

Well-being as a Primary Good: Toward Legitimate Well-being Policy

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The use of well-being research in assessing and creating public policy is gaining popularity. The UK's Office of National Statistics has developed its National Well-being Index to do exactly that, and several other nations have followed suit. This sway in political will, however, can make the use of well-being research in public policy seem less controversial than it is. Much of the rhetoric around the move toward well-being measures in evaluating policy has centered either on the idea that well-being is what "ultimately matters" or that it is at least "something we all care about." In this essay, I will argue that such claims are illegitimate from the perspective of political liberalism. The former kind of claim is illegitimate insofar as liberal societies should not base policy on comprehensive religious, moral, or philosophical doctrines that many reasonable citizens may not accept. The latter kind of claim is illegitimate insofar as some people care significantly more than others about well-being or the ingredients of well-being. Thus, the use of well-being research to evaluate public policy cannot be justified on either of these grounds.

Does this mean that there are no justifiable grounds for well-being-based policy? Not necessarily. In this essay, I explore the possibility that the psychological aspects of well-being can be viewed as a "primary good." That is, the preservation and promotion of well-being can be justified as instrumentally valuable for most people. Well-being is instrumentally valuable for most people regardless of their particular intrinsic values. In John Rawls's terms, well-being can be viewed as an all-purpose good that people are assumed to want whatever their plans. The reason for this is that the psychological aspects of well-being, the kinds of

things subjective well-being research typically measures, tend to be cognitively and motivationally necessary for agency. Without being able to appreciate one's life emotionally and cognitively, one cannot sufficiently pursue one's own conception of the good. Thus, well-being tends to be necessary for leading a good life regardless of one's conception of in what a good life consists.

Even if it is the case, however, that well-being can be viewed as a primary good in this way, it is not necessarily the case that the state should promote it as a matter of justice. The state should promote only primary goods that share certain important features. First, a given primary good must be distributable and objectively comparable if the state is to promote it in a just manner. In addition, the state must be in the best position to promote a given primary good. That is, the primary good must require institutional support: public policies related to its existence and continuation. Moreover, the primary good must be non-fungible. That is, it must not be commonly obtainable through substitutes - things other than the goods and services provided by the state.

I will argue that the psychological aspects of well-being share each of these features. Thus, according to political liberalism, governments can legitimately provide the social goods necessary for the preservation and promotion of the psychological aspects of well-being. However, I end with a word of caution. The extent to which public policy should promote well-being is not obvious. It may be that only the basic psychological aspects of well-being tend to be necessary for agency. Indeed, it may be that only the absence of the psychological aspects of ill-being (such as chronic depression) is a

primary good. This may make a difference to the kind of policies that governments should enact to preserve and promote well-being.

Well-being and Political Liberalism

Much of the talk about the use of well-being research in public policy has focused on either (a) the general validity or particular implications of well-being research, or (b) the value of well-being and related concepts (such as happiness, life satisfaction, quality of life, and so on). These are all useful discussions to have. But there has been very little talk about the legitimacy of well-being measures and research in public policy.¹ Even if the study of well-being is valid, and well-being is something of value, the promotion of well-being through policy may still not be just.

According to political liberalism, states should not directly promote particular values but rather provide citizens with the necessary means to pursue their own conception of the good. The reason for this is that states should have “respect for persons.” That is, states should treat citizens with respect by treating them as autonomous agents with sovereign authority over their own affairs. As long as the pursuit of one’s own conception of the good does not result in harm to others, it is not the business of the state to judge whether one’s own conception of the good is worthwhile. For the purposes of this paper I will focus solely on the role that well-being policy can take within the framework of political liberalism.^{2,3}

We may not be able to assume that well-being is something that we all care about, or at least something that we all care about to the same extent.

It does not matter, then, according to political liberalism, whether well-being is ultimately all that matters. Even if philosophical welfarism is true, states should assess and evaluate policy in respect to citizens’ own conceptions of the good. Indeed, even if well-being is merely one of many intrinsic values (along with certain rights and moral, religious, and

aesthetic values, for example) states should not necessarily appeal to these values in forming policy. As long as citizens reasonably disagree over the value or validity of well-being, policy based upon it is illegitimate.

