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Philosophy of Well-Being for the Social Sciences

A Primer

Guy Fletcher

Abstract

In this chapter I try to provide an introduction to *philosophical* work on well-being. I explain the specific kinds of questions that philosophers are interested in when it comes to well-being. I then seek to explain the role of thought experiments in philosophical work on well-being. I explain why such cases are useful, and non-gratuitous, and the methodological assumptions that underlie their use. Finally, I explain how philosophers seek to preserve a common subject matter for debate—well-being—even in the presence of radical disagreement about which theory is correct.

Socrates famously asked for the real definitions of things, for example and perhaps most famously, "What is Justice?" In asking this question the aim was to discover the fundamental nature of justice—in what does it consist? What needs to be the case in a city or an individual for that city or individual to be just? Answering these questions generated Plato's *Republic* (and a great deal of subsequent philosophical debate).

Philosophers ask the same kind of question about well-being—what is it, exactly? In asking this question philosophers aim to find out the fundamental nature of well-being. In what does it consist? What needs to be in place in an individual's life for that individual to have a high level of well-being?

To those working in other disciplines, work which begins with such abstract and fundamental questions probably seems abstruse and peculiar. In this chapter, I seek to remedy this situation by trying to give a sense of

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what philosophers are doing when they investigate well-being in a distinctively philosophical way. I will proceed by laying out the main distinctions, concepts, debates, and methodologies in philosophical work on well-being. My aim is to make this material more accessible to those working in other academic disciplines rather than trying to break new ground within the philosophy of well-being.

I first explain the specific kinds of questions that philosophers are interested in when they work on well-being and the ways in which these complement, converge with, and diverge from the work done in the social sciences (to the best of my understanding of these other fields). I then seek to explain why philosophical work on well-being so often involves using somewhat recherché thought experiments to test theories. I explain why such cases are useful and nongratuitous and the methodological assumptions that underlie their use. Subsequently, I explain how philosophers preserve a common subject matter for debate even in the presence of radical disagreement.

Philosophy of Well-Being: Questions

When thinking about the fundamental nature of well-being, philosophers typically proceed by first asking a series of sub-questions, questions that we need to address if we are to answer the main overarching question about the fundamental nature of well-being.

A common place to start with these sub-questions is the issue of which things contribute to well-being. This is a natural enough starting point: well-being is, pretty obviously, that quality or state had by a life that is going well. The next question that arises, then, is what makes a life go well? What contributes to well-being?

However, as happens a great deal in philosophy, it turns out that this last question is not a very interesting one because it is not sufficiently precise. To see this, consider that philosophers working on well-being are not much interested in the following question: Which things contribute to well-being *at all*? Indeed, philosophers will typically agree that there is a very wide range of things that contribute to well-being, at least as a general rule. This will include pleasurable experiences, material wealth, education, friendships and relationships, and so on. Philosophers will only start to be interested in the question of which things contribute to well-being once we mark, at the very least, a division between (1) things that contribute to

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well-being merely instrumentally and (2) things that contribute to well-being noninstrumentally or intrinsically.[1] This marks the divide between things that are *themselves* well-being enhancing in their own right versus things that simply bring about other things that are well-being enhancing. For example, money is *instrumentally* well-being enhancing. That is because with money one can obtain various things that enhance well-being in their own right. But it is nowhere near as plausible that having money makes someone's life go better in its own right. Thus many philosophers will hold that money is *instrumentally* good for us but it is not *intrinsically* good for us.[2] By contrast, one of the questions that philosophers of well-being are interested in, then, is:

Which Things Are Noninstrumentally Well-Being Enhancing?

And here is where we start to get some answers. We find various proposals put forward by different philosophers: well-being is enhanced by pleasure (famously held by both Bentham and Mill), by happiness, by desire satisfaction, by some plurality of goods, or by some complex relation between such goods and desire fulfillment or pleasure, and so on.

Another question that philosophers of well-being are not much interested in is *which* lives are going well and which are going badly with respect to well-being. That is to say, there is much (albeit mostly implicit) agreement about which lives are going well and which are going badly. To give one example, every remotely plausible contender to be the correct philosophical theory of well-being is going to deliver the verdict that Barack Obama's life is going well. However, once we turn to the question of *why* a life is going well, that is when we find a focus of intense philosophical disagreement. One philosopher will think that some life—Barack Obama's for example—is going well precisely in virtue of the presence of one feature of the life (its hedonic quality, for example). Another philosopher will think that the very same life is going well in virtue of the presence of some *other* feature of the life (its perfectionist quality, for example).

