Well-being: What makes a life go well?

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN EVENING LECTURE SERIES
26/03/2019
Structure of the talk

- What are we interested in, and why?

- Three different accounts of what might affect our well-being: hedonism, desire-theory, and objective list theory

- A brief tour of some other puzzles:
  - Subjectivism vs objectivism
  - Well-being in the past vs future
  - Well-being and disability
What this talk won’t have:

- All of the answers!
- (sorry)
Some of the answers that I don’t have:

- What actually, in practice, will improve your life
Some of the answers that I don’t have:

- But hopefully, taking a look at these theories will help us to think about and understand what *is* good for us.

- And hopefully you’ll each have some ideas of what your preferred theories are.
1. What affects our well-being?

- What even *is* well-being?

- Well, that’s kind of exactly the question people are interested in.
It seems like we have a shared idea of when lives go well and when lives go badly. So it’s trying to investigate this concept.

Well-being is about what makes a life go well.

Some things can be good for a plant:

- The right amount of water
- The right minerals
- The right temperature

Well-being is about what’s good for a person.
Another clarification: in order to understand what really affects our well-being, we need to understand what’s *intrinsically* valuable for our well-being.

- Intrinsically valuable = valuable for its own sake.
- Instrumentally valuable = valuable for the sake of something else.
We're interested in more than just what's instrumentally good for a person – we're interested in what's *intrinsically* good.
1. What affects our well-being?

- Three main theories
- First theory: Hedonism
1.1 Hedonism

- This term is used for a lot of theories about pleasure.

- For example, you might have heard of “psychological hedonism.”

- Also, “ethical hedonism.”

- But this particular kind is just “hedonism about well-being.”
1.1 Hedonism

- Hedonism about well-being is the view that all of the things that make our lives go well will ultimately boil down to pleasure

- (and lack of pain!)

- This might seem intuitive after a discussion about intrinsic / instrumental value
1.1 Hedonism

- Knowledge? Valuable to me because it makes me happy!
- Friendship? Valuable to me because it makes me happy!
- Love? Valuable to me because it makes me happy!
- Being a good person? Valuable to me because it makes me happy!
One reason you might deny this is because of some sci-fi-esque counter-examples.
The experience machine
The experience machine
Excerpt from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974)

What matters other than how people’s experiences feel “from the inside”? Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience that you desired. Superduper 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 in this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life’s experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years. Of course, while in the tank you won’t know that you’re there; you’ll think it’s all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there’s no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?* Nor should you refrain because of the few moments of distress between the moment you’ve decided and the moment you’re plugged. What’s a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that’s what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision *is* the best one?
The experience machine

- So, the problem for hedonism is that it cannot explain how living in an experience machine would be anything other than living our best life.
1.2 Desire-theories of well-being

(Desirable things)
1.2 Desire-based theories

- A person’s life is going better for them if more of their desires are fulfilled.

- The idea is that it gets around experience-machine problems, because if we’re in an experience machine then none of our desires are really being fulfilled.
1.2 Desire-based theories

- For example, suppose I desire to be in a loving relationship

- In the real world it’s possible for my desire to be fulfilled: I can really be in a loving relationship

- But in the experience machine my desire wouldn’t be fulfilled because I could never really be in a loving relationship
1.2 Desire-theories of well-being

- “The experience machine is one motivation for the adoption of a desire theory. When you are on the machine, many of your central desires are likely to remain unfilled. Take your desire to write a great novel. You may believe that this is what you are doing, but in fact it is just a hallucination. And what you want, the argument goes, is to write a great novel, not the experience of writing a great novel.” (Crisp)
1.2 Desire-theories of well-being

- But this theory of well-being still has problems.

- Most significantly: we’re just really really really bad at knowing what’s good for us.

- We often have our desires satisfied and it’s not very good for us.

- And sometimes things happen that are good for us that we never really desired!

  Contabulation!
1.3 Objective List theories

When it comes to ‘pleasure’ or ‘desire-fulfilment’, and their affect on well-being, you might think one of the following things:

1. That this is the *only* factor that affects well-being
2. That this is one of multiple factors that might affect well-being
3. That this is not a factor that affects well-being
1.3 Objective List theories

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1.3 Objective List theories

- According to Objective List theories of well-being, what makes our lives go well is not reducible to any one, single thing.

- Instead there are multiple factors that influence well-being.
1.3 Objective List theories

- What are some contenders for things to go on this list?
  - Pleasure/pain
  - Desire-satisfaction
  - Knowledge
  - Love
  - Virtue / morality
  - Freedom
  - Capability
1.3 Objective List theories

- So this theory has strengths because it doesn’t have to rely on reducing a person’s well-being to one single thing.

