

Well-Being

Raffaele Rodogno

Pre-final English version of: "La prudence"

To appear in: Deonna J. & Tieffenbach E. (eds.) *Dictionnaire des Valeurs*. Paris: Editions d'Ithaque, Collection Science & Métaphysique.

Alex has recently completed high school and is considering a number of questions not unusual for someone at this particular juncture of his or her life. Should she become a doctor, endure a long period of study without an income, but hopefully have a meaningful job with a good income at the end? Would she enjoy her studies and then her job? What would her life look like if she chose this option? Would she have time to keep up mountain climbing and see her friends or would she have to renounce to these activities? Would it not at that point be better to work as a postman, take the morning shift, so as to have time for mountain climbing and friends after work? Or, perhaps, that she does something altogether different and devote her life to higher calls such as helping those in need? Are these kinds of pursuits at all **good for** her? When answering questions such as these, moral considerations may surely be at play. Yet it is at least as clear that these common questions are motivated in large part by a concern with well-being or prudential value, as it is sometimes called, or the idea of what is **good for** oneself or in one's interest.

The contours of well-being

The idea of well-being is typically presented in the philosophical literature as what we have when we are having good lives, not in the sense of morally good lives, but in the sense of lives that are good *for us*. Well-being is also commonly supposed to play a specific role in first-personal practical thinking, to wit, as a determinant of rational action in the absence of other kinds of considerations such as moral considerations.

In philosophy, well-being is often called happiness and, both, ‘happiness’, and ‘well-being’ are used to translate the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*. These concepts, however, are not quite the same. Happiness, for one, is typically understood as a concept that is necessarily experiential. That is, if you are happy, you always know that you are happy because you feel happy. It is arguable, however, that a person may have and, in fact, enjoy those things that are good for him, and hence have well-being, without being aware that he does have and enjoy these things.

The notion of *eudaimonia* rests on the idea that human beings have a specific nature that resides in their rationality, and that they will have a good life to the extent that they fulfil that nature, i.e., that they lead a rational life. Some, however, argue that there is no conceptual guarantee that those who fulfil their nature as a human beings will be, *ceteris paribus*, doing better.

Philosophers disagree with regard to the scope of well-being. The scope question can be understood at the level of the subjects of well-being —what kinds of entities can have well-being beside human beings? Non-human animals? Plants and trees? Microbes?—or it can be understood at the level of the kinds of states, activities, or choices that can legitimately be counted as contributing to someone’s well-being. Do unselfish acts of love contribute to one’s well-being?

One important discussion in connection to the scope question is the interplay between well-being and self-sacrifice. One of the central features of the idea of well-being is that considerations pertaining to one’s well-being may well come into conflict with other demands placed on the individual. Perhaps the most common conflict of this kind is the one between one’s well-being, on the one hand, and one’s moral duties, on the other. When such conflicts arise, individuals may be required to self-sacrifice, to forego pursuing their well-being, in order to fulfil their overriding moral duties. In line with this idea, modern accounts of well-being typically make ‘well-being’ and ‘self-sacrifice’ exclusive concepts (if something is an instance of well-being, it is not an instance of self-sacrifice, and *vice versa*). This type of interplay between well-being and moral duties mediated by self-sacrifice, however, is not always found in Ancient ethics. For Aristotle, for example, one flourishes (is *eudaimon*) precisely when one acts virtuously or morally.

Scepticism about well-being

There is widespread agreement to the effect that well-being is, both, a descriptive and a normative concept. Well-being is an empirical phenomenon that can be measured, compared, and realized in people's lives. Yet, it also has normative significance, i.e., it involves reasons: if a career as a doctor is better for you than a career as a bar tender, *ceteris paribus*, you have more reason to pursue the former over the latter. While very few disagree with this claim, growing disagreement is to be encountered with respect to the kind of normativity well-being is taken to involve. The standard view is that well-being is an agent-relative value, i.e., it gives reasons to the agent whose well-being it is. The idea that well-being is agent-neutral is, however, on the rise. Darwall (2002), for example, has recently argued that each one of us has reason to desire and pursue his or her own well-being only insofar as everyone has reason to promote everyone's well-being.