How do we adjudicate between these different views? One difficulty that immediately arises here is that there is such a high degree of overlap between the various proposed features that are postulated to explain why a life is going well or going badly. To illustrate this point, consider the following sample of philosophical theories of well-being:

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Hedonism: All and only pleasure intrinsically contributes to well-being. All and only pain intrinsically detracts from well-being.[3]

Desire-fulfillment theory: All and only desire fulfillment intrinsically contributes to well-being. All and only desire frustration intrinsically detracts from well-being.[4]

(One particular) objective list theory: All and only pleasure, friendship, and achievement intrinsically contribute to well-being.[5]

Perfectionism: All and only the exercise and development of human capacities intrinsically contributes to well-being.[6,7]

Now imagine a cognitively typical human being, living in a well-functioning society, who spends their time engaged in a job as an architect, who has a loving and supportive family, who enjoys ample leisure time during which they pursue woodwork and team sports. If we add in plausible empirical assumptions about human psychology, we will find that the hedonist theory of well-being says that this person is high in well-being because their life scores well hedonically (it is high in net pleasure over pain). We will also find that the desire fulfillment theory likewise scores the life highly but because it is full of desire satisfaction (again, given plausible auxiliary assumptions). The same will be true of the particular objective list theory and of perfectionism. There is a high degree of overlap. Each theory will say that this life is going well. So they do not disagree in their verdicts about this life. Where they will disagree is (only) on the question of *why* exactly this life is going well.[8]

How, then, do we go about answering our questions? How do we determine which theory ultimately gives us the correct account of the nature of well-being? The lesson of the preceding discussion is that you cannot make progress in adjudicating between the main theories of well-being by thinking about the verdicts that they reach in typical cases (by which I mean those cases of lives that are typical). This leads us on to an important point about the methodology of philosophy of well-being.

Philosophy of Well-Being: Methods

Once we realize the high degree of overlap between the properties deemed relevant by each of the main theories of well-being, we realize that we cannot make progress by looking at what seems plausible in normal cases. The major

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theories will agree about the question of the *level* of well-being in most regular cases. This motivates philosophers of well-being to try to conjure up scenarios where we can prise apart the well-being determining properties postulated by the theories (hedonic level, desire-satisfaction, objective goods, etc.) to see which one is *really* explaining levels of well-being. Here are two such cases. The first is Nozick's (1974) "experience machine."

> Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? . . . Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening. . . . Would you plug in?[9]

Regrettably, Nozick's introduction of the example introduces a lot of distracting complicating factors (for one thing, one might be distracted by practicalities such as the maintenance of the machine). But the basic thought which his case is used to bring out is that we can imagine a life plugged into a sophisticated virtual reality device wherein the life would score very highly with respect to its hedonic profile but which would score badly when evaluated by other theories of well-being. For example, the person might have lots of desires that go unfulfilled due to living life in the machine because, for example, they desire to *actually* write the great American novel, not merely to have the realistic simulation of doing so. Similarly, their life would lack friendship and achievement and would also involve little if any development and exercise of their capacities. This means that while hedonism would ascribe a high level of well-being to someone in an experience machine, each of the main theories aside from hedonism would have a plausible explanation of why someone in the experience machine would *not* have a high level of well-being even if their life in the machine was very pleasurable. Philosophers of well-being thus use cases like the experience machine to tease out our reactions to lives that do well hedonically but not in other respects.

The most common reaction that people have when presented with this case is the judgment that the person plugged into the machine does not have a high level of well-being. This helps to undermine the plausibility of hedonism and drives some to give more credence to other theories of

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well-being, ones that say life in the experience machine would not have a high level of well-being. Of course, this is not to deny that some continue to find hedonism appealing even when presented with the experience machine example. Rather, it is only to note that many find hedonism less appealing when we move away from the verdict it reaches in normal cases and start to think about the verdicts it is committed to in some other cases.

Another useful case for theorizing about well-being is Derek Parfit's (1984) stranger case. While the experience machine was useful in providing an example of a life that did well hedonically but was lacking in other goods, Parfit builds a case of desire fulfillment in the absence of other goods.

> Suppose that I meet a stranger who has what is believed to be a fatal disease, my sympathy is aroused, and I strongly want this stranger to be cured. Much later, when I have forgotten our meeting, the stranger is cured. On the Unrestricted Desire-Fluffiest Theory, this event is good for me, and makes my life go better. This is not plausible, we should reject this theory.[10]

Many find it plausible, with Parfit, that the mere fact that the stranger was cured does not, by itself, positively impact upon his (Parfit's) well-being in this case. This case thus motivates the idea that having your desires be fulfilled is not what *fundamentally* matters to well-being because, as in this case, desire fulfillment without any associated pleasure or other goods seems not to be beneficial (or, at least, *much* less plausible than for any normal case of desire fulfillment, one accompanied by pleasure). Thus this kind of case puts pressure on the simple desire fulfillment theory of well-being by showing how the theory loses plausibility once we prise desire fulfillment apart from the other properties it typically comes along with (which also happen to be properties deemed to be relevant by other theories of well-being, such as pleasure or achievement). It is a way of arguing that desire fulfillment enhances well-being only instrumentally and not in every case.

