

# HAPPINESS, FLOURISHING & THE GOOD LIFE: A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF HUMAN WELL-BEING

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## **Preface**

Well-being studies is an exciting multi-disciplinary field. Social scientists from around the world are gathering measurements of well-being so that the resulting data can help improve social policies. However, the field is flawed because it relies on a truncated account of well-being, often implicitly based on neo-classical economic assumptions. It tends to exclude or minimise the normative aspect of well-being, thereby depriving the concept of its potentially transformative force. It reduces human well-being to a single central notion such as happiness or desire rankings, which results in an impoverished conception of human life. For these reasons, the field of well-being studies tends to reflect socially accepted assumptions rather than being a potential basis for radical improvement. Thus this book concentrates on what *constitutes* well-being: a conceptual framework for empirical research.

## **Chapter 1: Preliminaries for a Framework**

Well-being is a rich evaluative concept, which contrary to contemporary misconceptions, can be given empirical specifications without recourse to reductive accounts that try to explain its value in terms of rational preference or pleasure. A second misconception is the failure to separate the issue of what *constitutes* well-being from what causes it. A third error consists in failing to recognise that how one measures well-being doesn't define what it is. Finally, the phenomenology of experience is often excluded from accounts of well-being except insofar as it provides a set of external measures. As an antidote, we undertook life-narrative interviews with 50 persons regarding their well-being to illustrate the alternative framework offered in this book and to show how life-narrative interviews can shape our understanding of well-being.

To explicate the framework, we specify the relevant value-making facets of human life in terms of four structural features. First, our lives are comprised of various experiences, activities and processes. Second, we are aware of those constituents of a life in ways that can be more or less appreciative of their valuable nature. Third, these activities (etc.) are relational in nature: we are always interacting with things and persons. Fourth, in these activities, we are also aware of ourselves; we are self-conscious. These four structurally constitutive features of any human life have potentially good-making features relevant for well-being. The core idea that being-well is constituted by intrinsic goodness along these necessary dimensions of our (human) way of being.

## **Chapter 2: Beyond Instrumentalisation**

This chapter rejects a standard instrumental conception of rationality on the grounds that it implies that all our goal-directed actions are only instrumentally valuable. The conception thereby instrumentalises persons. The necessary remedy is to distinguish between means/ ends and instrumentally/non-instrumentally valuable. This distinction is vital for understanding well-being in three ways. First, self-instrumentalising is itself an important form of ill-being. Second, the

distinction transforms our relationship to goals: we show that goals *as such* are instrumentally valuable to the processes of living. Third, it supports the principle that the primary bearers of non-derivative prudential (non-moral) value are persons (and other conscious beings), as opposed to ends. The activities that comprise a person's life have value because the person does. This idea is required to avoid the instrumentalism of goal-based conceptions of rationality. In conclusion, the idea that we can dehumanise ourselves is directly relevant to well-being in each of its four structural dimensions: activities, awareness, relationships and self-consciousness.

### **Chapter 3: Activities and Desires**

Concerning the first structural feature, some of the activities, experiences and processes that partly constitute a life are desirable for the person living the life in virtue of certain characteristics. In this chapter, we specify those characteristics by contrasting desire (or preference) and objectivist theories. We argue that both these theories are mistaken because they are based on a simplistic account that identifies desires only in terms of their objects rather than also their content. As an alternative, we outline an account of the interpretation of desires in terms of why one desires what one does, in terms of the interests or needs that motivate the non-derivative desires in question. Such a notion is required to characterise what kinds of activities etc. are non-instrumentally valuable for well-being. We provide some empirical specifications for such interests, and argue that research about well-being requires the study of such interests.

### **Chapter 4: Awareness**

This chapter examines the second structural feature of human life: awareness. Conscious mental states need to be understood in terms of both their content and object, and this undermines pleasure theories of well-being. It is an error to regard pleasure as a mental object because this attempts to objectify the intentional or subjective nature of our mental lives. Furthermore, the conception of pleasure as a mental object instrumentalises the relation between the activity and the feeling. Instead, we should conceive 'pleasure' as the way one performs those activities i.e. with appreciation. It is necessary for well-being that we experientially appreciate the desirable feature of the activities and experiences that we engage in. This depends on the quality of one's awareness. This new conception explains the importance of happiness and other positive emotions for well-being and explore its importance for our relationship to our own desires. To emphasise the point about the quality of awareness, we introduce the idea of the construction of one's phenomenological world.