This view tacitly rests on the idea of *value plurality*, namely that citizens reasonably hold a diverse set of (nonharmful) values, none of which should be promoted at the cost of others. However, one could argue that, with well-being, we can assume *value universality*. That is, it may be that well-being is something that we all care about. Who doesn’t care about their own well-being? Indeed, not caring about one’s well-being almost seems paradoxical. Perhaps, then, if everyone cares about his or her own well-being, governments can legitimately promote it. Note that we are not necessarily making any claims about what is in fact valuable. We are merely noting that people do care about well-being. If people care about well-being then perhaps governments should too.

There are two problems with this view, however. First, we may not be able to assume that well-being is something that we all care about, or at least something that we all care about to the same extent. Second, even if we do all care about well-being, there may be considerable variety in the ingredients of well-being. I will briefly consider each problem in turn. Although I am unable to consider each problem in detail here, I aim to show that both problems together at least cast doubt on the legitimacy of well-being policy.

Both problems rest on two lines of evidence regarding reasonable differences in people’s values. First, there are well-documented differences in the kinds of things valued by more “individualist” cultures, on the one hand, and more “collectivist” cultures, on the other (Diener and Suh 2000). Whereas members of more individualist cultures tend to value such things as personal achievement and well-being, members of more collectivist cultures tend to value such things as social cohesion and group harmony. Second, in cases of self-sacrifice, people sacrifice their own well-being in favor of promoting their most important values. For example, parents may sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of looking after their severely disabled child. Similarly, soldiers may sacrifice their well-being (and lives) in order to promote ideals of freedom.

These differences in people's values cast doubt on the legitimacy of the use of well-being as a measure of or criterion for public policy. First, one could argue that they show that not all people care about well-being, or at least that some people care about well-being significantly more than others do. It seems that people with a more collectivist set of values care about well-being less than do those with a more individualist set of values. Indeed, in extreme cases, individual well-being may be so contrary to widely held values that well-being can come to be disvalued. Likewise, it seems that individuals who have sacrificed their own interests value well-being less than do individuals who are largely self-interested. If this were the case, well-being policy would unjustly benefit those who care most about well-being, at the cost of both collectivists and self-sacrificial individuals.⁴

In response to this problem, one could argue that both collectivists and self-sacrificial individuals *do* value their own well-being; only the *ingredients* of their well-being differ. In collectivist cultures, social cohesion and group harmony may be significant ingredients of well-being. In contrast, in individualist cultures, personal achievements may be significant ingredients of well-being. Thus, it may be that all people care about well-being to a similar extent. The differences in values outlined above may merely show that significantly different things cause well-being, not that some people value well-being more than others.

Even if this is the case, however, this simply pushes the problem back a level. Political liberalism holds that citizens reasonably hold a diverse set of values, none of which should be promoted at the cost of others. We can say a similar thing about the ingredients of potentially universal values: a reasonably diverse set of ingredients promotes people's values, none of which should be promoted at the cost of others. For example, well-being policy that promoted personal achievements would unjustly benefit those with a more individualist set of values. Conversely, well-being policy that promoted social cohesion and group harmony would unjustly benefit collectivists. It is unlikely that well-being can be preserved and promoted in the same way, to the same extent, for all citizens.⁵ This failure to find common ground would make such well-being policy illegitimate.

In sum, according to political liberalism, policies

that promote well-being as a value in itself may not be justifiable. Even if well-being has intrinsic value (or indeed is the only thing of intrinsic value), states are not justified in promoting it. Moreover, it is not obvious that all citizens value well-being, or the ingredients of well-being, to the same extent. Thus, well-being policy is likely to advantage some citizens at the expense of others; such policy is illegitimate.

Well-being as a Primary Good

For many people, the discussion stops there. If well-being cannot legitimately be promoted as a value in itself then there is no place for well-being in public policy. This is a mistake. According to political liberalism, states should provide its citizens with certain *primary goods*: all-purpose goods that people are assumed to want whatever their conception of the good. In other words, even if states should not promote particular conceptions of the good, they should still provide most citizens with the means to promote their own conceptions of the good, and well-being can be viewed as a primary good.

In sum, according to political liberalism, policies that promote well-being as a value in itself may not be justifiable.

To be more precise, the *psychological aspects of well-being* can be viewed as an all-purpose, instrumental good. The psychological aspects of well-being involve the kinds of things that are typically measured by subjective well-being researchers, such as affect balance, life satisfaction, and psychological (or "eudaimonic") well-being. Individuals lacking subjective well-being (SWB) are unable to form and pursue their own conceptions of the good life.⁶

Positive affect is particularly important in this respect. SWB researchers have shown that positive affect has various cognitive and motivational advantages, such as making one more healthy, sociable, creative, confident, optimistic, resilient, and so on (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). Although these kinds of advantages are important, positive

affect also tends to be advantageous in a more fundamental respect: having a favorable affect balance enables us to appreciate our selves and our lives.