These are just two of the cases deployed by philosophers of well-being but, as I hope to have shown, the main dialectical point is common across them: to show how we can prise apart the properties postulated by theories as the fundamental explanation of well-being in order to see how plausible they are in isolation from each other. The weirdness of these cases is thus precisely by design. By thinking of weird possibilities we can prise apart theories which would agree on everyday cases to see which of them is doing the real explanatory work. This is why philosophers tend to downplay what we can learn

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from everyday cases—because the theories agree so much about ordinary cases—and instead make recourse to recherché thought experiments when testing their views. It also explains why philosophers can seem uninterested in empirical work on well-being, such as that done in positive psychology, given that such empirical work will not isolate each potential explanation in the manner needed to make progress on philosophical questions.[11]

Having explained the distinctive questions within philosophy of well-being and explained how they lead to the use of thought experiments based around unusual cases, let me now move to explaining a more abstract issue in the philosophy of well-being: conceptual questions and substantive questions and how the ideas here might be of use to those doing empirical work on well-being.

Philosophy of Well-Being: Concepts and Conceptions

Something that may have occurred to the reader by this point is to ask why it is that philosophers of well-being take themselves to all be answering the same question, to all be giving an account of the fundamental nature of well-being? Another way to put this is to say that one background question to all theorizing about well-being is, how is it that we can actually disagree about the subject matter? After all, if I subscribe to hedonism about well-being and you subscribe to perfectionism about well-being, what makes it true that we are having a disagreement about some common thing—well-being—as opposed to simply thinking about and talking about different things? Furthermore, if we are thinking about the same thing, how we can we know this to be true?

The standard way that philosophers would think of the situation is that we have a common *concept* of well-being but different *conceptions*, or theories, of it. A concept will be identified with a set of very general high-level claims, whereas the conceptions are much more specific. Thus there will be some very general conceptual claims in common between us that fix the subject matter. Here is an example to illustrate the distinction. Libertarians and socialists disagree vehemently in their theories of distributive justice. Yet we still think that they are disagreeing about something. They are not simply talking past each other. How does that happen? Well, to have a disagreement at all they must agree on some *very* high-level claims—for instance, that justice is concerned with *entitlements* to property and the grounds of such

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entitlements, or something like that. That is to say, there must be enough agreement between them, on very high-level claims, to provide a subject matter for disagreement.

Before turning to well-being let me note three complications in passing. First, the difference between the high-level conceptual claims and the substantive claims will not always be uncontentious or obvious. Second, the method does not guarantee that we are always disagreeing when we think we are. Perhaps sometimes people really *are* talking about two different things but unfortunately using the same term. Third, it is not necessary for disagreeing parties to accept *all* of the high-level claims. Rather, they must simply accept enough of them; where what counts as enough is going to be difficult to determine.

When it comes to well-being the relevant high-level concept-fixing claims will be things like well-being is a matter of how that subject's life goes *for them* (as opposed to how good their life is for their community or the world); humans have levels of well-being; tables and chairs do not have levels of well-being; and various kinds of non-human animals might have levels of well-being, depending upon their capacities. We will also hold in common claims including that well-being is connected to care and concern, such that caring for someone (a relative, a friend etc.) *is* partly a matter of promoting and preserving that person's well-being, and so on. These platitudinous claims about well-being fix the subject matter, and philosophers then offer competing theories of it. This ensures enough commonality for there to be a subject matter but enough diversity to allow for radical disagreement, as there is between (say) hedonists and objective list theorists about well-being.