Historically, the very idea that well-being is a kind of (agent-relative or agent-neutral) value in its own right, irreducible to other kinds of value, has been met with some scepticism, still alive in the current debate (Hurka 1987). In 1903 G.E. Moore challenged the idea that something can be 'good for' someone, if this notion is to be understood as a value independent of what Moore calls *absolute goodness*. Moore thought that it does not make sense to think of something being good *for* me (as opposed to good *tout court*) in the same way in which it does not make sense to think of something being true *for* me (as opposed to being true *tout court*). The notion of 'my own good' strikes Moore as strangely proprietary and, as he goes on to argue, its proprietary nature has unwelcome effects on its normativity. Moore took the idea of good *for* to suggest a kind of value that the individual herself could have exclusive reason to promote, and that, he thought, would be no value at all. According to Moore, the idea of a person's 'own good' signifies nothing over and above the idea that the thing a person gets is good absolutely or that the state of her possessing it is good absolutely. But if it is *good absolutely* that a person should have this thing, then everyone else has as much reason for aiming at her having it, as the person herself have. There is, in other words, no distinctive normative property beside that of goodness, in conjunction with the fact that it occurs in someone's life. It would be an error to postulate the existence of a property such as *being good for P*.

In the eyes of those who defend the irreducibility of well-being, however, the Moorean proposal misses the point. It is not enough, they will say, that something of value occurs in a subject's life in order for her to be benefitted by it. Absolute goodness is determined in the absence of any reference to any subject or class of subjects such as human beings. It would hence be possible that some absolute good occurred in the life of human beings, which they all firmly and stubbornly found uninteresting, meaningless, or even alienating. How can this good possibly benefit them? An analysis of 'good for' along the right lines would articulate this concept in terms of what is *suitable* or *fitting* to a certain subject or class of subjects. Suitability and fittingness are *relational* notions: something is fitting or suitable always to someone or something. This feature tells against the Moorean attempt to reduce prudential goodness to *absolute* goodness (in conjunction with the fact that it occurs in someone's life).

Theories of Well-Being

Philosophical discussion of well-being has traditionally focussed on so-called *theories of well-being*. These are of two, complementary, kinds: *formal* and *substantive*. A theory counts as substantive only if it directly attributes prudential value to certain items (e.g. kinds of mental states, relationships, states of affairs, activities, etc.). Theories of this kind provide answers to the question: *Which things make someone's life go better for them?* A substantive hedonist, for example, is someone who claims that only pleasurable mental states are prudentially good where non-hedonists would also mention other goods (e.g., friendship, knowledge, autonomy, etc.) that are taken by them to be irreducible to pleasurable mental states.

A theory counts as formal only if it tries to identify *why* something is prudentially good, or, as some would say, only if it identifies the *prudential* or *good-for* value maker. Such a theory provides answers to the question: *What makes something good for the individual?* Desire satisfaction theories, for example, will argue that it is the satisfaction of an individual's desires that makes something prudentially good.

Theories of well-being are also often categorized as being either subjective or objective. **Subjectivism** states that nothing can intrinsically enhance the quality of an individual's life unless that person desired or endorsed that thing, or unless the person would desire or endorse that thing under idealized conditions, i.e. perfect rationality and/or full-information. Objective theories do not

include such a requirement. Hence, something may be good for an individual even in the absence of a relevant **pro-attitude** on his or her behalf.

Finally, theories of well-being are often divided along another dimension, typically referred to as **mentalism**. A theory is mentalist if it states that something can affect an individual's well-being only to the extent to which the individual experiences that thing. Hence while pleasurable experiences would clearly be good candidates for mentalist views, on such views the fact that unbeknownst to me my wife is cheating on me cannot as such affect my well-being. *Non-mentalist* accounts could in principle accommodate also such facts.

