

Cultural Differences and Philosophical Accounts of Well-Being

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1. Introduction

In cross-cultural studies of well-being psychologists have shown ways in which well-being or its constituents are tailored by culture (Arrindell et. al. 1997, Diener and Diener 1995, Kitayama et. al. 2000, Oishi & Diener 2001, Oishi et. al. 1999). Some psychologists have taken the fact of cultural variance to imply that there is no universal notion of well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001, Christopher 1999). Most philosophers, on the other hand, have assumed that there is a notion of well-being that has universal application. Given the facts about cultural variance, is this a mistake? What are the implications for philosophers of the existence of cultural differences in well-being? In answer to these questions I distinguish two different philosophical projects in the area of well-being. One of these projects seeks to provide a formal analysis of well-being. I argue that this project is not undermined by the kinds of cultural differences that have been discovered and that, therefore, there might be a universal notion of well-being. The other project seeks to provide a substantive account of well-being. Cultural differences are relevant here, but not always as directly relevant as one might have assumed.

The main goal of this paper, then, is to argue that the implications of cultural differences for the philosophical project are limited and to clear the ground for a universal notion of well-being. In service of this main goal, the paper takes on three subsidiary tasks. First, I clarify the basic question or questions that philosophers are trying to answer when they talk about well-being. Second, I provide a selective overview of the kinds of answers philosophers have given to

these questions. Finally, I explain and defend the role of philosophers in discussions of well-being.

2. Cultural Differences

Before we can see the implications of the discovery of cultural differences for philosophers, we must have a sense of what kinds of differences have been discovered. Here I will consider three examples.

According to Martha Nussbaum's "capabilities approach" to human flourishing, people live well when they are able to enact essential human functions (Nussbaum 2000).¹ Which functions count as essential is determined by an overlapping consensus among people from around the globe. Nussbaum's list of essential capabilities includes several human functions that are not terribly controversial: autonomy, physical health, relationships. She admits, however, that one of the capabilities she lists, the capability to relate to the natural environment, was much more important to people in Scandinavian countries than it was to people in East Asian countries. Certain people see a good relationship with the natural environment as essential to their well-being while others do not find this to be important.

Psychologists have ascertained a difference in the types of goals that conduce to life-

1. Nussbaum (2000, p. 14) does not claim to be providing an account of well-being because she associates 'well-being' with utilitarian philosophers who identify well-being or welfare with states of consciousness. To distance herself from this tradition she avoids the term 'well-being'. Nevertheless, her account of flourishing is an account of well-being in the broader sense that does not distinguish between hedonic and eudaimonistic conceptions.

satisfaction, which is taken to be one measure of subjective well-being (Oishi & Diener 2001).

According to these studies, the attainment of goals that are pursued for independent reasons (that is, pursued for one's own enjoyment or fun) is correlated with increases in subjective well-being among European Americans, but not correlated with increases in well-being for Asian Americans. In so called individualistic cultures, like the culture of European Americans, well-being requires pursuing goals that one enjoys. For so called collectivist cultures, like Asian cultures, well-being requires pursuing goals for the sake of making others happy and meeting their expectations.

Finally, studies have shown that self-esteem is more highly correlated with well-being in individualistic cultures than it is in collectivist cultures (Diener & Diener 1995).

It should be noted that all three of the differences mentioned here are differences in the *causes* or sources of well-being. In fact, in order to establish that there are these differences, some common notion of well-being had to have been assumed. To ask people from other cultures about their judgments concerning well-being, we must find some concept that is enough like ours that we can say that these judgments are on the right subject. In Nussbaum's case, what seems to have been assumed is that human flourishing requires the functioning of capacities that are endorsed by human agents as essential to truly human life. Similarly, psychologists investigating cross-cultural variance in well-being have to start with some notion of well-being that is common to both cultures. Some begin with the assumption that life satisfaction is essential to well-being, others with the assumption that objective indicators such as health and positive functioning are essential to well-being (Ryan and Deci 2001, p. 146). For example, in the case of differences in types of goals and the contribution of self-esteem to well-being, it was

assumed that subjects' judgments of life satisfaction determine their well-being. Without this assumption, it would have been impossible to say that these differences between cultures are differences that have to do with well-being.

