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Key issues includes appraisal of life, work conditions, mental and physical health, developmental trajectories throughout the life span, socio-economic conditions, cultural aspects, and their impact on individual and social wellbeing.

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Johnny H. Søraker · Jan-Willem van der Rijt  
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# Well-Being in Contemporary Society

 Springer

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# Introduction

Jelle de Boer, Jan-Willem van der Rijt, Johnny H. Søraker,  
Pak-Hang Wong and Philip Brey

## Four Types of Questions About Well-Being

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) famously argued that human happiness should be conceived as the fundamental principle of human conduct, both psychologically and morally. The desire to be happy normally guides individuals in their decisions in life, and in as far it does not, he believed it *should* guide them. Similarly, governments ought to regard happiness as the standard for improving society. In Bentham’s time, this was seen as a revolutionary idea by which he aimed to counteract the force of tradition, superstition, and speculative systems of thought. Bentham claimed that the happiness principle alone followed from the dictates of reason. “Systems which attempt to question it,” he wrote, “deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.” (Bentham 1789/1823 [Chapter 1, Section I]). With hindsight, we can say that this assertion was perhaps a bit overconfident. As it soon came to light, the happiness principle too has its drawbacks, one of the most prominent being the difficulty to measure it. Others objected to it on the ground that people’s happiness falls outside of the purview of government: people know best what is good for themselves. Due to recent scientific progress, these two arguments have now lost much of their force and as a result Bentham’s thinking has made a major comeback.

Nowadays, the first objection is losing much of its urgency as the modern science of subjective well-being continues to develop its methods to measure people’s happiness. One very influential method is questionnaire-based and asks people how satisfied they are with their life on, for example, a 0–5 scale, either in a global sense or in some specific domain of their life. Another method probes the emotional responses of people. This can be done in real-time, while they are engaged in their daily routines, or retrospectively, for instance by querying them about these emotions at the end of their day. Other techniques rely on brain scans or the measurement of physiological proxies of happiness. Such techniques enable us to learn what conditions are particularly apt to human beings experiencing



subjective well-being, how strong the influence of these conditions are, and to what degree these different measurement methods interrelate and validate each other.

The force of the second objection is also undermined by progress in this field of research, as it has been demonstrated that people surprisingly often fail in securing their own well-being when left to their own devices (Gilbert 2007, Haybron, 2007). By focusing on the wrong things, or through short-sightedness, people end up in far less favorable conditions than they could be—even by their own standards. Many of us, for example, find a high income important. Yet arguably we find it too important: the evidence suggests that money does not contribute much to happiness once a certain threshold level has been achieved.<sup>1</sup> *Prima facie*, the fact that people are so fallible in these regards provides a reason to develop public policies that engage with these human shortcomings and so increase subjective well-being.

Subjective well-being scholars have argued that governments should focus less on income as the standard for social well-being but should instead direct their attention to what really matters: well-being itself. For instance, Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his coworkers have recommended that governments use this new research on happiness to enrich their bookkeeping methods and develop National Well-Being Accounts. Joseph Stiglitz and Armatya Sen, two further Nobelists, have likewise expressed concerns about traditional, social, and economic indicators and emphasized the need to develop better ones. These appeals have not remained without success: discontent with traditional measures and optimism about the new possibilities now resonate beyond academia, especially within the circles of politicians and policy makers. Currently, the UN, the OECD, the European commission and countries like Australia, Bhutan, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have each issued statements that the subjective well-being of their citizens should be used as a guide for policy-making and as an indicator of its success; some of them have also taken steps toward implementation of this principle. Bhutan has famously gone furthest in this direction and uses a Gross National Happiness Index to guide policies and track progress.

For the study of well-being—what it is, how it works, and how to apply it for policy objectives—four types of questions are especially germane. The present volume is structured around these four issues. The first concerns our understanding of the concept of well-being: what is well-being, what does it consist in? The other three we borrow from John Rawls (2001). In his work on justice, Rawls argued that when working toward a more just society one should ask whether policies and courses of action are “likely to be effective” at the level of the individual (taking into account human psychology), whether they are “politically possible” and

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<sup>1</sup> This is sometimes referred to as the “Easterlin Paradox” (Easterlin 1974). The exact relationship between income and subjective well-being is contested, however (see e.g., Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). See also various contributions in Diener, Helliwell and Kahneman (2010).

whether they are “morally permissible” (Rawls 2001, p. 89) Our concern is with well-being, not justice, but the same set of requirements apply.