Philosophy of Well-Being and Psychology: Differences and Disagreement

Philosophical work on well-being is very relaxed about fundamental disagreement. This is—from what I can tell—quite different from the way in which work on well-being proceeds in psychology. There, it seems, there is a tendency to *generate* subject matters from theories or, put another way, to fix a subject matter using a theory or set of theories. Let me give an example. Psychologists refer to "subjective well-being," "hedonic well-being," and "eudaimonic well-being." This is in stark contrast with philosophy, bracketing some recent work for a moment (but which I discuss later). Philosophers

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refer to hedonistic *theories of well-being*, eudaimonic *theories of well-being*, and the like. Thus in philosophy it is clear that competing theories of *one and the same thing* are being offered, such that hedonism is the true philosophical theory of well-being or it is false and some other theory is true instead.[12] By contrast, in psychology it seems that those working on *hedonic well-being* are just looking into something different from those investigating *eudaimonist well-being.*[13]

Once we notice this difference, we can ask how these two projects (or sets of projects)—the philosophical and the psychological—relate. One way to reconcile them would be if we were supposed to take the theories from psychology—theories of hedonic well-being and eudaimonist well-being and the like—and then ask whether hedonic well-being or eudaimonist (as understood by the best psychological model of them) fits our ordinary, pretheoretical concept of well-being. That would be to treat work in psychology as providing the best descriptive account of the elements postulated within the philosophical theories of well-being. For example, psychological work on hedonic well-being would thus be contributing to the theory of the nature of the elements postulated by the (philosophical) hedonic theory of well-being (specifically, pleasure and pain). If it is the right way to think of the relation between work on well-being in philosophy and psychology—and I am by no means certain that it is—then it gives a sense of how researchers working in each of these two areas should regard the other.

One complication that arises for the rapprochement just sketched is that recent work in philosophy has postulated genuine conceptual pluralism within thought and talk about "well-being." Anna Alexandrova (2017) and Steve Campbell (2016) have each explored and defended views which hold (roughly) that talk about well-being (and similar expressions such as "good for," "doing well," etc.) exhibit a radical kind of pluralism by not always referring to the same thing. This means, for example, that each of two speakers could both say something true if they say, of the same person: "Jack is doing well" and "Jack is not doing well."[14] If this view is true then it might be that across different conversational contexts different things are meant by "well-being" and that the different referents of the expression are (e.g.) hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being, and the like.[15] If this is so, then it would be the job of philosophy to devise a theory of which "kind of well-being" is relevant in different contexts and why, and then work in psychology would be able to provide a theory of what each of these "kinds of well-being" is like.

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Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to clarify philosophical work on well-being by bringing out its distinctive questions, commitments, and methodologies. Two major points about philosophical theories of well-being were, first, that such theories are typically offered as competing theories of one and the same subject-matter—"well-being"—as opposed to theories of different "types of well-being" or the like. A second major point is that philosophical theories of well-being aim to find explanations of what fundamentally, noninstrumentally contributes to and detracts from well-being.

The aims of philosophical work on well-being lead philosophers to focus away from typical cases and to reflect on cases where the explanatory factors that feature within the major theories of well-being can be prised apart. This is why philosophers use thought experiments about quite unusual cases so that they can see which factors are most plausible candidates for explaining facts about well-being.

Notes

1. For further discussion see Chapters 8 and 9, both in this volume).
2. There is a dense but interesting debate in philosophy about whether all value that is noninstrumental is *intrinsic*. I don't want to introduce those issues here so just read "intrinsic" as "noninstrumental." I choose "intrinsic" just for readability. To learn more about these controversies see, for example, Korsgaard (1983) and Bradley (1998).
3. For discussion of hedonism about well-being see, for example, Gregory (2015).
4. For discussion of desire-fulfillment theories of well-being see, for example, Heathwood (2015).
5. For discussion of objective list theories see, for example, Fletcher (2015a).
6. For discussion of perfectionist theories see, for example, Bradford (2015).
7. The negative side of perfectionist theories is less clear than their positive claim. The same holds for objective list theories. I thus omit formulations of these parts of these theories. For more on the main philosophical theories of well-being, see Fletcher (2015b, 2016).
8. How far this overlap extends into theological conceptions of well-being, I do not know. But see Chapter 10 and 16 (both in this volume) for more on this.
9. Nozick (1974, pp. 44–45). For discussion of the example see, for example, Lin (2016).
10. Parfit (1984, p. 494).
11. This is *not* to say that all philosophers neglect empirical work. For important exceptions see Baril (Chapter 9, in this volume); Besser (2014), Bishop (2015), and Haybron (2008).

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12. See Lauinger (Chapter 8, in this volume) for one such attempt.
13. One exception here is Disabato et al. (2016).
14. They would need to be in different conversational contexts, though.
15. For discussion of Alexandrova and Campbell's pluralist theories, see Fletcher (2019), Lin (2018), and Mitchell (2018).

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Guy Fletcher is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. His work examines the nature of moral discourse, philosophical theories of well-being, and theories of prudential discourse. He edited the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (Routledge, 2015) and co-edited *Having It Both Ways: Hybrid Theories in Meta-Normative Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He is author of *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Well-Being* (Routledge, 2016) and *Dear Prudence: The Nature and Normativity of Prudential Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

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