Nor can the above argument be sidestepped by one who assumes a "substantive list" account of well-being.² According to substantive list accounts, well-being consists in the pursuit or achievement of a list of goods or values. Here it is still the case that an account of well-being is assumed at the outset. Were such an assumption about well-being not made, differences between the goods pursued by various cultures could not be reported as differences that have to do with well-being.

Empirical studies, then, discover differences in the causes, source, or perhaps even the components of well-being. But in order to proclaim that these are differences about well-being, they must presuppose an account of the nature of well-being that is the referent of a concept we share with other cultures. Defending such an account is one of the main projects of philosophers working in this area.

3. The Formal Philosophical Project

Some philosophers who write about well-being are explicitly interested in the formal analysis of well-being. These philosophers are not trying to list the sources or causes of well-

2. Derek Parfit (1984, p. 493) coined the name "objective list theories" for theories that identify well-being with a list of objective goods. A substantive list account would be similar, except that it would not insist that the goods on the list are objectively valuable. Such an account might be attributed to Christopher 1999.

being; rather, they are trying to explicate its nature. To give an analysis of the nature of well-being is to articulate the criterion (or criteria) that any thing must meet in order to count as a source or cause of well-being. The fact that the list of sources of well-being differs from culture to culture does not matter to such accounts; these formal accounts are compatible with thinking that the goals or traits that meet the proposed criteria differ depending on one's social context. That the kinds of cultural differences outlined above do not matter to this project will be more clear once we have some examples of such philosophical analyses in hand.

3.1 Informed Desire Theory

James Griffin (1986) argues that well-being consists in the satisfaction of informed desires that are in some way part of the goals you have for your life. An informed desire, according to Griffin, is one “formed by appreciation of the nature of its object, and it includes anything necessary to achieve it” (p. 14). Griffin's analysis takes off from a criticism of hedonism, the view that well-being consists in pleasure.³ A standard objection to hedonism (about well-being) is that we seem to want or to care about other things besides pleasure.⁴ If

3. The term “hedonism” has many different uses. This is the definition that is most relevant to the topic of well-being.

4. Robert Nozick (1974) makes this objection very sharply with his thought experiment about an experience machine that offers a guarantee of more pleasure than “real” life will bring you. Nozick points out that if there are people who would not choose to hook up to the experience machine, which seems to be the case, it must be because they want or value something other than pleasure.

asked to choose between pleasant delusions, and painful truths, for example, at least some people choose painful truths even when they know that those painful truths will not bring future pleasures and the pleasant fantasies will not bring future pains.

Griffin notices the fact that in assessing hedonism we attend to our desires for our lives and realize that we desire other things than pleasure. Desires, therefore, seem to have a fundamental role in determining what is good for us, or what contributes to our well-being. Even so, Griffin argues, we ought not to identify well-being with actual desire satisfaction because we are often mistaken about what contributes to our well-being. For example, we frequently desire things that are bad for us because we have inaccurate information.

It is because desires can go awry that Griffin adds his information requirement. The desires that are determinative of our well-being are those desires that you would have if you understood the nature of their objects. Painful truths might contribute to our well-being if we would desire to know the truth even if we were informed about the nature of this desire. Pleasures too, naturally, are contributors to well-being as long as our desires for them would not change if we were to become more informed. One might object to Griffin's account because, taken together with the fact that few people are ever fully informed about the objects of their desires, it seems to have the unattractive implication that well-being can be achieved only by an elite group. This is not a problem for Griffin, however, because his account is expressed in counterfactual terms. It is not necessary for people actually to be fully informed to achieve well-being; it is enough that we satisfy the desires we would have *if* we were informed.⁵ This does not

5. There are other problems with the notion of 'informed desire'. Connie Rosati (1995), for

mean that the notion of fully informed desire is so formal as to be useless. We can make judgments about our own and others' well-being, on Griffin's account, by making inferences about what we would want if fully informed on the basis of facts about our actual desires and how information changes them.

Griffin is clear that his account is meant to be an account of the formal nature of well-being, not an account of its ingredients or causes. On Griffin's account, utility (or well-being), which Griffin has identified as informed desire satisfaction,

is not to be seen as the single over-arching value, in fact not as a substantive value at all, but instead as a formal analysis of what it is for something to be prudentially valuable to some person. Therefore, utility will be related to substantive values such as pleasure or accomplishment or autonomy, not by being the dominant value that subsumes them, but by providing a way of understanding the notion '(prudentially) valuable' and hence the notions 'more valuable' and 'less valuable' (p. 32).