- But its strength is also its weakness: it’s unclear whether any of the things on the list really are *intrinsically* valuable for a person’s life.
1.3 Objective List theories

- What are some contenders for things to go on this list?
  - Pleasure/pain
  - Desire-satisfaction
  - Knowledge
  - Love
  - Virtue / morality
  - Freedom
  - Capability
Three Theories:

1. Hedonism: pleasure is what affects our well-being

**Strength:**
- It seems to jell well with our idea of what’s intrinsically valuable

**Weakness:**
- It can’t explain why we, intuitively, want to avoid living in an experience machine
Three Theories:

2. Desire-theory: satisfaction of our desires is what affects our well-being

**Strength:**
- It seems to answer experience-machine cases

**Weakness:**
- It relies on us being very good at knowing what’s good for us!
Three Theories:

3. Objective list theory: there are a number of different factors that affect well-being

**Strength:**

It avoids the problems of the other theories by taking a pluralistic approach

**Weakness:**

It’s not clear whether these things on the list are really *intrinsically* valuable for our well-being
2. Other Puzzles about Well-being

- For the remainder of this talk I’ll mention a few other interesting areas in the philosophy of well-being.

- These are some more areas where I don’t have the answers, necessarily, but that recent philosophers have discussed and drawn attention to.

- Again, hopefully just thinking about these puzzles will help us in trying to understand well-being generally.
First of all, a question: to what extent is well-being subjective?

That is, should we trust people to report on how well their lives are going?

Perhaps this will depend on our answer to the previous question, but it’s also an interesting topic in its own right.
2.1 Well-being and subjectivity

- After all, it seems like we have a kind of dilemma.

- On the one hand, we might think that well-being is objective: that there is an *objective fact* about whether people’s lives are going well, and that this is the case whether or not they *think* their lives are going well.

- After all – we’ve already talked about how terrible we can be at knowing what’s good for us.

- But this seems both patronising and overly paternalistic.
2.1 Well-being and subjectivity

- After all, it seems like we have a kind of dilemma.

- On the other hand we might think that well-being is subjective: that the person in question is the authority about whether their life is going well.

- After all, if they’re not in a position to know, who is?

- But this leads to problems with people who might not know a lot of things about their situation.
The second puzzle is about well-being and time.

(Flashback to another of the talks from this series)
2.2 Well-being and time

- This puzzle comes from philosopher Derek Parfit.

- It’s an asymmetry: why does it seem like good things in the future matter more for our well-being than things in the past?

- E.g. a hospital thought-experiment

How do we explain this weird asymmetry?
2.3 Well-being and abilities / disabilities

- Finally, there's been a lot of work lately about how we conceptualise and understand disability, and its relation to well-being.

- Traditionally people have held a “bad-difference” view of disability: one that says that being disabled is something that negatively affects a person’s well-being.
But some philosophers and disability activists have taken to arguing for a “mere-difference” view: the view that disability is not a harm to a person’s well-being at all.

Why so?

Because having a disability is just a different way to live.

And most of the problems that disabled people deal with come from a society that is bad at accommodating disabilities, not with the disabilities themselves.
2.3 Well-being and abilities / disabilities

“When I started learning about disability pride, I finally dealt with the latent, entrenched feelings of shame and inadequacy that I had about my body. I learned, for the first time in my life, how to celebrate the ways that my body is different, rather than try to ‘overcome’ them or be successful ‘in spite of’ them. I can’t even begin to explain how much this improved my life, or the extent to which it was a fundamental change.” –Barnes, in an interview for ‘What is it like to be a philosopher?’
Summary

- Three theories of well-being
  - Hedonism
  - Desire-fulfilment theory
  - Objective list theory

- And three other important and interesting areas in the philosophy of well-being
  - Well-being and subjectivism / objectivism
  - Well-being and time
  - Well-being and disability
Further Reading

**Overall:**

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/

**The three theories of well-being:**

Guy Fletcher *The Philosophy of Well-being: An Introduction* Chapter 1: Hedonism

Robert Nozick – The Experience Machine

http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil3160/Nozick1.pdf

Sharon Hewitt – What Do Our Intuitions about the Experience Machine Really Tell Us About Hedonism?

https://philpapers.org/rec/HEWWDO

Guy Fletcher *The Philosophy of Well-being: An Introduction* Chapter 2: Desire-fulfilment Theory

Brad Hooker - Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent

https://philpapers.org/rec/HOQDBV

Gwen Bradford - The Value of Achievements

https://philpapers.org/rec/BRATVO-9

Chris Heathwood Desire Satisfaction and Hedonism

https://philpapers.org/rec/HEADSA

**Well-being and subjectivism:**

Jennifer Hawkins - The Subjective Intuition

https://philpapers.org/rec/HAWTSI

**Well-being and time:**

Derek Parfit - Reasons and Persons

**Well-being and disability:**

Barnes, Elizabeth - Valuing Disability, Causing Disability

https://philpapers.org/rec/BARVDC-2

Guy Kahane & Julian Savulescu - Disability and Mere Difference

https://philpapers.org/rec/KAHDAM
Bonus: Ray Monk later this week

- This Thursday, Ray Monk will be giving a talk at 7pm in the J M Synge theatre

- “The Mystery of Music: A Wittgensteinian response”