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Well-being and Prudential Value

Tim E. Taylor

When we talk about well-being we often also talk about what is "good for" a person. The fact that we use the term "good" suggests that there is a kind of value here. Philosophers tend to call this "prudential value" to distinguish it from value of other kinds, such as aesthetic value or moral value. Surprisingly little attention is given in the philosophical literature to the relationship between prudential value and well-being. Often, they are simply regarded as synonyms (in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for example [Crisp 2008]). In this paper I shall argue that it is useful to make a distinction between these two separate, but closely related, notions and that a recognition of this distinction, and an increased focus upon prudential value in certain circumstances, would be beneficial in the context of public policy.

The Distinction

When we say that a person has a high level of well-being, we tend to mean that his life is going well for him overall. In some cases a judgment about well-being may concern a person's whole life, but it is more usual to talk about somebody's well-being at a particular time. Sometimes we talk about specific kinds of well-being, such as psychological or social well-being. In these cases we are concerned with how well a person's life is going in a particular respect, rather than on the whole. Nevertheless, a judgment about someone's level of psychological or social well-being is still a judgment about how well his life is going overall in that respect.

By contrast, when we talk about prudential value, we do not necessarily make any overall evaluation of a person's life. We may, of course, talk about the prudential value of a person's life itself – whether it is a good life for that person. But lives are by no means the only things that we evaluate in this way. We talk about all sorts of things, including objects, people, events, and states of affairs as being good or bad for people.

When we talk about something's being good for a person, we mean that this thing makes, or tends to make, that person's life go better for her. But making such a judgment does not imply any judgment about how well her life is going overall. Indeed, the judgment that something is good for some person is entirely consistent with a judgment that the person's life is going badly overall. Thus, for example, when a condemned man eats his favorite meal on the eve of his execution, it is plausible that in some small way his enjoyment of the meal is good for him: it makes his life go a little bit better for him than it would have gone otherwise. Nevertheless, this is consistent with the fact that overall his life is going very badly indeed. We might say that the meal has positive prudential value for him, but that his level of well-being is very low. We can sum up the distinction by saying that well-being is what someone has if her life is going well for her; whereas something has prudential value for someone if it contributes to making her life go well.

Some Points about Prudential Value

Prudential value is a kind of value alongside other kinds, such as aesthetic value. It has a particular property that helps distinguish it from other kinds of value. Prudential value is always relative to a person or other welfare subject: something that has this kind of value is good for someone (or something). Other kinds of value aren't usually seen as having this kind of relativity: things are

good simpliciter, not good for someone (although there are philosophical views that hold that certain kinds of value may be relative in a different way: to a certain cultural context or sensibility).

Prudential value also has certain properties that it shares with some other kinds of value. It can be positive or negative: things can be good for someone or bad for someone. "Bad," in this context, does not mean merely "not very good," but is the opposite of good: "bad for" is to "good for" as "concave" is to "convex," not as "big" is to "small." This property of being bipolar seems to be shared with moral value, for example – moral badness also seems to be the opposite of moral goodness. Note, however, that this is not true of all kinds of value: a bad saw does seem to be a saw that is not very good (at cutting wood), rather than the opposite of a good saw (which would perhaps be something that stitched wood back together).

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Prudential value can also be intrinsic or instrumental (some philosophers, influenced by G. E. Moore [Moore 1903/1983], prefer to use the term "final" in opposition to "instrumental" and restrict the term "intrinsic value" to what has value in virtue of its intrinsic properties). Things can be good or bad for someone either in their own right, or indirectly, because they lead to other things that are good/bad for the person in their own right. Thus, for example, the achievement of some goal might have intrinsic prudential value for a person – it is something that makes his life go better in its own right. Something like a training course, on the other hand, might have instrumental prudential value: though it is not something that in itself would directly improve a person's life (it is hard work and rather tedious), it does so indirectly by giving him skills he needs to achieve certain goals whose accomplishment does make his life go better.