If we take Griffin at his word, it is clear that his theory is not undermined by the existence of the kinds of cultural differences that have been found by psychologists. The informed desire account can explain cultural and individual differences by appeal to differences in desires. Accordingly,

example, has argued that 'full information' is an incoherent ideal. Others (Hill 1986, Tiberius 1997, Velleman 1988) have argued that fully informed desires are not authoritative about the appropriate goal for human life. These objections have been made to various versions of so called "full information theories" of normative concepts. Whether the criticisms apply to Griffin's account is a question I cannot address here.

in some cultures goals pursued for the sake of one's own enjoyment will contribute more to well-being than in others because these goals are more frequently the object of informed desires or are the object of more intense informed desires.

3.2. *Authentic Happiness Theory*

L. W. Sumner (1996) argues that Griffin errs in thinking that informed desire captures the nature of well-being. According to Sumner well-being is authentic happiness. Being happy means having a positive attitude toward your life as a whole. This positive attitude, the attitude of personal or life satisfaction, is comprised of a conative and a cognitive component:

The cognitive aspect of happiness consists in a positive evaluation of the conditions of your life, a judgment that, at least on balance, it measures up favourably against your standards or expectations... The affective side of happiness consists in what we commonly call a sense of well-being: finding your life enriching or rewarding, or feeling satisfied or fulfilled by it (Sumner 1996, p. 146).

People are authoritative about their own happiness, according to Sumner; if a person finds her life satisfying, then it is (pp. 157-8). Self-assessed life satisfaction is all there is to happiness. Sumner does not identify well-being with happiness because he thinks that the concepts of 'happiness' and 'well-being' are such that one cannot make errors in assessing whether one is happy, but one can make errors in assessing one's well-being. A person cannot be wrong about whether she *feels* satisfied, and this is all there is to happiness. Whereas, there seems to be something more to achieving well-being: one can think one has achieved it and yet discover later that one was incorrect. Instead of identifying well-being with happiness, Sumner argues that a person's assessments of her happiness must be authentic for it to count as constitutive of her

well-being, where authenticity consists in being informed and autonomous. The authenticity requirement implies that our self-assessments are defeasible: a person is authoritative about her own well-being unless we can show that her assessment is misinformed or nonautonomous (pp. 156-167).

Cultural differences of the kind mentioned in section 2 undermine Sumner's theory no more than they do Griffin's informed desire theory. Sumner can explain such differences by appeal to the fact that different people find different things satisfying. According to the authentic happiness account, for example, that self-esteem is more important to the well-being of those in individualistic cultures means that the life satisfaction of people in individualistic countries is more greatly affected by self-esteem. The fact that there are differences in which things contribute to life satisfaction in different individuals or different cultures does not undermine the definition of well-being in terms of authentic life satisfaction.

3.3. Assessing Formal Accounts

Cultural differences in the sources or causes of well-being do not undermine philosophical accounts that are attempting to provide the criterion for what *counts* as a source or cause. In fact, it should be clear from the argument of section 2 that such an account must be presupposed by psychologists engaged in cross-cultural studies of well-being. Without some formal, abstract assumption about what well-being is, it would be impossible to claim that the studies done in one country and studies done in another are studies of the same thing.

We might ask though whether there is any empirical evidence that could make a difference to this philosophical project of formal analysis. Would any psychological findings be relevant to this project? In order to answer this question we need to have a sense of what the

standards for this inquiry are.

Formal analyses are to be evaluated on the basis of how well they accommodate our uses of the concept in question and how well they fit with our ordinary experience. In other words, formal accounts of well-being are evaluated primarily in terms of their descriptive adequacy. The most descriptively adequate account of well-being is the one that is most faithful to our pre-philosophical convictions about well-being.

We manifest these convictions whenever we judge that our lives are going well or badly, that pursuing some objective will be profitable or advantageous for us, that a change in our circumstances has left us better or worse off, that some policy would enhance or erode our quality of life, that some measure is necessary in order to protect the interest of our family or community, that a practice which is beneficial for us may be harmful to others, that we are enjoying a higher standard of living than our forebears, and so on (Sumner 1996, p. 11).

