

1 The Topics of Well-Being and Happiness

I write these words from my home in Boulder, Colorado, which a recent *National Geographic*/Gallup study named “the happiest place in the United States.” It was claimed furthermore that Boulder “produces the highest level of well-being for its residents” and that people in Boulder “live better lives” than do people in any other US city surveyed (Buettner 2017).

How do studies like this one purport to measure happiness, and how can we be sure that what they are measuring is the genuine article? Being confident of this requires having some idea of what happiness is. And even if we know what happiness is and how to measure it, are we allowed to infer conclusions about well-being or about the value of a life from premises about happiness?

This Element is about these more fundamental, more philosophical questions that lie behind happiness studies of this sort. Such studies often simply assume certain answers to these questions. In this Element, we’ll examine these assumptions. We’ll be exploring, centrally, these two questions: 1) What is happiness? and 2) What is ultimately in a person’s interests? *Happiness and Well-Being*.

Any answers to these ancient, awesome questions are going to be controversial, and we will get to these controversies. But there is disagreement even in how to understand the questions themselves. This first section clarifies our questions, focusing mainly on the question about well-being, and touches on how we might try to answer them.

1.1 Ways a Life Can Be Good

Start with this question: *What makes a life a good life?* It is hard to imagine a more important question. The title of this Element, however, mentions not “a good life” but “well-being.” Is that difference important?

Yes. When we talk about well-being, I think we are talking about a phenomenon narrower than that of the goodness of a life. I take the philosophical question of well-being to be the question of what things are of ultimate *benefit or harm* to us and other beings capable of being benefitted and harmed. It may help to put the question in other ways as well; indeed, I think that clarifying the question in ordinary language is our best means of getting at it. Some different ways of asking the philosophical question of well-being:

- What is of *ultimate benefit or harm* to beings capable of being benefitted and harmed?
- What *directly* makes a being *better or worse off*?
- What things are good or bad in themselves *for* some being?
- What is in or against a being’s *self-interest*?

Two other terms for well-being are *welfare* and *prudential value*.

The concept of a good life is a broader concept. Having positive well-being is one way in which a life can be good, but not the only way. Understanding some of these other ways serves to distinguish well-being not only from a good life more generally but from these other more specific ways in which a life can be good.

1.1.1 Moral Goodness

One of these more specific ways is *moral goodness*. How a life rates morally can diverge from how it rates self-interestedly. To see this, let's consider an example in some detail. For the purposes of this illustration, let's assume that there are strong moral reasons against buying and consuming meat from factory farms. And let's assume that this is owing to the great suffering factory farming visits on sentient creatures, to its significant environmental costs, and to the risks it creates of spreading infectious diseases among humans. Now suppose that Korva, a college student, loves eating meat. She never feels fully satiated after a meatless meal. Eating meat is, moreover, a deeply engrained part of her social and cultural life. Unfortunately, non-factory-raised meat is not available where Korva lives.

Korva's philosophy class is spending two weeks on the ethics of eating meat. Although she has been vaguely aware of some moral arguments on the topic, studying the matter in a serious way increases her appreciation of the strong moral reasons she has to stop eating meat. At the end of this unit in her course, she feels greater motivation to become a vegetarian than ever before. She feels herself at a crossroads: If she is ever going to quit this practice, one that she has come to think of as indefensible, now is the time. Depending on what Korva decides to do today, one of these two futures will come about:

- M: Korva decides that she just cannot make what she sees as such a disruptive lifestyle change. She remains a meat eater for the rest of her life. She has occasional thoughts that her diet is morally problematic, but they are rare, in part because no one around her takes seriously the idea that there is anything wrong with eating meat. More often when Korva thinks of vegetarianism, she is amazed that she was at one point seriously considering becoming a vegetarian. On the whole, Korva feels good about herself and the way she leads her life.
- V: In what she takes to be a moment of moral clarity and courage, Korva resolves to give up meat once and for all. In part to hold herself accountable, she announces her new commitment to her friends and family. She finds her new lifestyle difficult. She never enjoys her meals

as much as she used to, and secretly envies her friends for their more carefree, indulgent lifestyles. She even finds that her vegetarianism is something of a barrier between herself and her friends and family. They never tire of poking fun at her about it. She socializes less with them and feels less connected to them when she does. Korva also lacks the information she needs to ensure that her new diet is healthful, and her health suffers as a result. But she remains convinced that this is the virtuous path and the one required by morality.