We can also distinguish between actual and potential prudential value. Something has potential prudential value if it is the sort of thing that makes, or is likely to make, someone's life go better. Thus, for example, we might say "regular exercise is good for us," meaning that exercising regularly tends to improve people's well-being. Something has actual prudential value if it actually has an impact upon someone's life. Thus we might say "the regular exercise she does is good for her" meaning that her exercising regularly in fact has a positive effect on her life. Potential prudential value could be general or specific. Something with general potential prudential value is something that tends to be good for human beings in general; something with specific prudential value would be good for a particular person at a particular time if that person were to have it (or – if it is an event or state of affairs – if it were to occur or obtain) at that time. My interest in this paper is exclusively on actual rather than potential prudential value.

Prudential Value and Well-being

A rough analogy may help to illustrate these different kinds of prudential value and how they relate to well-being. We can regard well-being as loosely analogous to bodily health: well-being is a yardstick of the overall quality of someone's life just as health is a yardstick of her overall physical functioning. On this model, something that has intrinsic prudential value, positive or negative, is roughly analogous to something that in itself means that her health is good or bad in some respect, such as normal lung function (positive) or an irregular heartbeat (negative). Positive and negative instrumental prudential value would be roughly analogous to the properties of being beneficial or injurious to health. And the fact that we talk about both actual and potential prudential value has a parallel in the fact that we can talk both in general terms about normal lung function, say, as something that is part of being healthy, and specifically about a person's (actual) normal lung function as meaning that she is in fact healthy in this respect.

Making a distinction between well-being and prudential value should not mask the close connection between the two terms. They are not independent of each other, and can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Something that has positive (actual) prudential value for someone is something that contributes positively towards that person's well-being; something that has negative prudential

value is something that decreases well-being. We can thus translate statements about prudential value into statements about well-being, as follows:

X has positive (negative) prudential value for S

is equivalent to

X increases (decreases) S's well-being.

Conversely, we would expect that a person who enjoys a high level of well-being will be a person whose life contains more positive than negative prudential value. In this context, note that it is only intrinsic prudential value that counts. To include the instrumental prudential value that some things have by virtue of bringing about other things that have intrinsic prudential value would be double-counting.

Top-down and Bottom-up Approaches

If well-being and prudential value are two sides of the same coin, then it does not seem reasonable that they should be defined independently of each other. We should be able to define one of them in terms of the other. This could in principle be done either way round, depending upon which notion is seen as logically prior to the other. It is also conceivable that neither term is logically prior – that each can be defined in terms of the other. However, in developing a theory of well-being and prudential value, we would need to take one or the other of these terms as our starting point.

On the one hand, we could adopt a top-down approach, beginning with a definition of well-being, and defining positive and negative prudential value in terms of whatever contributes to, or detracts from, that. Alternatively, we could adopt a bottom-up approach, defining prudential value first, and then defining well-being in terms of the balance between positive and negative prudential value. The bottom-up approach has an obvious kinship with "atomism" about well-being: the view that the value of a life is determined by that of its valuable components, or "value atoms," as Ben Bradley calls them (Bradley 2009). The parallel between the opposing view, holism, and the top-down approach is less close. Holists believe that how well someone's life goes has to be seen in terms of the life as a whole, and is not determined by the subject's well-being at particular times (in particular, it may be influenced by the overall shape of the life, as David Velleman has argued [Velleman 1991]). The top-down approach is not committed to this: one could hold a top-down theory of well-being while maintaining that how well a life goes is determined by the subject's well-being at particular times.

Most of the mainstream accounts of well-being appear to follow the bottom-up structure. Hedonism, for example, identifies a good, pleasure, and defines well-being in terms of the amount of this good (and its opposite, pain) that a person's life contains. Most (but not all – see below) desire-satisfaction theories also seem to be bottom-up in structure. What matters for well-being is the satisfaction of desires or preferences, and a person's life goes well to the extent that her various desires – or, on different variants of the theory, her informed desires, or the desires that an ideally rational version of herself would have for her – are satisfied.

We would expect that a person who enjoys a high level of well-being will be a person whose life contains more positive than negative prudential value.