The success of an account of well-being is measured by the degree to which it can support and systematize these judgments and assessments.

Given this account of the standards of evaluation for formal analyses, there is some evidence that would seem to be relevant to this philosophical project. First, if it were to turn out that other cultures do not make such judgments, then it would follow that these cultures do not have a concept of well-being that is comparable to ours. Second, if it were to turn out that in some cultures the judgments about lives going well, about benefit and harm, etc., are fundamentally different from the ones we make, then there may be no single analysis that supports and systematizes the judgments for all of us.

On the first point, the kind of evidence required does not seem to be forthcoming. Moreover, even if there were evidence that people in other cultures do not make judgments about well-being, it is not clear that this evidence would be relevant to the projects of philosophers or psychologists. The fact that this hypothetical culture does not employ the concept of well-being does not mean that their lives cannot be meaningfully assessed in terms of that concept. It seems quite plausible, in fact, to think that this is exactly the case with non-human animals. Even if such creatures do not have a concept of well-being, their lives can surely go better or worse for them and they achieve well-being or not depending on how things go. Therefore it could make sense to talk about the well-being of people without the concept, to measure it and compare it to ours. Further, a philosophical analysis is not falsified by the existence of people who do not have a concept for what is being analyzed.

The second kind of evidence – evidence that another culture’s judgments about well-being are fundamentally different from ours – is more likely to be relevant. One thing to notice here is that a truly formal account can accommodate a wide variety of particular judgments about well-being. What could not be accommodated by Griffin’s account is a preponderance of judgments about well-being that had no relationship to desires whatsoever. Similarly, if other cultures’ judgments about well-being were by and large disconnected from facts about happiness, Sumner’s account would be in trouble. Insofar as philosophers seek to establish a formal analysis of well-being that applies universally, for example by becoming the appropriate goal of cross-cultural political action, it is incumbent upon us to consider convictions not just from our own cultures, but from other distant cultures as well.

This means that there is a way in which cross-cultural, empirical study could be relevant

to formal analysis. If such study were to reveal that there are the kinds of fundamental differences mentioned above, we would have reason to seek a deeper analysis that accommodates both cultures' judgments. This is not a simple matter, however, and current studies are not designed to investigate differences of this kind.⁶ The studies that would be relevant to the *formal* analysis of well-being would be studies that detail the uses of the concept of 'well-being', as opposed to uncovering correlations between various supposed goods and specific indicators. The difficulty here is that the less overlap there is between our usage of a word and another culture's usage of the translated word, the more it seems that there is no genuinely shared concept. Minor differences can be evidence in favor of modifying the formal analysis. But more dramatic differences would be evidence that the two words we thought referred to the same concept, in fact refer to two different things. Again, if we discover that another culture does not share our concept of 'well-being', then it is open to us, as it is in the case of non-human animals, to ask whether it still makes sense to evaluate their lives in these terms. And this question is an ethical or philosophical question, not an empirical one.

4. The Substantive Philosophical Project

6. I would suggest, then, that current cross-cultural research on well-being is protesting against Western bias in *substantive* (not formal) accounts of well-being. This project of psychologists is particularly important since the two types of accounts are not always distinguished. This failure to distinguish increases the problem of bias because it leads to the mistake of taking substantive accounts with limited scope to be formal accounts with universal scope. I would like to thank Mark Suh for pressing me to clarify this point.

Not all philosophers aim at a formal analysis of well-being. Some, in particular those in the Aristotelian tradition, are trying to articulate a substantive conception of what it is to live well. Such conceptions include a view about the nature of well-being, but they also provide a more detailed account of its ingredients or component parts. Martha Nussbaum's theory of human flourishing is a good example of such a substantive account. Nussbaum (2000) argues that the good for a person is true human functioning along various dimensions: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; concern for other species; play and control over one's environment (pp. 78-80). The basic intuition of her approach is that these areas of human ability "exert a moral claim that they should be developed" (p. 83). Nussbaum emphasizes that the appropriate political goal is not the insurance of functioning, but rather the necessary prerequisite for functioning, that is, capability.