### **Chapter 5: Relationships**

The third structural feature of human life is that we live in relations. Of special importance is those with other people, other beings in nature, and the divine other. In this chapter, we examine three features of human relationships: doing-for (e.g. building a house), being-with (others) and being-in (being in a community or a set of social relations). In the first case, we show how this aspect of well-being consists in connecting directly to what is valuable, namely other persons. Therefore, for instance, the point of work must be directly connected to other people rather than say performance targets or the production of material goods *per se*. We apply this idea to undermine instrumentalised conceptions of relationships. In the second case (being-with), we show how a non-instrumentalised human relationship requires that the other person becomes part of one's life and how this is an irreducible aspect of well-being. When other people are part of one's life, it is as if one imports their value into one's life through appropriate connections. We apply this analysis

to personal and impersonal relations and examine its importance for happiness studies. For the third feature (being-in), we analyse what it means to be part of a community insofar as this is a *constitutive* feature of well-being. Furthermore, we consider what it means for humans to flourish in harmony with nature, and with the spirit.

### **Chapter 6: Evaluative Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness is a necessary dimension of the human way of being and so it forms a general aspect of living well. We classify the kinds of self-awareness that constitute well-being in relation to the past, present and future. Vis-à-vis, present experience, we examine the nature of reflexive self-consciousness and argue that the appreciation of this is experienced as the joy of being an I. Concerning the past, our evaluative self-awareness takes the form of personal narratives, and these are constitutive (as opposed to being merely causally conducive) of well-being when one is reconciled or at peace with one's past (among other conditions) as an expression of one's perception of oneself as a being of value. Regarding the future, evaluative self-awareness is constitutive of well-being when it is an expression of one's perception of oneself as a being of value and this takes the form of the sense of one's future being appropriately open (given certain caveats). We argue that the unity of the self through past, present and future consists in one's identity, which should be understood in terms of what one non-derivatively identifies with. In this aspect, well-being is constituted by one's awareness of oneself as a being that is non-instrumentally valuable.

### **Chapter 7: A Holistic Account of Well-Being**

We unite the threads of the previous chapters to present an overall framework for an empirical study of well-being, adding a fifth criteria pertaining to the synergetic functioning of the four dimensions. The chapter concentrates on three major points. Such a framework needs to be robust enough to evaluate different social institutions. We argue that such inter-societal comparisons are possible by employing the notion of interests outlined in Chapter 3 to show the relevance of their relative inescapability in different social contexts. We shouldn't employ escapable interests that are local to specific conditions in such comparisons. This concept allows for evaluative comparisons between societies without appeal to a suspect notion of human nature. Second, such a framework needs to answer the question: can well-being so defined be measured? We show how, in principle, it can be. However, we argue that such measurements cannot constitute an operational definition. Once freed of this expectation, and once liberated from the idea that standardised well-being measures should be performance-targets of public policies, we can defend the assertion that well-being can be measured despite being a pluralistic normative and an intentional concept. Third, we examine the use of narrative methodology to understand better well-being and to show how life-narrative interviews provide a fruitful complimentary method to purely quantitative approaches.

### **Chapter 8: Towards Social Critique**

We aim to show that the framework for well-being developed in this book escapes being neoliberal. We argue this, first, by demonstrating how the conception of well-being developed can be employed to provide a principled and systematic critique of a so-called "neoliberal society". We explain what we mean by 'neoliberal' and 'critique' and frame the critique in terms of the four structural features and instrumentalisation. The point is to show how a normatively robust and subjectively rich conception of well-being can provide a platform for critically evaluating the

socio-economic institutions one lives in. The proposed framework navigates between two dangers: on one side, views of well-being that mirror current economic paradigms, and on the other, the concern that the whole notion of well-being is ineluctably a damaged product of those paradigms. Second, we uncover the features that a neoliberal account of well-being would have and how our account avoids them.

We conclude with ways that our account of well-being can provide an evaluative framework to inform social policies and serve as a basis for constructive alternatives. This would lead to more holistic ways to examine well-being through integrative (qualitative and quantitative) indicators.