Well-Being

Well-being identifies a good state of being relative to one's life as a whole. Since the 1950s the term appears frequently as a preferred substitute for "happiness," which tends to characterize a narrow segment of life with a short-lived feeling ("I'm happy with my latest pay raise"). One would say, "I have a sense of well-being," and mean, in ordinary uses of the term, physical health, optimal psychological functioning, and/or, in philosophical terms, actions flowing from what is distinctive in human nature (like reasoning).

Since the 1970s physical well-being identifies a health-related quality of life, where issues such as regular exercise, proper diet, and the absence of disease or injury dominate the discussion. Advances in pharmacology and technology are proceeding so rapidly that, for the wealthy at least, a state of physical well-being might be created, not from daily attention, but from medical intervention.

Until mid-twentieth century, much of psychology focused on the amelioration of psychopathology. But in the 1960s psychologists devoted significant energy to well-being as the development of human potential, and at the turn of the century to what has become known as positive psychology, the focus of research on positive affective experience and optimal functioning. A significant work of the latter period is *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) by naturalized American Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Positive psychology has developed two paradigms which overlap with the concept of well-being dating back in philosophy to the Ancient Greeks: hedonism and eudaimonism. And so the meaning and development of these two views of well-being in the history of philosophy is necessary.

In the hedonist version, one's well-being consists of maximal pleasure. Aristippus (435-356 BC) and early Cyreniacs hold a radical hedonist view focused on pleasure derived from the

complete satisfaction of bodily desires. Epicurus (341-270 BC) and his followers, on the other hand, find pleasure in the tranquil, pain-free state that results from reason in control of sensual desires. Both hedonist groups, however, lock their focus on the pleasure of the individual, a perspective typical of the Ancient Greeks.

About 1500 years later in England, two utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), expand the locus of pleasure from the individual to groups of individuals. Perhaps Bentham best articulates the classic view of hedonism in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780): "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*" (1). Individuals should shorten and lessen their encounters with pain while extending and intensifying their periods of pleasure. Bentham, however, argues that the interests of individuals constitute the interests of communities. He describes his principle in the first volume of the *Constitutional Code* (1830) as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (11). Mill differs from Bentham on at least one important point: the quality of pleasure. Whereas Bentham focuses on the quantity of pleasure as measured by its intensity and duration, Mill distinguishes and values higher or intellectual pleasures more than lower or physical pleasures. Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861) is the most widely read work describing utilitarian thought. Thus, for hedonists, well-being refers to pleasure, whether of the body or the intellect.

The word "eudaimonism" originates from the Greek adverb *eú* (well) and the noun *daimōn* (spirit), meaning literally "a good spirit" or a life lived as if ordained divinely. Well-being in this sense represents a flourishing or living well that is more objective than a fleeting hedonist feeling. Indeed, eudaimonists pin their well-being argument to the unchanging nature

of human beings. Aristotle (384-322 BC) presents a convincing view of eudaimonism, and then St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) Christianizes it.

Aristotle discusses eudaimonism through a version of the function argument. He says in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, "[T]hat which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else *is* man" (1178a 5-7 Tr. David Ross). Reason defines the function of human beings, and so a life of the intellect, a life of good reasoning or wisdom, accounts for well-being in this instance. But eudaimonism does not come easily. Aristotle characterizes a life of the intellect as an excellence, a virtue, acquired through years of effort, patience, diligence, and often guided practice. Children may reason—it is part of their nature as human beings—but they require much practice and guidance to develop their reasoning, to flourish, so that later, as adults, they can exercise the virtue. An incentive to make the effort to reason well is that, as Aristotle claims, human beings enjoy reasoning; indeed, it is the most pleasant thing they can do. Thus, eudaimonism accommodates pleasure, but, unlike hedonism, it identifies life according to reason rather than pleasure as the proper function of human beings.

Aquinas adapts Aristotle's function argument to his Christian worldview, which includes two existences, one in the here-and-now and the other in the afterlife. He, like Aristotle, isolates rational activity as the defining characteristic of human beings. He says in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, "Man's ultimate happiness lies in the contemplation of truth" (3, q. 37). However, this ultimate happiness or well-being occurs in the afterlife where human beings perceive God, as St. Paul (c.10-c.67) says, "face to face" (I Cor 13:12 NAB). Aquinas calls this perfect well-being *beatitudo*. Though original sin prevents most human beings (exceptions are mystics or people in direct perception of God in a mystical encounter) from experiencing perfect well-being, it does

not hinder them from the experience of an imperfect well-being (*felicitas*). Aquinas's use of "imperfect" suggests, not a flaw, but a desire for something more, which can only be met by perceiving God directly. Thus, Aquinas builds on Aristotle's function argument by adding a divinity dimension to it.

After Aquinas, eudaimonistic well-being gives way in philosophical circles to assorted incarnations of hedonism until 1958 when G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001) from England resurrects it in her article "Modern Moral Philosophy." Once again a debated concept, eudaimonism attracts serious scholars, among them American Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981), and New Zealander Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (1999).

In its various articulations, well-being draws the same criticism: it is too self-centered to be a master-value. Concern over one's good state of being seems to predominate over the welfare of other people. However, contemporary eudaimonists argue that the well-being of each individual does not preclude the well-being of others. They point out that virtuous character requires a proper response to the needs of others. Contemporary hedonists such as Frenchman Michel Onfray and American Rem Edwards are also defending their view of well-being by showing that one's pleasure can harmonize well with the pleasure of others.

Bibliography

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by David Ross. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. 2nd ed. Edited by George Sher. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.

Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being." *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 141-166.

Dan Vaillancourt
Professor, Department of Philosophy
Loyola University Chicago

Kyoungnam Park
Independent Scholar
Chicago, IL

1116 words