There are a variety of ways that each of these human functions could be exercised. Bodily health, for example, can be achieved by practicing yoga, or running, or eating well, or doing a variety of other things. Nussbaum's substantive account is not so detailed that it fails to allow for individual variation. Nevertheless, her account does tell us a list of general ingredients of a well-lived life, not merely the criterion for assessing whether something counts as one of these ingredients.

The first things to notice is that Nussbaum's account does presuppose a formal account of the good life. The items on her list of capabilities get on the list because these capabilities are part of a conception of human functioning that is intuitively compelling from a perspective that aims to evaluate the world. An item is an ingredient of a well-lived life, then, if it is part of a conception of human life that garners agreement from people taking up an evaluative point of

view. In the acceptance of this underlying formal account Nussbaum's position is similar to the positions of other contemporary Aristotelians who differ from her about the particular ingredients of flourishing.⁷ Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), for example, agrees that the components of human flourishing will be determined by the conception of human life that is compelling from an evaluative point of view, but she emphasizes traditional moral virtues such as justice and courage in her account of which components meet this criterion.

Substantive philosophical analyses, such as the capabilities approach and virtue ethics, can do at least two things. First, they can provide further analysis of the normative concepts that are involved in formal accounts and of the relationships between these concepts.⁸ Second, they

7. Aristotle himself is often thought to have a teleological conception of human nature that provides the criterion for what counts as a component of flourishing. This teleological conception looks suspicious to modern eyes and contemporary Aristotelians tend to reject it. According to Nussbaum (1995), however, Aristotle's account of human functioning is not based on natural teleology. She therefore takes her own account to be more heavily influenced by Aristotle than standard interpretations of his ethics would suggest.

8. "Normative" concepts, for philosophers, are concepts that have to do with how things *ought* to be as opposed to how things are. Moral concepts are normative concepts, then, because concepts such as 'goodness' or 'rightness' are concepts that guide action rather than simply describe it. It should be noted that, for philosophers, to say that a concept or a judgment is "normative" is not to say that normal people behave in accordance with it, nor that it coheres with the conventional mores of a particular culture.

can explain what reasons we have to be interested in these concepts. Below I discuss each of these points in more detail.

First, all the formal theories we have considered involve normative concepts that must themselves be interpreted and analyzed. Griffin's account requires a notion of "relevant" or "adequate" information. Sumner's account requires notions of "authenticity" and "autonomy". For example, taking Sumner's authentic happiness theory as our formal account, a substantive account could articulate those things that people authentically judge to be satisfying by giving a more detailed account of 'authenticity' and applying this account to facts about life satisfaction for human beings. We cannot determine what people's authentic judgments are without an understanding of what authenticity is. And, since authenticity is a normative notion, filling in these gaps is a philosophical project.⁹

The Aristotelian views of Nussbaum or Hursthouse require an evaluative conception of a human life, or the notion of an evaluative point of view. These normative notions are not easily understood or operationalized. A substantive account of well-being can provide a more detailed examination of these concepts and can even argue, as Nussbaum does, that given what human beings are like such an examination supports the claim that there is a universal list of ingredients of well-being. Further, according to virtue theories, the notion of a 'good human life' is to be

9. My own work defends a substantive account according to which authentic choices would be those made by agents with certain traits of character that I call prudential virtues. Perspective is one example of a virtue championed by this account (see Tiberius, 2002).

explicated by reference to virtues such as generosity, courage and kindness. A good virtue theory will provide accounts of these subsidiary values and show the relationships between these and the account of a good human life.

The second task for substantive philosophical accounts is to show how the relevant norms or values give us reasons for taking various kinds of action. Some of the work here will not be easily separated from the first task for substantive theory. For example, in Hursthouse's case, the reasons we have for developing the virtues derive from the evaluative perspective from which we evaluate what a good human life is. Hursthouse believes that this perspective is one to which most of us are committed and, therefore, most of us have reason to do the things that are deemed good from within it. Any substantive theory ought to be sure that the formal account of well-being it presupposes is normatively compelling, that is, that it is something we have reason to care about. A substantive theory can do more than this, however; it can also show us that there are other reasons for us to act in accordance with it besides the reasons that are presupposed by the account of well-being. For example, a substantive account of well-being that gives a central place to the virtues can show how many of our actual commitments and real concerns provide reasons for us to develop these virtues. Sometimes this will be a matter of explaining what the virtues are in such a way that we recognize that we already care about their cultivation. Sometimes it will be a matter of showing that, given the other things we are committed to, we ought also to be committed to developing the virtues.