I have laid this out in some detail because I want us to be able to make relatively confident moral and prudential evaluations of Korva's two possible futures. Our questions are these. In which life, M or V, is Korva herself better off? And in which life, M or V, is she leading a morally better life? Recall that we simply *stipulated* for the purposes of this example that there are, in fact, very strong moral reasons not to buy and eat meat from factory farms.

I assume you agree that life M is prudentially better for Korva than is life V, while life V is morally better. We can leave aside the question of which life is the better life *overall*, or the life that, all things considered, Korva should choose to lead. The fact that the possible life that is prudentially better for Korva is not the one that is morally better helps us to see the difference between prudential and moral goodness.

1.1.2 Other Scales of Evaluation

Although morality and prudence are the evaluative domains most discussed by philosophers, we make other important evaluations of our lives. For example, we think about how *meaningful* they are. As with moral goodness, it appears that how meaningful a life is can vary independently from how beneficial it is to the person living it. Perhaps the case of Korva shows this, since it may be that supporting a morally good cause at the expense of your own self-interest makes your life more meaningful.

A fourth respect in which a life can be a good one, or worth choosing – in addition to its having prudential value, moral value, and meaning – is by its manifesting *excellence*. A life manifests excellence to the extent that the person living it excels at certain worthwhile activities. The possibilities here are endless: chess, boxing, jazz trombone, table tennis, Scrabble, Hatha yoga, oil painting, StarCraft, hip-hop dance. This good-making feature of a life can also come apart from well-being. It is a truism that learning to master a difficult activity can require sacrifice. The sacrifice is to one's well-being.

That a life would benefit the person living it is surely a reason for that person to choose that life. Not a decisive reason, but a reason nonetheless. The same is

true for the life's involving moral virtue, meaning, and excellence. In other words, each of these four domains of evaluation is a way that a life can be good. This shows that the notion of a good life is a wider notion than that of a life that is good *for* the person living it ("good *for*" signals well-being). Thus, if the author of the *National Geographic* article slides from the idea that a certain group of people tends to be well-off to the idea that they are getting good lives, that is a little hasty. If these people tend to have, say, morally corrupt and meaningless lives, their being well-off may not be enough to make their lives good overall.

1.2 More on the Philosophical Question of Well-Being

Also incautious would be a slide from the idea that a person is very happy to the idea that they are very well-off. The theory that the single fundamental ingredient of human well-being is happiness is just one possible answer to the philosophical question about well-being.

A further clarification about that question: When we ask it, we are not asking about the *causes* of well-being; we are asking what things *in themselves* make a person better off. If someone were asked simply to list "some things off the top of your head that benefit a person," maybe their list would include the following: Winning the lottery, visiting the dentist twice a year, getting eight hours of sleep each night, spending time in nature, and warm hugs. For many of us, these are indeed good things. But are they good things to get *in themselves*, or is their value instead derivative – inherited from other things that it is good to get and that these things help us to get?

One method for deciding this is to imagine a situation in which some person gets the thing in question but fails to get any of its usual effects or accompaniments. Then we ask ourselves whether it still seems like a good thing for them that they got it. So, imagine that someone *wins the lottery*, but that every last penny of their winnings is quickly lost in a harebrained investment scheme. Or we can ask whether a person who has no teeth would still benefit from visiting the dentist every six months. Or we can imagine someone having a hug forced on them when all they want is to be left alone. In these cases, the thing in question (the winning of the lottery, the dental visits, the hug) seems to be of no benefit at all. This suggests that it isn't *that very thing* that is the benefit but some other thing that usually accompanies it.

We are here homing in on the distinction between a thing's being good for someone *derivatively*, due to its being connected in a certain way to something of more fundamental value for them, and a thing's being good for someone in this more basic way. I will usually refer to this as the distinction between

a thing's being *derivatively good* for someone and a thing's being *basically good* for them. Philosophers also speak of a thing's being *instrumentally good* for someone as opposed to *intrinsically good* for them.