This is perhaps best illustrated by almost the opposite mental condition, namely depression. Depressed individuals, who suffer from an unfavorable affect balance, often lack a sense of self-worth and find no value in any personal activities. They are unable to appreciate the value of themselves and their lives, and thereby lack the motivation to improve their situation. In contrast, individuals with a favorable affect balance often do have a sense of self-worth, and by extension tend to value their own projects, commitments, contributions to relationships, and so on (Hawkins 2010). In short, positive affect enables us to have sufficient *valuing capacities*. Valuing capacities are what enable us to form and pursue our own conception of the good life.^{7,8}

The state is required to promote only those primary goods that it is in the best position to promote in a just manner.

SWB can be viewed as a primary good in this way. However, not all primary goods should be promoted by the state as a matter of justice. The state is required to promote only those primary goods that it is in the best position to promote in a just manner. Rawls divides primary goods into two classes: social and natural. Social goods include goods that the state can distribute: liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social bases of self-respect. In contrast, natural primary goods include goods whose distribution states can influence but not directly control, such as health. According to political liberalism, only social primary goods are subject to claims of justice.

Social primary goods are subject to claims of justice because they share certain important features. First, the state is able to objectively compare and justly distribute social primary goods. Thus, for SWB to be promoted by the state as a matter of justice, there must be material goods related to SWB that can be *distributed and that are objectively comparable*. It is the *social bases* of SWB that can be promoted by

the state.

In addition, the state is in the best position to promote social primary goods. In the case of SWB, this means that the social bases of SWB must *require institutional support*, that is, public policies related to their existence and continuation. If the social bases of SWB can be more efficiently obtained privately then they should not be promoted by the state. In a related manner, the social bases of SWB must be non-fungible. That is, SWB must not be commonly obtainable through substitutes - things other than the social bases of SWB. If SWB can be efficiently obtained through substitutes, then the state should not promote the social bases of SWB.

In the remainder of this section I will consider whether the psychological aspects of well-being can be viewed as a social primary good and should therefore be promoted by the state as a matter of justice.

Well-being as distributable and objectively comparable

For SWB to be subject to claims of justice, states must be able to distribute and objectively compare it to other material goods. States cannot directly control the distribution of SWB, but they can distribute the social bases of SWB.

What kinds of material and social conditions promote SWB? In general, SWB researchers highlight the importance of such things as intimate relationships, meaningful work and leisure, health, and a sense of control (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2011). There are various social conditions related to each of these kinds of goods. For example, the promotion of meaningful work is partly dependent on jobs that enable workers to make decisions and obtain helpful feedback. We can expect these kinds of social conditions to be important factors in most people's SWB. Moreover, we are in the fortunate position of having a wealth of research into the determinants of SWB, including the kinds of material conditions associated with SWB (Seligman 2011).

Well-being as requiring institutional support

To count as a social primary good, the social bases of SWB must require institutional support, in contrast to being privately obtained. That is, the social and material conditions associated with SWB

must require public policies related to their existence and continuation.

This may not be the case with many of the kinds of social and material conditions that promote SWB. For example, meaningful employment may be best provided by private companies, not by the state. Similarly, a sense of control may require individuals to arrange their lives in certain ways, rather than policies aimed at helping them to do so. I do not want to take a definite stand on the kinds of social conditions that do not require institutional support. It may be, for instance, that education and health care do not necessarily require institutional support, but that the promotion of such goods is best achieved through public policies insofar as they are already publicly supplied. I am unable to consider these sorts of cases here. However, in the remainder of this section I will consider a particular kind of good that does require public policies related to its existence – these are *public goods*.

The psychological aspects of well-being can be viewed as a primary good: an all-purpose good that people need to form and pursue their own conception of the good life.