As rational agents we need to construct life plans that we can see compelling reasons for adopting. A philosopher engaged in constructing a substantive account of well-being fills in the details of our most general concepts and relates these general concepts to particular goals and

commitments we might adopt. A good substantive account shows us the reasons for adopting these particular goals and commitments in such a way that the whole picture of us, our reasons for acting, and the expected consequences of these actions provides a compelling normative picture of a human life.

With this description of the substantive project in hand, we can see that cultural differences of the sort psychologists have described do seem to be relevant to this project in a way that they are not relevant to formal analyses. As we fill in the details and draw out the practical implications of our formal analysis of well-being, it is more likely that the results will not be shared among cultures. For example, although we might share a general concept of ‘generosity’ with other cultures, the western conception of ‘generosity’ might differ from other conceptions in exactly what it requires of people.¹⁰ Cultural differences are also relevant to whether formal analyses of well-being can support the claim that there are universal ingredients of well-being. If we accept Griffin’s formal account, for example, whether or not there is a universal list of components of well-being will depend on what informed people would desire. Because the notion of information here is normative, this is not a purely empirical question; however, empirical facts about what people desire are relevant to it.

Finally, cultural differences are relevant to the reasons we have for acting on an account

10. Here I draw on John Rawls’ (1971, p. 5) distinction between concepts and conceptions.

Rawls makes the distinction with respect to conceptions of justice: “...it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different sets of principles, these different conceptions, have in common”.

of well-being. Take, for example, the imperative to develop the virtue of generosity. First of all, just what we would have reason to do will vary depending on the particular conception of charity in one's culture. If one's culture has specific rituals for demonstrating generosity, then one will have a reason to participate in these rituals; in cultures where there are no such rituals, people will not have reasons with the same content. Second, how the development of charity relates to other reasons one has will depend on facts about what commitments and concerns individuals have. Therefore, these reasons may be affected by cultural differences if there are general differences between individuals in different cultures.

Nussbaum herself is cognizant of the relevance of cultural differences to her project. Her main justificatory argument for the capabilities approach is its intuitive appeal and Nussbaum counts on the existence of widespread agreement about the value of these capabilities. She is explicit about her hopes for this kind of agreement and her methodology makes clear that she is interested in establishing that there is this kind of agreement across cultures:

This list [of functional capabilities] represents the result of years of cross-cultural discussion, and comparisons between earlier and later versions will show that the input of other voices has shaped its content in many ways. Thus it already represents what it proposes: a type of *overlapping consensus* on the part of people with otherwise very different views of human life (2000, p. 76).

If something counts as an ingredient of flourishing only if people find it to be a compelling part of human life, then cultural differences in what people find compelling will matter to the possibility of finding a universal list of ingredients.

The case that cultural differences matter to the substantive project should not be

overstated, however. First, given the level of detail in substantive accounts such as Nussbaum's, and given the flexibility built into most such accounts, cultural differences like the ones mentioned in section 2 do not undermine the project. For Aristotelians like Nussbaum, flexibility is built into the account in virtue of the importance of practical reason. Since the capacity to reason about what we ought to do is a central human capacity, which specific life is best for a person will be up to that person to determine by engaging her rational capacities. Which ingredients of flourishing are more central than others, and how exactly the human capacities are used, is left up to agents themselves.

Many cultural differences can be accommodated by this space for individual choice. If people in different cultures have different views about the importance of each of the functionings on Nussbaum's list, this would not undermine her account. It would be a problem for Nussbaum if, for example, people in collectivist cultures did not see autonomy (or some other ingredient on her list) as an important ingredient of a good human life at all. But, differences in the degrees of importance are compatible with her position which allows for individuals to determine levels of importance through practical reason.

Second, not every difference is one that *need* be accommodated by a substantive account. On Nussbaum's view, I have suggested, the criterion for something's counting as an ingredient of human flourishing is that it is part of a conception of human life that is compelling from an evaluative point of view. If there is a group of people who are not capable of taking up an evaluative point of view, or who are not capable of making their own assessments of what is compelling to them, then their disagreement with us about what are the correct ingredients of flourishing need not be taken as undermining our conception of flourishing. For example, we

could imagine a group of people who have been subjected to systematic oppression whose hopes and desires have been shaped by this oppression in such a way that they do not find autonomy to be part of a full human life. The existence of a such a group would not prove that autonomy is not part of a universal conception of well-being because it might be that such people are, according to the formal account of flourishing, not capable of making assessments of flourishing and, perhaps also, not capable of achieving it in full.

