, and engagement. The last of these, engagement, is a feature of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievement) and Csikszentmihaly's (1992) notion of flow. The WB-Pro takes a more nuanced view of some wellbeing variables than other measures. Rather than merely including the basic need for relatedness, the WB-Pro has positive relations, empathy, and prosociality. It also includes some unusual items, notably clear thinking, resilience, and optimism. Their inclusion is perhaps colored by the conceptualization of wellbeing that informs the WB-Pro, namely, that wellbeing is the inverse of depression and psychopathology more generally. Depressed individuals tend toward discombobulation, lack resilience, especially in their moods, and are often stubbornly pessimistic. While studies utilizing the WB-Pro are understandably rare, Marsh et al. (2020) present compelling psychometric statistics as to its validity. Its wider utilization may help us to understand the underlying causal structure of subjective well-being and populate Bishop's (2015) positive causal network.

Moving from measurement to theory, Martela and Sheldon (2019) is emblematic of current efforts to understand the interrelationships between hedonic and eudaimonic variables. Martela and Sheldon demarcate a three-part structure to psychological well-being: subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect), eudaimonic motives and activities (i.e., self-concordant goals and values), and basic psychological need (autonomy, competence, relatedness) satisfaction. Succinctly, they posit subjective well-being as the symptoms of basic need satisfaction, which takes place when people live in accordance with eudaimonic motives and activities. This provides a holistic understanding of psychological wellbeing that is reminiscent of Fabian's model of self-actualization. Subjective wellbeing is indicative of living well, in this case defined as nourishing the basic psychological needs common to all humans through behaviors appropriate to the individual in question. Diagnosing wellbeing and offering guidance on it therefore involves paying attention both to feedback from subjective wellbeing and to what eudaimonic motives that feedback might be directing the individual toward.

## **CONCLUSION: A WISHLIST FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

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The decades of scholarly investment into the subject of wellbeing have born many fruits. Measurement of what was once considered unmeasurable is ongoing and improving. Today researchers have a better understanding of the psychological and socioeconomic factors that account for differences in various types of reported wellbeing. They have explored and tested interventions that boost people's appreciation of life and, in the process, connected the science of wellbeing to the ongoing research programs in clinical psychology, psychotherapy, and behavioral economics.

Moreover, wellbeing research is in flux. After an initial stage, dominated by a small set of generalizations—namely, the Easterlin Paradox, set point theory, and the Peak End rule - there is now more diversity in topics. Wellbeing is recognized to be multidimensional, with complex links to the environment, personality, social conditions, and morals. With more researchers working in this area and the growth of the open science movement, there are better research practices, enabling more subtlety, albeit less certainty, about those early generalizations. Another change is the greater collaboration between empirical studies of wellbeing and the conceptual research typically carried out in philosophy and other humanities. Few philosophers these days think that theories of wellbeing can be developed from the armchair and fewer scientists operate in ignorance of basic philosophical distinctions. Most serious treatments of the relations between happiness, self, virtues, agency, and communal welfare are deeply interdisciplinary.

Nevertheless, much remains to be done. We end with a wishlist for future research, which can be summarized by three slogans: better theory, better methods, better ethics.

*Better Theory:* The urge to produce “impactful” science, one that’s noticed by policymakers and picked up by the media, means that researchers chase results of the form “X is a factor in wellbeing.” This pursuit results in an overinvestment in statistical analysis and underinvestment in theorizing. Why is X a factor in wellbeing? Under what conditions is it a factor and is it a causal factor? Understanding of the mechanisms underlying wellbeing requires a willingness to build theories and to connect levels of analysis. A more robust theorizing is also needed to improve measurement because the relation between the survey and the person asked to fill it out should not remain a black box.

*Better Methods:* Wellbeing researchers are eager participants in today’s drive to improve reproducibility and credibility of science (Diener and Biswar-Diener 2019). But in addition this field needs a greater openness to diverse methods and diverse forms of evidence. The dominance of economics and psychology means that wellbeing science proceeds in almost total absence of qualitative methods common in anthropology, sociology, and history. These are ethnographies, case studies, participant observation, or indeed archival research. For a phenomenon as complex and as close to personal values as wellbeing, this virtual absence is a tragedy.<sup>23</sup> It contributes to shallow and Western-centric

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<sup>23</sup> Welcome exceptions that should be known better in the wellbeing mainstream are Fischer (2014), Kavedžua and Walker (2016), and Laidlaw (2008).

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methodologies that fail to unpack what wellbeing means to people of different cultures and times and it stands in contrast with humanistic aspirations of this field.

*Better Ethics:* Also contrasting to the humanistic aspirations is the predominant technocratic approach to wellbeing policy. Whether the interventions are at the level of individual (self-help), organization (wellness initiatives), local or national government (wellbeing public policy), it has been typical to approach them in a top-down, expert-driven way – “Eat your greens, because science” - rather than in a people-centered way. Exactly what it takes to put people at the center of wellbeing policy is a big question. Most important, it is a question in ethics and political theory, both of which have been sorely missing in wellbeing research. The cutting edge here is participation and deliberation. Wellbeing science and wellbeing policy should be both credible and legitimate and that means people should not be just research subjects to whom wellbeing is done. They should own and produce the science and the policies together with researchers and with professionals.

We are optimistic about this wishlist. In particular, the growing number of collaborations between philosophers and psychologists presages a boom in wellbeing theorizing. The desire by economists to find robust applications of subjective wellbeing theory in public policy looks set to revive interest in fundamental issues around measuring wellbeing in the context of welfare analysis. And the burgeoning interdisciplinary literature on well-being public policy is rapidly disseminating sophisticated thinking around the politics and ethics of designing public policy around psychological science in particular. Now is a great time to be in wellbeing.

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