Public goods typically need state intervention for their existence and continuation. This is because states can resolve the collective-action problems that prevent public goods from being privately obtained. Examples include goods such as national defense, certain types of police services, and various types of insurance. Markets in these kinds of goods will simply be “missing,” in the sense that they will not be provided at all, despite the presence of consumers who would be willing to pay for them and producers who would be willing to provide them. Collective-action problems prevent such markets from existing. The state has the power to “solve” such collective-action problems by imposing taxes or fees, then using the revenue to provide these missing goods.⁹

Various public goods, which are often not provided by the state, may have a large impact on people’s SWB. These include such goods as open green spaces and social settings. Although these

kinds of social conditions can seem fairly trivial at first, evidence suggests that they may in fact have a profound effect on our lives. Consider, for instance, a recent study concerning a low-income housing project in Chicago, whereby residents were assigned to twenty-four almost identical apartment blocks (Frumkin and Louv 2007). The only difference between the apartment blocks was that twelve of them faced some form of vegetation (open green spaces, trees, and so on) whereas the other twelve did not. A follow-up study found that apartment dwellers facing vegetation were significantly: (a) more likely to know their neighbors, socialize, know people within their building, and help each other; (b) less likely to engage in a wide range of aggressive behavior against their partners. This is a large difference made by a very small intervention. In general, we have reason to believe that the public goods that make up the social environment and context in which people spend their lives have a large impact on SWB (Haybron 2011).

Well-being as non-fungible

Lastly, for the social bases of SWB to count as a social primary good, they must be non-fungible. That is, SWB must not be commonly obtainable through substitutes: things other than the social bases of SWB.

One might think that the kinds of social conditions discussed in the previous section are unnecessary if SWB could be promoted merely through the use of certain kinds of mental-health therapies and drugs. This may seem significantly easier and more feasible than building social settings. Of course, it may be that these kinds of mental-health services are still best supplied publicly, rather than privately obtained; I am unable to discuss this issue at length here. We can still ask, however, insofar as such services do not require institutional support, can the social conditions associated with SWB be readily substitutable in this way?

A quick answer would be to say that SWB is not *currently* fungible in this way. That is, despite the efficacy of certain therapies and antidepressants, we have reason to believe that the social conditions discussed above still have a major role to play in the promotion of SWB.

However, it is possible that therapies and drugs will improve in certain ways. Such improvements may make the impact of various social conditions on our SWB largely redundant. If this were the case, the state would not be in the best position to promote SWB through promoting the kinds of social conditions discussed in the previous section. It is possible, therefore, that, sometime in the future, well-being policy would be illegitimate.

Toward Legitimate Well-being Policy

To sum up, the psychological aspects of well-being can be viewed as a primary good: an all-purpose good that people need to form and pursue their own conception of the good life. It is for this reason that states can legitimately promote well-being. In particular, well-being policies should promote public goods associated with SWB. Well-being policy may also promote related goods and services that are publicly funded for other reasons, such as education and mental health.

However, we need to touch upon one further issue in order to understand the extent of legitimate well-being policy. That is, how much SWB is required in order to have sufficient valuing capacities? Is it enough merely to have an absence of various negative psychological conditions, such as depression or an anxiety disorder? If all that is required is a lack of subjective ill-being (SIB), in contrast to a relatively high level of SWB, then extensive well-being policy may not turn out to be legitimate after all.

In response, it is worth saying that this is ultimately an empirical question, and one that should demand further SWB research. Yet we can say one thing in the meantime. That is, promoting SWB may be the most efficient way of preventing SIB in the long-run (Seligman 2011). Whereas preventing SIB may eliminate the immediate stressors in one's life, it does nothing for developing the strengths one needs to deal with potential future setbacks (Fredrickson 2006). Thus, even if states should merely aim to prevent SIB, this may be best achieved through the promotion of SWB. This is, of course, only a speculative suggestion, but one worth considering nonetheless.

In addition, we can say that policies aimed simply at maximizing SWB are likely to be illegitimate in certain circumstances. For example,

it may be that having a relatively high level of SWB is the most efficient way of preventing SIB in the long run, but that having a *very* high level of SWB is not an effective way of preventing SIB. In this case, maximizing people's SWB may not be required in order for them to have sufficient valuing capacities. Rather, policies should aim to promote SWB to the extent that SWB enables people to form and pursue their own conception of the good.¹⁰

Moreover, it is important to stress that, even if it is the case that legitimate well-being policy concerns only the prevention of SIB, this still leaves room for a considerable amount of well-being policy. One recent report found that one-third of all families in the UK include someone who is currently mentally ill (Layard et al. 2012). Policies aimed solely at the prevention of SIB would need, therefore, to consider how best to combat an extensive amount of particular kinds of mental illness. This is not insignificant.