Note that on neither approach is it necessarily the case that a verdict on well-being may be derived simply by adding up pleasures or satisfied desires and substracting pains or unsatisfied desires (though this may be true of certain versions). For example, John Stuart Mill's version of hedonism, with its insistence on a distinction between "higher" and "lower" pleasures, would treat the former as more valuable than the latter, even if the amount of pleasure is the same (Mill 1993). Similarly, some desire-satisfaction theories reject the "summative" view that the greater the number of satisfied desires the better, and give priority to certain kinds of desires. Nevertheless, the fact that the way in which individual pleasures or satisfied desires contribute toward well-being may be fairly complex does not alter the fact that these approaches are bottom-up in

structure. Their verdicts on well-being are ultimately determined by facts about good and bad mental states or states of affairs, even if this is not a matter of simple addition and subtraction.

Objective-list theories of well-being, and objective versions of the "capabilities" approach, which sees well-being in terms of capabilities to be and do certain things, also seem to be bottom-up in structure. They specify various prudential goods (or capabilities), and regard a person's life as going well to the extent that the person possesses them. As in the case of hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories, it may not be the case that one can reach verdicts on well-being simply by adding up the goods. On some theories, for example, a person would need to possess all of the goods/capabilities to at least some degree to be regarded as having a good life (this seems to be true of Martha Nussbaum's list [Nussbaum 1999]). Again, however, this does not change the fact that well-being is defined in terms of the possession of goods (that is, things that have prudential value for human beings) rather than in terms of a prior notion of what it is for something to be good for someone.

A notable exception to this pattern is the group of theories, to which we can give the general label "life-satisfaction theories," that define well-being in terms of a person's overall attitude to his life. A prominent example of this approach is Wayne Sumner's theory (Sumner 1996), which defines well-being in terms of "authentic happiness," with happiness in turn being defined in terms of a person's evaluation of and affective response to his life (with certain "authenticity" conditions that need to be met for a person's verdict on her life to be regarded as authoritative). John Rawls also seems to have favored a top-down approach to well-being: he argues that whether something accords with a person's good depends upon how well it fits the plan of life that would be chosen by that person with deliberative rationality (Rawls 1999). A more recent example of a top-down approach is Jason Raibley's "well-being as agential flourishing" (Raibley 2012) which says that a person is doing well to the extent that she resembles the paradigm case of a flourishing agent.

Other possible top-down approaches are variants of the desire-satisfaction approach that rank the possible lives a person might lead on the basis of the person's actual or idealized desires about those lives. Chris Heathwood has given these approaches the labels "Life Preferentism" and "Idealized Life Preferentism" respectively (Heathwood 2011). One could also envisage an objective theory that specified not components of a good life, which might realize well-being in various combinations, but rather an overall pattern of life that was seen as the best for human beings, with actual lives judged by how closely they approximate to this ideal. The Aristotelian "perfectionism" espoused by Thomas Hurka has this structure (though arguably it is not strictly a theory of well-being [Hurka 2003]).

It is important to note that it is not only those who adopt a top-down approach to defining well-being who are interested in top-down measures of well-being, such as life-satisfaction. Top-down measures offer obvious practical advantages: they rely on a single datum, which promises a clear and straightforward verdict on how well a person's life is going. By contrast, the bottom-up approach in principle requires many individual elements to be considered and assessed to deliver a verdict on well-being. Someone who defines well-being in a bottom-up way, in terms of, say, the overall balance between pleasures and pains or satisfied and unsatisfied desires, might nevertheless believe that global attitudes such as life-satisfaction provide good evidence of where that balance lies, and perhaps can even be a reasonable proxy for well-being – no doubt with caveats. The idea would be that, in making a judgment on how satisfied she is with her life, a person is likely to be influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by the extent to which her important desires are being satisfied and/or the extent to which she experiences pleasure and displeasure with the circumstances of her life. Thus, if the subject's life-satisfaction reports (or other top-down appraisals of her life) are reflective and not distorted by extraneous factors, they should provide a reasonable approximation of the verdict that a bottom-up appraisal of her life would deliver. We should note however, that this may be quite a big "if": Daniel Kahneman, Norbert Schwarz, Dan Haybron and others have identified various factors that may distort subject reports (Schwarz and Strack 1999; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Haybron 2007).