The philosophical question of well-being concerns what is *basically good* for us. That is why the formulations above mentioned *ultimate* benefit and harm and spoke of what *directly* makes us better or worse off. These are simply different ways of conveying the all-important notion of basic value. Some of our formulations also spoke of what things are good or bad *in themselves* for us, which invokes this same idea.

1.2.1 Why Philosophers of Well-Being Focus on Basic Prudential Value

The question of what is basically good for subjects of welfare is, by definition, more fundamental than the question of what is derivatively good for them. Derivative value is definable in terms of basic value, roughly as follows: A thing is derivatively good for a person if and only if it is appropriately related to something that is basically good for them. The most obvious such relation is *causation*: If *x* causes *y* and *y* is basically good for a certain subject – as when taking a sip of coffee causes a pleasant taste experience – then *x* will thereby be derivatively good for that subject. Other such relations are *prevention* (it's good to get anesthetic because it prevents pain), *signification* (it's good if your medical test comes back negative because that is a sign of good health), and *parthood* (if an evening contains a bunch of good moments, that can make the evening itself good, albeit derivatively so). Because philosophers tend to be interested in the most fundamental aspects of whatever they are studying, it is no surprise that philosophers of welfare are most interested in basic welfare value.

Another reason it makes sense for philosophers to focus on basic rather than derivative value is epistemological. Questions of basic value can arguably be answered *a priori*, whereas questions of derivative value – being in part questions about what causes what, what prevents what, and so on – are partly *empirical* and thus ill-suited to investigation from the philosopher's armchair. The empirical/*a priori* distinction is an epistemological distinction, or a distinction having to do with how we come to know about reality. To know something empirically is to know it using your senses, including introspection (or to know it by reasoning exclusively from facts so discovered). Empirical knowledge is observational knowledge. To know something *a priori* is to know it absent any empirical investigation or evidence.

To illustrate, I know empirically *that there are limes in my refrigerator* (by using my eyes) and *that I am craving a margarita* (by introspecting). Two other things that I know are *that all triangles have three sides* and *that nothing can be*

red and green all over at the same time; but I don't have to use my senses to verify these things. Simply understanding what these claims are saying puts us in a position to know them without the benefit of any empirical evidence. Thus we know them a priori.

A priori knowledge was defined negatively, simply as knowledge that is not empirical; so we know what its source is not (empirical observation). Can we say what its source is? One answer, and an answer that fits well with common practice in ethics, is *rational intuition*. Rational intuitions are states of mind in which we can “just see” that some claim is true, or in which we feel compelled to believe the claim, simply on the basis of what the claim is saying. We have rational intuitions about a wide variety of topics, including ethics. For example, virtually everyone has the intuition that *it's wrong to set a cat on fire for fun* and that *pain is bad in itself*.

Those intuitions are about general claims. When doing ethics, we frequently consider particular cases as well. But they are cases whose empirical aspects are stipulated, and so when we make value judgments about them, such judgments are a priori. Such cases are often used to help us discover general principles, and to test them. This is the method that will be on display throughout this Element, when it comes to discovering both the elements of well-being and the nature of happiness.

Curiously, although the partly empirical question of the causes of well-being is parasitic on the a priori matter of what the basic prudential goods are, the causal question seems easier to answer. Steven Pinker's recent book *Enlightenment Now* contains a chapter on each of about a dozen things that he assumes without argument are conducive to human well-being; they include longevity, health, sustenance, wealth, peace, safety, equal rights, knowledge, and happiness (Pinker 2018). And there is indeed no serious dispute over whether these are important promoters of human well-being. But things are different when it comes to the underlying question of why. The question of what the basic elements of well-being are, which would explain and justify Pinker's list, is evidently much harder to answer, as shown by the widespread disagreement over this question among philosophers of well-being. As a work about the philosophy rather than the science or economics of well-being, this Element's focus will be on the harder, more fundamental, philosophical question.

