

# Introduction: Dynamics of Well-Being

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Published online: 22 June 2013  
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The essential dynamics of well-being pivot on the key conceptual observation that we cannot help but understand well-being from both an objective and a subjective perspective: Life goes well for us when we have what we need, when we have access to the resources, the people and the opportunities that make it possible for us to be and do what we wish. On the other hand, however, we also strongly believe that our well-being is a feeling, an experience, usually that of happiness, which is intensively subjective. Conceptually, in short, both perspectives are needed both to understand and to secure well-being: happiness without resources, without friends and opportunities, is either short-lived or empty; but resources, friends and opportunities without positive experiences, is equally flat and emotionally empty. Here we have a perfect dilemma: both perspectives are self-evident and neither is sufficient, but what creates objective well-being may undermine subjective well-being, and vice versa. The aim of this thematic section is to indirectly address this dilemma and advancing our understanding of the nature and determinants of well-being by conceptually disentangling the essence of well-being in different contexts and through an analysis of its essential components and characteristics.

Some of the papers presented here explore factors that lead to or enhance well-being. *Sarah Atkinson* proposes an interpretation of well-being that is always and necessarily situated and relational. She frames well-being as an

emergent though situated phenomenon with relational effects that are dependent on the mobilisation of resources within social and spatial contexts, and in this manner addresses our dilemma by bridging the standard division between individual and collective resources, and therefore subjective and objective determinants of well-being.

In the same vein, *Michael Power* questions the assumptions of the so-called ‘positive psychology’ movement and interrogates what he characterises as its naïve pursuit of happiness. In light of evidence that defensive pessimists often perform better than optimists, he supports a psychological capacity he calls flexibility that trades on the fact that sometimes optimism is a good trait, sometimes pessimism is, but when reality is accurately known, realism should supersede both. Whether realism, optimism, or pessimism is a more prudent temperament depends on a range of other personal and social factors for which the same underlying trait of flexibility is also required.

In the context of the Amartya Sen’s capability account, *Christopher A. Riddle* discusses the special role of health in the promotion of well-being. The author claims that capabilities are not of equal moral worth as some are more centrally related to, or predictive of, human flourishing. Health, in particular, is of special moral importance because of the scope and nature of the disadvantage suffered when one is unhealthy. This kind of disadvantage is particularly corrosive as it adversely impacts one’s very ability to secure any other valuable functionings essential for one’s conception of the good life.

Another group of papers presented in this collection helps to conceptually clarify the notion of well-being by juxtaposing it to another, but related concept.

The relationship between welfare or well-being and human virtue is at the core of *Christopher Toner*’s paper. By drawing support from the Aristotelian idea of the link

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between being good and well-being, Toner argues for a form of welfare perfectionism that can be summarised by two interrelated claims: first, that the virtuous person's welfare is an aspect of that individual's virtuous activity and, secondly, that the virtuous person will never be in position to choose to attain well-being at the expense of acting virtuously.

Also in the context of health, but from the perspective of social aesthetics, *Michael Musalek* explores the relationship between health and well-being from the point of view of beauty. As the author explains, well-being is inextricably linked with beauty, and this link might be called joy. A life that is for the most part lived autonomously and joyfully is experienced as well-being; and human beings believe that we have achieved well-being when we succeed in living joyfully. The author supports the development of a human-based medicine that focuses on the restoration or preservation of a comprehensive state of health in the sense of complete physical, mental and social well-being, in the sense of opening up the possibility for a mostly autonomous and joyful life.

The characterisation of well-being in the context of disability is at the core of two papers.

*Franziska Felder* investigates the issue of which disabilities, if any, are fundamentally detrimental to human well-being, and for which reasons. Against the generalisation that disability is itself and always an instance of reduced well-being in an absolute sense, she supports the view that a disability is only bad for a person in an absolute sense if it undermines the very personhood of the individual by negating the essential core of functional elements absolutely crucial to human well-being.

*Claire Edwards* explores some standard responses to the so called 'disability paradox', namely that while to external observers the well-being of disabled people appears poor, people with disabilities themselves report a good if not superior quality of life. She argues for the view that there is

a need to take account of things other than happiness when assessing people's well-being. But she also critically addresses commonly relied on presumptions about what 'goods' are important to people with disabilities and highlights the need for empirical research on perceptions of persons with disabilities of their own well-being.

Finally, this thematic section contains two papers that focus on the characteristics of well-being in two additional and important contexts.

The paper by *Christina Schües* and *Christoph Rehmann-Sutter* focuses on the well-being of children. As applied to children, the concept of well-being is embedded in a sense of the origins or genesis of the child and thus temporally based and directed towards the good life as a meaningful life that is sensitive to social context and to the quality of these relationships. As a result, child well-being is fundamentally a relational concept that requires, the authors argue, a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to clarify what they call the 'generative insight'.

In the context of policy development, finally, *Bruno S. Frey* and *Jana Gallus* question the trustworthiness of what has been called a 'National Happiness Index' as suitable and valid aggregation of individual happiness states. In light of the history of how the parallel notion of life satisfaction was transformed once it has become an official goal of government policy, they argue in favour of governments establishing, democratically, the conditions that enable individuals to become happy, and recommend that the results of happiness research be introduced more directly into the political process.

As editors, we believe that the articles in this thematic section will open up discussion in important areas in relation to the essence and determinants of well-being. We hope that they stimulate further conceptual and empirical work to support the goal of understanding the metrics for enhancing well-being at the individual and population level.