5. Universal Conceptions of Well-Being and the Value of Formal Analysis

For Nussbaum, whether there is a substantive account of well-being that is universally applicable depends on whether there is enough cross-cultural agreement of the relevant kind about the capabilities that are part of a full human life. If we were to take Sumner's formal criterion for ingredients of well-being, the possibility of a substantive account would depend on the degree of commonality about the causes of (authentic) life-satisfaction. For Griffin, it would depend on the degree of agreement in the objects of our informed desires. Certainly, there is a large empirical dimension to the question of whether the relevant kind of agreement exists. But, given the possibility of discounting the judgments and desires of groups of people deemed irrelevant by the formal criterion, it is not entirely an empirical matter.

In any case, the possibility of a universal, *formal* account is easier to defend because it is not an empirical question whether there is an adequate account of this kind; rather, it is a matter for philosophical investigation. Further, it seems that some such account is required if psychological or philosophical research is to be done on cultural or individual differences in the constituents of well-being. As I argued above, without a formal analysis of well-being, we cannot ascertain differences in the causes of it among cultures.

Despite the apparent need for some criterion of what counts as a component of well-being, one might be skeptical of the value of formal, philosophical accounts. Given how formal such an analysis has to be for it to serve the role it is needed to serve, that is, given how little it can say about the content of a well-lived life, one might think that formal accounts are so formal as to be vacuous. Perhaps, the objection might continue, we need to make some assumptions about the nature of well-being in order to investigate it – for example, the assumption that well-being consists in life satisfaction– but we do not need anything like the philosophical accounts provided by Griffin and Sumner.

To answer this objection and to defend the importance of formal philosophical accounts, it will be helpful to consider the difference between subjective formal accounts like Griffin's and Sumner's and the assumptions made by psychologists who aim to measure subjective well-being. Griffin's informed desire theory and Sumner's authentic happiness account count as subjective theories in the philosophical literature because they make well-being dependent on the attitudes of subjects.¹¹ Nothing can count as contributing to a person's well-being unless that person has, or would have under certain appropriate conditions, some attitude such as a desire or a feeling

11. Griffin's theory is difficult to categorize because of his view that neither the desirability features of an object nor the desire for these features has priority and, hence, that the distinction between subjective and objective views is misleading. I am interpreting Griffin in a less subtle way here than is fair to his actual position, for the sake of making a larger point. There are other informed desire theories that lack this particular subtlety. See, for example, Brandt (1979) and Railton (1986).

toward it. Nevertheless, both Griffin and Sumner think that subjects' responses must be qualified if they are to reveal important information about well-being. Neither Griffin nor Sumner would accept the assumption that feelings of life satisfaction, pleasure, or desires fulfillment *necessarily* indicate facts about a person's well-being.

Why is this? The primary reason for the qualification of subjective, formal accounts is the view that we can be mistaken about our own good, which is implicated in so many of our ordinary, pre-theoretical convictions about well-being. One class of examples that provides a particularly compelling case for qualification is the case of adaptive or endogenous preferences.¹² Adaptive preferences are preferences (or other responses to one's circumstances, such as feelings or judgments of life satisfaction) that have adapted to oppressive circumstances. For example, one might argue that some women's preferences for female circumcision are adaptive in this sense because this preference would not exist without social pressures that systematically disadvantage women.

Whatever well-being is, it is surely something that should be the object of moral and political attention. For example, one might think that government ought to promote the well-being of its citizens or, at least, guarantee the necessary conditions for this promotion. Similarly, well-being seems to be an important concept for individual moral action: as individuals many of us are concerned to promote the well-being of our friends and family. But if well-being is defined in terms of people's subjective attitudes and if subjective attitudes can be manipulated by

12. Amartya Sen (1987, pp. 45-46) emphasizes the importance of responding correctly to adaptive preferences in his argument against subjective accounts of well-being.

oppressive circumstances and the immoral actions of others, then it would seem that promoting well-being may only serve to sustain or even exacerbate existing moral and political problems. For this reason, philosophers have thought that formal accounts of well-being must guard against the conclusion that *anything* a person wants, cares about or finds satisfying is truly indicative of her well-being.