Policy Implications

What are the implications for public policy of the

distinction between prudential value and well-being? It is relevant, I suggest, in the context of the increasing adoption of well-being as a policy goal, or as a yardstick against which policies may be assessed, by governments (such as that of the UK) and international organizations. This has led to a recognition that well-being needs to be measured and to the development of national and international measurement programs. I argue that such programs would provide more complete information in support of public policy aims if the distinction were more widely recognized, and if there were a willingness to focus specifically on prudential value in certain circumstances. This claim is not theory-neutral: its force depends to some extent upon whether one adopts theories of – or assumptions about – well-being and prudential value that are at least partly bottom-up rather than top-down, and at least partly subjective rather than objective.

Prudential Value Can be Measured

The first point to make in support of this contention is that prudential value is something that can be measured. It can be measured indirectly, of course, because statements about prudential value can be translated into statements about increases or decreases in well-being. We can measure well-being before and after some event, or with and without some factor under consideration, and make inferences about whether that event had, or that factor has, a positive or negative impact on well-being and therefore positive or negative prudential value.

But in principle we could also measure prudential value more directly by asking questions of the individual welfare subject, at least on certain theories. These theories are those that are a) bottom-up rather than top-down in structure and b) broadly subjective, in that they give a central role to the subject's attitudes or mental states in determining what is good for her. In this sense, hedonism, desire-satisfaction theories, and life-satisfaction theories all count as subjective theories (though life-satisfaction theories are top-down). Those responsible for developing national programs of measurement (such as the Office of National Statistics in the UK) sometimes adopt broadly-based assumptions about well-being, which include both top-down and bottom-up, and objective and subjective, elements rather than endorse particular philosophical theories. This inclusive approach also gives some scope for the direct measurement of prudential value, if it includes elements that are both bottom-up and subjective.

Since top-down theories would define prudential value (if they recognize it at all) in terms of a prior theory of well-being, it seems likely that they would only allow prudential value to be measured indirectly, as discussed at the start of this section. It is also unclear how intrinsic prudential value would be measured directly on an objective theory. The instrumental prudential value of policies (and so on) could be measured by identifying how much of the stipulated objective goods (or whatever) they produce, but objective theories tend not to offer any basis, other than stipulation, on which to assess the value of these goods themselves (that is a major weakness of these theories, in my view).

Measuring prudential value directly would pose certain challenges. In particular, the meaning of the term "prudential value" itself, and the distinction between prudential value and well-being, may not be readily understood. However, in order to obtain responses that might shed light on prudential value, it would not be necessary to use the term explicitly in framing questions. There are other forms of words that could be used that are more familiar in everyday speech, such as "is X a good thing in your life?"

The use of everyday language would not, of course, eliminate all methodological issues. It would be important to frame the questions, and their contexts, carefully in order to elicit responses relevant to prudential value. Care would also need to be taken to ensure that responses were not affected by extraneous factors. Similar issues apply to all methodologies that rely on subject reports. If we are prepared to place reliance on people's judgments about how happy they are, and how satisfied they are with their lives, it does not seem unreasonable that we might also be prepared to place some reliance upon their judgment about whether some event, or some factor, is good or bad for them. This is not to say that we should necessarily take people to be infallible witnesses of what is good or bad for them. People can be wrong about this. Nevertheless, they are surely witnesses

who deserve to be given a certain prima facie credibility.

This is particularly so when we are asking people about what has intrinsic prudential value for them. This is surely a matter on which the subject should be regarded as a privileged – though not infallible – witness. Indeed, there are reasons to think that people's answers to this type of question might potentially be more reliable than, say, judgments of life-satisfaction. Judgments about intrinsic prudential value are narrower in focus – and therefore, I suggest, less subject to cognitive error: they do not require subjects to assess their lives as a whole but merely to focus upon the value of some particular event or factor. They may also be less subject to distortion by factors such as expectation, since they do not require subjects to judge things against some standard (which itself may be affected by extraneous factors) of what is acceptable. There is more reason for caution regarding self-assessments that include instrumental prudential value. Perhaps we should not assume that people are always good at assessing and balancing the indirect impacts that things may have on their lives. Nevertheless, these assessments too may be of some value, with appropriate caveats.