Conclusion

I have argued that well-being policy that aims to promote well-being either as (a) something of value in itself, or (b) something that everyone cares about, is illegitimate. According to political liberalism, even if well-being is ultimately all that matters, states should not promote a particular view of the good life. Moreover, it is not the case that all citizens value well-being, or the ingredients of well-being, to the same extent. Thus, well-being policy would unjustifiably be an advantage to some citizens at the expense of others.

However, an alternative form of well-being policy can be justified. That is, the psychological aspects of well-being (the kind of things measured by SWB researchers) can be viewed as a primary good: an all-purpose instrumental good. In short, legitimate well-being policy enables people to form and pursue their own conception of the good life. In discussing this view, I have suggested that well-being policies should promote public goods associated with SWB. This includes such goods as open green spaces and social settings, and potentially certain forms of education and health care. Lastly, even if well-being policy is required only to alleviate the psychological aspects of ill-being (SIB), an extensive range of well-being policies may still be justified.

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Notes:

¹ Exceptions include Buhkarat 2006; Frey and Stutzer 2010; and Haybron and Tiberius unpublished.

² I will not be able to argue here that political liberalism is an adequate theory of justice. There are, of course, alternative theories of justice. The Capabilities Approach, for instance, focuses on the provision of universal capabilities in contrast to primary goods (Nussbaum 2000). I will briefly mention in another footnote below how well-being policy could be incorporated into such a framework.

³ I will also not be able to prove here that well-being policy is illegitimate from the point of view of political liberalism. I merely aim to show that, if well-being policy were illegitimate from the perspective of political liberalism (which it may well be), alternative forms of well-being policy (namely, treating well-being as a primary good) may still be legitimate.

⁴ With respect to self-sacrificial individuals, one could argue that well-being policy would not be unjust in this way. This is because such individuals tend to sacrifice their own well-being in favor of promoting the well-being of others. This may not always be the case, however. Consider, for example, environmentalists who sacrifice their own interests in favor of preventing irreversible climate change. Environmentalist may do this for the sake of the planet, not for the well-being of others. Thus, policies aimed at improving their well-being would be unjust, according to political liberalism.

⁵ For example, even common well-being ingredients such as intimate relationships, meaningful work, and leisure time are likely to benefit some individuals more than others.

⁶ From hereon in I will use the terms “subjective well-being” (SWB) and “the psychological aspects of well-being” interchangeably.

⁷ In this sense, the psychological aspects of well-being can be viewed in a similar way to Rawls’s notion of self-respect. Rawls argues that self-respect is necessary in order to form and pursue our own conception of the good life (Rawls 1971). I have no problem with the advantages of SWB being interpreted in this way. This paper can be viewed as an attempt to flesh out the notion of self-respect with respect to one of its ingredients: the psychological aspects of well-being.

⁸ In the development of her version of the Capabilities Approach, Nussbaum also emphasizes the importance of valuing capacities, referring to practical reason as one of the fundamental central capabilities (Nussbaum 2000). Thus, SWB has a similarly important role to play in alternative views of distributive justice, the Capabilities Approach in particular.

⁹ The state may also be required to solve collection-action problems related to the over-consumption of various positional goods (see, for instance, Layard 2005; Frank 2011). Positional goods involve zero-sum games, which have a tendency to escalate. For example, arms races occur because each side wants more arms than the other side. The absolute number of arms possessed by either side does not matter; all that matters is the relative number of arms that each side has, that is, whether one side has more arms than the other. The result is that both sides tend to “over-consume” on arms. External interventions are often necessary to prevent such competitions from escalating in this way. Frank 2000 has argued that similar “arms races” abound with respect to our consumption of various positional goods. He further argues that state intervention may also be required to prevent such over-consumption. Over-consumption of positional goods ultimately prevents the consumption of other goods associated with SWB (such as quality relationships, leisure time, and so on). It may be that certain taxes, therefore, can act as disincentives for the promotion of various positional goods. This is more controversial than the role played by other public goods in the promotion of SWB. Yet it is a striking example of how institutional support may be required to promote the kind of social conditions related to SWB.

¹⁰ With regard to promoting public goods, such as open green spaces and social settings, this would mean that states should provide such goods in areas where people have low levels of SWB (typically deprived areas) rather than high levels of SWB (typically affluent areas).

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