If Griffin and Sumner are correct, what we really care about, what we are really interested in achieving and promoting for others, is not simply life-satisfaction, pleasure, or desire-fulfillment, but these things under certain conditions. The thing we want for ourselves and those we love, and the thing we would like to see made available to humanity, is *qualified* subjective well-being. For Griffin, it is the satisfaction of desires that are informed about their objects; for Sumner it is life satisfaction that is not based on misinformation or caused by autonomy subverting mechanisms.

Which formal analysis one accepts makes a difference to the kind of substantive analysis that will be defensible and to the kind of data that one seeks. In fact, we can see that psychological studies that measure subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological studies that measure psychological well-being (PWB) differ in their formal conceptions of well-being. The former takes well-being to be something like happiness, while the latter takes well-being to be something like the realization of one's true nature (Ryan and Deci 2001, p. 143).

Those who favor measuring PWB argue that subjective well-being does not correlate well with health or positive functioning (Ryff & Singer 1998). Those who favor measuring SWB argue that the eudaimonistic criterion is paternalistic, allowing experts to determine what is best for subjects rather than letting subjects determine what is best for themselves (Diener et. al.

1998). On both sides of this argument, additional assumptions about well-being are adduced in favor of the particular conception of well-being. In the first case, defenders of PWB assume that health and positive functioning are essential to well-being and in the second case, defenders of SWB assume that well-being is the kind of thing about which subjects have authority. Here we see the need for an analysis of well-being that justifies our making some assumptions rather than others. A formal philosophical analysis that best meets the standard of descriptive adequacy provides this justification.

Moreover, we can see that the particular formal analyses discussed here provide a middle position between SWB and PWB. According to both the informed desire account and the authentic happiness account, the ultimate authority about what makes a life good *is* with the subject. Nevertheless, because the subject's immediate, unqualified assessments are not definitive, there are grounds for ruling out responses that are not conducive to health or functioning. Of course, such responses will be ruled out because they do not meet the criteria assigned by the formal account, not because they are not the right responses according to some independent criteria; it is still the case that there is no list of goods, including health and functioning, that is independent of subjects' responses. The subjective formal accounts discussed here, therefore, preserve some compelling insights from both sides of this debate. And this is what we should expect from accounts that aim to fit with our pre-philosophical convictions about well-being.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that cultural differences, while relevant to philosophers in various ways, do not undermine the philosophical project of constructing a formal account of well-being, nor do

they preclude an important role for philosophical reflection in the creation of a substantive account. One further conclusion we can draw from the arguments of this paper is that philosophical and psychological research on well-being complement each other in important ways. Psychological studies presuppose a formal account of well-being that determines what is to be measured. Substantive philosophical accounts make assumptions about the kinds of facts psychologists study in order to flesh out the bones of formal accounts.

Given these relationships, some collaboration in future research on well-being would seem to be indicated. Some directions for collaboration should already be apparent. Psychologists could make use of formal philosophical analyses of the objects of their investigation. Insofar as psychologists are interested in measuring that which truly corresponds to our deep interest in living well, good philosophical analysis will help to focus empirical tools on the right object of measurement. Philosophers who defend substantive theories could also benefit from familiarity with empirical studies that show cross cultural variation. Such variation may reveal unfair biases in the substantive theories. Philosophical theories will be improved either by eliminating the bias, or by making explicit the culturally specific purpose of the theory and thereby justifying the bias.

Finally, while it is true that psychological studies that *measure* well-being must make assumptions about the formal nature of well-being, other kinds of psychological studies might be relevant to the construction of formal accounts. Ultimately, the question of whether another culture's concept is too far away from our own to count as a concept of 'well-being' is a philosophical question. But if the differences are subtle, empirical research can illuminate philosophical investigation. For example, a study with the goal of cataloguing and categorizing

people's various uses of the concept of 'well-being', would be useful to the formal analysis of well-being that aims at descriptive adequacy. By being open to subtle differences in usage and presupposing only enough about the nature of well-being to ensure a common subject matter, such studies could help to reveal the formal features of well-being that are the most central.

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