Reasons for Measuring Prudential Value

Why would we want to examine, and measure, prudential value as well as, or instead of, well-being? I suggest that there are two sorts of contexts in which this would be beneficial. The first context is found in cases where governments, or other bodies, wish to identify the positive or negative impact of various factors or events, such as ill-health unemployment, upon people's lives. That is, in essence, a question about the prudential value of those things. It can be translated into a question about well-being, by virtue of the fact that statements about prudential value can be translated into statements about increases or decreases in well-being. This type of question already receives attention, of course, and it tends to be addressed through the "before/after" or "with/without" type of question discussed at the start of the previous section. So prudential value is already measured indirectly in these cases. My suggestion is that there would also be merit in measuring it more directly, by asking people whether they regard these factors or events as having positive or negative value in their lives. I am not suggesting that indirect measurement of prudential value via well-being should cease, just that there might be benefit in employing both methods in parallel.

A second, and arguably more important, context in which to look at prudential value has to do with more fundamental questions that lie at the heart of the whole subject of what makes human lives go well: the questions regarding what are the things that have the most impact upon how well people's lives go, and what is their relative impact. Again, these are fundamentally questions about prudential value, though as before, they can be translated into questions about well-being.

The question of what are the things that have the most impact upon how well people's lives go ... is fundamentally a question about prudential value.

These questions do receive attention, but where attempts are made through well-being research to answer them, this is generally done indirectly, by using statistical techniques to establish correlations among various candidate components or domains of well-being – such as personal relationships, autonomy, and the like – and overall well-being. I do not wish by any means to deny the value of this work, or to suggest that it should not be done, but there are certain limitations inherent in this indirect method. In particular, though it may be possible to make generalizations about groups of people by such means, statistics may mask differences between individuals. It may be that, for example, personal relationships are of paramount importance for one person, and autonomy is paramount for another. Also, statistical correlations may not reveal the nature of the relationship between well-being and other factors – it might be, for example that some feature is usually possessed by people who have high well-being, without itself being something that increases well-being (has prudential value).

It seems to me, therefore, that in addition to measuring correlations with well-being, there would be merit in research targeted more directly at prudential value. This might take the form, for example, of inviting subjects to consider what are

the things, or types of things, that most matter in their lives. This could either be open-ended, or subjects could be asked to rate the relative importance to them of various specified well-being domains. Both options have advantages and disadvantages – it might be more difficult for open-ended questioning to induce the subject to consider all the relevant conditions of their lives; on the other hand, a list of domains might exclude things that are important to some individuals.

The information that such value-focused measures might provide could be beneficial in two ways. First, by allowing weighting of different domains or goods, these measures would allow differences between individuals to be taken into account, thus providing a more nuanced and accurate picture of well-being (weighting is already a feature of some surveys). Second, to the extent these measures facilitated the drawing of more general conclusions about the positive or negative value that goods, factors, or domains have in people's lives, this would help policy-makers who acknowledge a role for well-being considerations to make judgments about priorities. To give a hypothetical example, if people with access to public libraries consistently rated this as having considerable value in their lives, that would be relevant to considerations about library funding.

As I conceded at the start of this section, the claims that underlie my proposal are not theory-neutral: they may have less force for those who favor wholly top-down or wholly objective theories of well-being. Nevertheless, I believe that they hold good for a wide spectrum of mainstream opinion on this subject. The methodological challenges that would arise in attempting to measure prudential value directly should not be underestimated, but they do not seem insuperable. What I am proposing is a shift in emphasis rather than a radical change to methodologies for measuring well-being. Nevertheless, I believe that such a shift, which would be facilitated by a recognition of the distinction between prudential value and well-being, would be beneficial in filling out and sharpening the picture that empirical research can paint of what affects the quality of people's lives, with consequent benefits for the shaping of public policy.

Tim E. Taylor
phltet@leeds.ac.uk

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