Let us look at these three sets of distinctions (formal/substantive, subjective/objective, mentalism/non-mentalism) at work in what are, historically, the most renowned theories of well-being, namely, hedonism, desire-satisfaction theories, and objective list theories.

Hedonism is often presented as a substantive theory of well-being according to which pleasure is the only prudential value, and pain the only prudential disvalue. Hedonists go on to claim that well-being is the greatest positive balance of pleasure over pain. According to this view, then, what's best for Alex is to choose the life that maximizes the positive balance of pleasure over pain. Hedonism is normally understood as a mentalist theory, for pleasure and pain are normally understood as experiential states. The fate of hedonism depends to some extent on the way in which pleasure is defined and, in particular, whether it is defined in subjectivist or an objectivist terms. Critics of hedonism, often challenge the idea that choosing the most pleasant option will always amount to the best prudential option. It is sometimes recounted, for example, that, at the very end of his life, ill and in pain, Freud refused drugs except aspirin, claiming to prefer thinking in torment to not being able to think clearly. It is not clear that in terms of his own well-being his choice is criticisable.

Desire theories are to be understood as formal theories stating, in their simplest form, that what makes someone better off is the extent that her current desires are fulfilled. On such *present desire* theory, substantively, an individual's well-being consists in the satisfaction of her current desires, whatever they may be. This view is open to one simple objection: it is not uncommon for us to desire or prefer things that are clearly not in our interest or good for us and, in fact, things that are positively bad for us. In order to elude this problem, desire theories have been rationalized. What's good for us is not simply what we desire, but rather what we would desire under idealized conditions, e.g., if we were aware of all the relevant facts and reasoned correctly about them.

According to this view, then, what's best for Alex is the life that she would most desire under such idealized conditions. Desire theories are not committed to mentalism, as we may well (rationally) desire things other than mental states. They are, however, committed to subjectivism, given that desires are themselves pro-attitudes. Whether this commitment can be maintained by the idealized versions of the theory, however, is up for discussion.

Finally, objective list theories can be understood either as substantive, or as, both, formal and substantive theories of well-being. In either case, *contra* hedonism, the substantive claim these theories make is that there is an irreducible *plurality*, a list, of prudential goods such as pleasure and the absence of pain, achievement, friendship and other deep personal relations, autonomy, virtue, knowledge, etc. Clearly, some of the goods on the list would qualify this view as non-mentalist. *Contra* desire-satisfaction theories, however, the list is also supposed to be an objective one. It is worth noting here the possibility of perfectionist objective list theories, according to which what makes something a component of well-being (an entry on the substantive list) is their role in perfecting human nature. On this view, for example, if rational activity were what best perfects human nature, what's best for Alex is whatever life available to her best allows her to exercise her rational capacities.

Conclusion

All theories of well-being have some strengths and some weaknesses. This makes it hard to establish which one, if any, is the clearly better theory. There is, however, one important area of neglect common to all three theories, the articulation of which could indeed be of much benefit to the study of well-being. This area can be referred to as the practical epistemology of well-being. Consider the case of Alex once again. How does, in real life, an agent like Alex find out about what is best for her? The answer is that she will herself have to experience various activities (while also relying on the judgement of others concerning other activities). But as she experiences various activities and modes of life, what signs should she take as indicators that these activities are good for her or even best for her? One common sense answer is to ask whether she is happy or unhappy when engaged in such activities or when living a specific kind of life. There is, however, an important discussion to be had about the nature of happiness and unhappiness in this context, its role in the epistemology of well-being, and its potential connection with traditional theories of well-being (Rodogno, 2014).

Darwall, S. (2002). *Welfare and Rational Care*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hurka, T. (1987). 'Good' and 'Good For'. *Mind*, 96, 71-73

Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*. Revised Edition. Baldwin, T. (ed.)(1993). Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

Rodogno, R. (2014). Happiness and well-being: shifting the focus of the current debate. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 33(4), 433-446. doi:Doi 10.1080/02580136.2014.968477