1.3 The Question of the Nature of Happiness

Another of this Element's goals is to investigate the nature of happiness. Here we are, wanting to know not *what makes* us happy, but *what it is to be* happy.

This first pass at our question is only as clear as the terms in it. But the term “happy” is ambiguous. Thus we don’t yet know what thing it is whose nature we seek to understand. What are the various phenomena that travel under the label “happiness”?

Unfortunately, there is disagreement about even this. That is, in addition to metaphysical disagreement about the nature of whatever phenomena the word “happiness” might stand for, there is linguistic disagreement over just what phenomena the term signifies in the first place. This linguistic disagreement notwithstanding, in Section 3 we will distinguish three central notions of happiness, which will be our focus.

1.3.1 Happiness and Well-Being

So how do these two phenomena, happiness and well-being, which supply the title of our Element, relate to one another? This is a matter of controversy, a controversy we’ll wade into, but a way in which they might be related is that happiness is one of the basic prudential goods. That is, it makes people better off, all else equal, when they are happier. Indeed, this might sound too obvious to be worth stating. A stronger and much more controversial claim about the relation between happiness and well-being has it that happiness is the *sole* prudential good, so that a person is well-off just to the extent that they are happy.

But we are here encroaching on the topic of some of the sections to come: possible answers to the philosophical question of well-being. Our exploration of what things are of ultimate benefit and harm to a person will begin with an examination of one of the most central questions about well-being: is it *objective* or *subjective*?

2 Objectivism and Subjectivism about Well-Being

2.1 A Preliminary List

The philosophical question of well-being asks what things in themselves make a subject better or worse off. Now that we better understand the question, how do we go about answering it? It is reasonable to begin with our initial intuitions, or how things first seem to us. The philosopher William Frankena began this way and came up with an impressively long preliminary list:

- Life, consciousness, and activity
- Health and strength
- Pleasures and satisfactions of all or certain kinds
- Happiness, beatitude, contentment, etc.

Truth
 Knowledge and true opinion of various kinds, understanding, wisdom
 Beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated
 Aesthetic experience
 Morally good dispositions or virtues
 Mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation
 Just distribution of goods and evils
 Harmony and proportion in one's own life
 Power and experiences of achievement
 Self-expression
 Freedom
 Peace, security
 Adventure and novelty
 Good reputation, honor, esteem, etc. (Frankena 1973: 87–8)

At a quick first pass, nothing seems terribly out of place. Each of these seems like a pretty good thing to have in your life. All of these words at least have “positive valence.” But a little reflection reveals that the list can be refined and reduced.

Some entries seem redundant. Take “Truth,” for instance. What is it to have truth in your life? Presumably this: To know, or at least to believe, some true things. But, as Frankena recognizes (1973: 89), that is covered by the next item on the list, “Knowledge and true opinion of various kinds.” So “Truth” should be deleted.

Other items have the following feature: some but not all instances of them seem good. This is a problem because the appearance of the item on the list is presumably meant to imply that every instance of the item would be good to have. So take “activity.” Some activities, such as playing a sport you love or summitting a beautiful mountain, seem good, but other activities, such as trudging barefoot through the snow or riding a vomit-inducing carnival ride, seem positively bad. Perhaps, then, we'd want to modify “activity” to something more specific. One option is “enjoyable activity,” although then the item might be rendered redundant, since “Pleasure” appears already.

Those were some of the lower-hanging fruit, but other items should also be removed. In my view, one of them is “Health.” It is obvious that health is almost always a good thing to have, but that may just be because health is of merely derivative value. How do we decide whether the obvious goodness of health is wholly derivative or at least partly basic?

2.2 A Test for Basic Goodness

We can use the following test. We imagine a pair of cases that differ in a minimal way – “minimal pairs.” They differ just with respect to the putative basic good

in question and are otherwise as alike as possible. Then we consult our intuitions about the cases. Does it seem to us that the case with the putative good added contains more well-being than its minimal pair? If the answer is “yes,” then this is evidence that the good in question is a basic good. That’s because, if the cases are minimal pairs, then they won’t differ with respect to the effects or other accompaniments of the putative good. So the difference in value that we intuit must lie in the presence of the putative good itself. If, by contrast, it does *not* seem that the case featuring the putative good is any better than the variant that lacks it, this is evidence that the putative good is not a genuine basic good after all.