1. ***The nature of well-being.*** At the most general level, a person’s well-being tells us how well his or her life is going. This means that the concept of well-being has both a descriptive and an evaluative component. For example, whether a certain individual is very happy is something that can be true or false: it is a matter of fact. At the same time, to say that somebody is happy conveys evaluative meaning. It expresses approval or endorsement: a judgment that this person is on the right track, that she should keep doing what she is doing. Since well-being has both descriptive and evaluative components—to use the words of Bernard Williams: it is a “thick concept” (Williams 2006)—it attracts the attention of empirically minded scientists as well as normatively oriented philosophers, as this volume attests. As mentioned, empirical scholars apply various methods to measure well-being. Some are more cognitively oriented, others more affectively, and still others physiological. We can understand this variety of methods in different ways. They can be taken to represent different approaches to one and the same subject: well-being as a unitary entity; alternatively, each of them can be taken to measure a different aspect of well-being.

What well-being consists in is an issue that precedes its measurement. We might call it a philosophical question, and there are predictably many different theories of well-being within philosophy. Derek Parfit (1986) has usefully distinguished these theories in three categories: desire satisfaction theories, hedonic experience theories, and objective list theories.<sup>2</sup> From a practical point of view this variety may at first sight seem unfortunate, possibly even dispiriting. When one is interested in measuring and furthering well-being, it can be highly frustrating to get bogged down in philosophical questions regarding its true nature. However, a closer look shows that the requirement of practical applicability can be used to re-examine our most prominent theories of well-being: we can seek to determine where these theories overlap and in what sense they are complementary. This is an exercise that may well bear fruit. It is the subject of Chaps. 1 and 2 of the present volume, “Towards Consensus on Well-Being” by *Tim Taylor* and “Towards a Widely Acceptable Framework for the Study of Personal Well-Being” by *Sam Wren-Lewis*. Independently of each other these authors both argue that subjective well-being can be conceived as a value in itself, as an indicator of what is valuable, or as a resource to create value. Through this troika Wren Lewis ties together the main *empirical* approaches to the study of well-being, while Taylor ties together the most prominent *philosophical* theories. The prospect that empirical science and philosophy could mutually inform each other and are not doomed to talk past each other is further explored in Chap. 3 “Well-Being, Science, and Philosophy” by *Raffaele Rodogno*.

2. ***Effective at the level of the individual.*** Human beings are finite beings: it is a fact of life that we cannot get or do whatever we may happen to want.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Griffin (1986), Sumner (1996) and Brey (2012).

Proposals regarding the promotion of well-being, either for specific individuals or for society at large, must meet the condition that they are in accordance with human psychology. They must take note of human capacities, dispositions, and the limits of what people can achieve and learn. These constraints are not fixed, however, as they depend on the resources and technologies that are available.

Our prospects of improving well-being are dependent on our knowledge of what makes people happy and their lives go well. Here, the current insights from positive psychology, with its focus on happiness and positive functioning, are especially helpful. In Chap. 4, “Improving the Health Care Sector with a Happiness-Based Approach,” Laura A. Weiss, Sarah Kedzia, Aad Francissen and Gerben J. Westerhof show how this knowledge can be applied to help people who are trapped in a vicious spiral of illness, depression, and social isolation via what is called “the Happiness Route”.

Aids for improving people’s happiness must connect with what people have in stock themselves, their natural dispositions and capacities. This includes their potential to use self-insight, i.e., to use their knowledge of how their own motivations can change due to the choices they make, as *Rixtar Arlegi and Miriam Teschl* demonstrate in Chap. 5, “Conflict, Commitment and Well-Being.” Their chapter addresses an important problem for desire satisfaction-based theories of well-being: how to deal with the fact that people often have conflicting desires. Commitment is a technique that allows individuals to cope with this problem of conflicting motivations. Alegri and Teschl contribute to our understanding of this technique by arguing that commitment assisted by self-knowledge can be understood in terms of a volitional solution to motivation conflict.