Here is a minimal pair that we can use to test whether health is of intrinsic welfare value:

- Coma:* Giles is in a terrible accident and falls into a coma. Although his brain is damaged, the rest of his body is a specimen of perfect health. Two days later, Giles dies.
- Coma Minus:* Giles is in a terrible accident and falls into a coma. Although his brain is damaged, the rest of his body is a specimen of near-perfect health. His only health defect is a minor renal contusion, caused by the accident, which makes one of Giles’s kidneys function slightly less well. Two days later, Giles dies.

The only difference between this minimal pair is that one of Giles’s kidneys is slightly impaired in *Coma Minus*, making him in slightly worse physical health. All else is equal, including all of Giles’s experiences and the time and manner of Giles’s death. So, consider the period of time during which Giles is lying in a coma in the hospital bed. *During this period, is Giles better off in Coma than he is in Coma Minus?*

It seems to me that the answer is “no.” Although Giles is indeed healthier in *Coma* than he is in *Coma Minus*, this superior health does him no good. I don’t think this is a hard case either; I feel quite confident that Giles is no better off in *Coma* than in *Coma Minus*. Because the view that health is among the basic welfare goods implies otherwise, we should remove “Health” from the list.

Similar reasoning shows that “Life” is of no basic welfare value either. Consider a new case, *Coma Plus*, exactly like *Coma* except that, in *Coma Plus*, Giles lives for an additional day. Since, I hope you agree, his getting to be alive (but still comatose) for this additional day is no benefit to him, “Life” should also be removed from our list.

The same goes for “Consciousness,” it seems to me. Consider *Coma Plus Flicker*. It is exactly like *Coma* except that one evening in which Giles is lying in a coma, he experiences a dim flicker of consciousness for a few moments. Some

random neuronal activity in his brain causes him to experience a low-volume auditory hum for a few moments. The sound sensation does not cause him to have any thoughts: It doesn't startle him; it doesn't make him wonder where he is or make him have hopeful thoughts that he might regain full consciousness; it doesn't make him afraid. He is no longer capable of having any such thoughts or emotions. Nor is the auditory hum pleasant or unpleasant in any way. It is simply an isolated flicker of conscious experience. It seems to me that this brief, dim, conscious experience doesn't make Giles's life better in any way. But the hypothesis that consciousness itself is a basic welfare good implies otherwise. Thus, "Consciousness" should also be removed from our list.

2.2.1 *Not Everything Fails the Test*

But not every item on Frankena's list fails this test. That would be bad news for the test; it would call its validity into question. One item that seems to pass the test is "Happiness." Consider *Coma Plus Happiness*. It is just like Coma except that Giles wakes up for a few brief moments, sees that he is alive, sees his family in the room, and is happy to see them. We can suppose that this happiness is short-lived. Giles falls back into the coma and succumbs to his condition shortly thereafter.

Was Giles's experiencing this brief moment of happiness a good thing for him? Although I don't have a highly confident reaction to this unusual case, I am inclined to think that the answer is "yes." Granted it wasn't *highly valuable*, brief as it was. But I have experienced brief moments of happiness as Giles did, and they were good experiences for me.

I believe that several other items on Frankena's list – in particular, "Pleasures and satisfactions" (at least "of certain kinds"), "beatitude," "contentment," "Knowledge" (and related phenomena), and "Aesthetic experience" – pass this test in the same sort of way.

I'm not sure if this sort of test can be used to evaluate every item on Frankena's list, however. For example, it may not be easy to evaluate "Mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation" and "Harmony and proportion in one's own life" using a case that differs only minimally from Coma.

2.3 The *Euthyphro* Question about Well-Being and Another Test

But we can scrutinize these putative goods in other ways. Take "friendship." I am very glad to have friends in my life and it certainly seems to me that they make my life better. And it is a common and plausible thought that we value our friends and our friendships for their own sake rather than for other goods that they might bring us. The same might be true for some of the other goods on the