Natural human psychological capacities are of crucial importance in regards to well-being, but in our modern age technology plays no less important a role when it comes to the prospect of increasing people’s happiness. In Chap. 6, “Can Technology Make Us Happy? Ethics, Spectator’s Happiness and the Value of Achievement,” *Andreas Spahn* outlines the different ways in which modern technology contributes to different aspects of well-being. Positioning himself on the side of Enlightenment optimism with regards to technology, rather than suffering from Romantic uneasiness, Spahn discusses the potential of “persuasive technologies” that can make people both more happy and more likely to act as morality demands. The subsequent two chapters concentrate on specific technologies for improving well-being. *Birgit Beck and Barbara Stroop* in their contribution “A Biomedical Shortcut to (Fraudulent) Happiness? An Analysis of the Notions of Well-Being and Authenticity Underlying Objections to Mood Enhancement” (Chap. 7) question the validity of the common view that mood enhancers should not be used outside of the medical context to make people feel happier because this would merely lead to a fake kind of happiness. They argue that this view is mistaken and that mood enhancers can improve genuine well-being. Not all technologies need to work through such physiological interventions, as *Judith Annett and Stefan Berglund* show in their “Increasing Societal Well-Being Through Enhanced Empathy Using Computer Games” (Chap. 8). They make a case for the development and use of a special kind of social computer

game, designed to increase and stimulate people's empathic capabilities. This should smoothen the interaction between people, which in turn will improve societal well-being.

3. **Politically possible.** Even if it may be possible to increase well-being for some individuals because their psychological makeup is favorable to interventions that are presently within technological reach, it does not follow that the same holds on a larger scale. At the political level, problems that will undermine the promotion of well-being on a societal scale may, for example, arise due to various sorts of conflicting individual aims, or because of disrupting interaction effects.

In order to further well-being in a given society, appropriate institutional arrangements and mechanisms are required. In democracies, people must be willing to give their votes to policies that improve well-being, politicians have to endorse such policies, and policy makers and bureaucrats have to implement them. The route to higher societal happiness levels is for a large part a political route, and therefore dependent on the way collective decision-making is organized.

The question of promoting well-being can enter the political domain in various ways. Political questions arise, for instance, when the provision of a public good impacts societal well-being. This is the subject of Chap. 9 "Well-Being, Happiness and Sustainability" by *Bengt Brülde*. A more sustainable way of life requires drastic changes in consumption, both with respect to its pattern and to its level. How to achieve this environmental goal is an intricate puzzle that involves solving questions regarding the scale and distribution of behavioral types and of particular activities that impact sustainability and well-being. Another factor that advances issues of well-being into the political domain is the occurrence of interaction effects. In Chap. 10 "The Political Pursuit of Happiness: A Popperian Perspective on Layard's Happiness Policy" *Aloys Prinz and Björn Büniger* discuss status competition: the fact that a person's well-being is not only determined by absolute facts about their lives, but also is affected by relative comparisons. To the extent that one person's well-being depends on how well others are doing, the pursuit of happiness becomes a zero-sum game. If this is the case, then governments should arguably intervene to prevent a self-defeating rat race. Prinz and Büniger address this question and examine the possible traps and obstacles on the political road toward reducing the effects of positional comparisons on happiness.

Knowing how to operationalize well-being indicators and knowing how to foster well-being on an individual level do not entail that we know how to promote well-being on the scale of a whole society. This is demonstrated by Chap. 11 "Measuring Quality of Life—An Idea Whose Time Has Come? Agenda-Setting Dynamics in Britain and the European Union" by *Ian Bache*. Whether an idea catches on depends on the political context. Through a comparative analysis between the UK and the EU, Bache shows how institutional design and political entrepreneurship helped determine the success and timing of the idea that we can improve society through application of the new Benthamite subjective well-being methods and indicators.

4. **Morally permissible.** Individual and political feasibility together do not suffice to justify the new-Benthamite endeavor. Knowing how to improve the well-being of (a subset of) the population and being able to install the appropriate policy to implement this may be sufficient to ascertain that governments *can* improve individual and societal well-being, but that does not imply they also *should*. Well-being is not the only political value, and neo-Benthamism is not the only moral theory. The goal of fostering well-being among a group of people seems laudable on its own, but any attempts to put it into practice must be carefully considered taking note of their effects on other values, goals, and considerations. These may set constraints, point to trade-offs, or even put the entire Benthamite project into doubt.

This means that even when it is possible to implement the happiness principle on an individual level by means of effective psychological and technological methods and on the societal level by designing and using institutional and political mechanisms, there can be weighty reasons to refrain from doing so. This is what *Jan-Willem van der Rijt* argues in Chap. 12 “The Political Turn Towards Happiness.” Van der Rijt examines the reasons to be wary of a government that is too happily devoted to promoting the happiness of its citizenry, to a Benthamism unbound.

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