



“Summary of article by Shelly Kagan: Me and My Life” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 194-196

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The concept of well-being is central to issues in moral philosophy. Despite its importance (or because of it), there has been little consensus on the nature of well-being. This paper argues that efforts to define well-being have confused what it means for a person to be "well-off" with what it means for a person's life "to go well". In contrast to the mainstream view, this article argues that the concepts of quality of life and well-being are different and provocatively suggests that the standard of evaluation for each may differ as well.

Theories of well-being range from the narrow, which value only isolated properties of the mind, to the broad, which value states of the world, including non-mental properties. Hedonism, the most familiar and narrow account, defines well-being in terms of a single mental property, pleasantness. Many reject this view, since it disregards the value of all other mental properties. Still, many do find compelling the idea that mental states, broadly defined, constitute well-being. This more general mental state view implies that only changes in one's mental state can affect levels of well-being. The appeal of this view lies in the intuition behind the platitude: "What you don't know can't hurt you." It is not clear, however, that the mental state view is sufficiently broad. Consider the plight of a man who dies contented, in the belief that he is loved by his wife and family, is respected in the community, and is successful in business. But in reality his wife cheated on him, the community only pretended to respect him because of his charitable donations, his children were only nice to him so that they could borrow the car, and his business partner embezzled funds from his nearly bankrupt company. If one's mental state is all that matters, the man's life has gone well; but this conclusion is clearly unacceptable.

The standard response to this type of example is to broaden the concept of well-being to include events and states of affairs that occur in the world, factors that do not involve mental properties. Since it matters whether or not the businessman really achieved what he wanted, it is important to consider whether his preferences or desires were actually satisfied. Desire or preference theories take seriously the idea that well-being consists in states of the world, not just states of mind. However, preference or desire accounts fail to distinguish between those satisfied desires that do and those that do not contribute to well-being. Suppose I meet a stranger on the train, discuss her work and desire her success, but I never think about the person again. Whether or not the stranger succeeds has nothing to do with me or my well-being. Apparently, the satisfaction of certain desires is relevant to well-being.

This example suggests that changes in well-being must involve changes in the individual. After all, well-being constitutes a final, rather than an instrumental, benefit to a person. For instance,

changes in wealth or political power may be of instrumental benefit, potentially leading to changes in well-being, but they are not in and of themselves the pay-off. In contrast, well-being is the pay-off itself, the ultimate benefit. Final or ultimate benefits require intrinsic, non-relational changes in a person. If we then accept the plausible view that a person is no more than a body and a mind, it follows that changes in well-being must involve changes in a person's body or mind. This narrow view of well-being implies that external changes that do not alter the internal properties of the individual cannot effect her well-being.

This conclusion calls for a revision in the standard way of interpreting examples, such as the case of the deceived businessman, which have been typically used to illustrate changes in well-being. A better approach is to acknowledge that there is a difference between a person's well-being and her quality of life, and that it is possible for a person's quality of life to be low, while her well-being is high. This does seem possible, given that a person's life is more encompassing than the person himself. Thus, even though a person's wellbeing can only be affected by intrinsic changes in the person himself, in principle, it seems, the quality of that person's life can be affected by facts that alter the intrinsic content of the life without involving intrinsic changes in the person's body or mind. For example, the lack of success of the deceived businessman, and his very failure to perceive this lack of success, were significant factors in his life, but they had no impact on his body or mind. So although it may be appropriate to conclude that the businessman's life went poorly, nonetheless the businessman himself was well-off.

Obviously, none of this shows that goods or states of affairs that extend beyond the individual are unimportant. If the deceived businessman's family, community, and business partner had really loved, respected, and treated him fairly, these facts would have contributed much value to his life. Accordingly, some external, relational goods may be more significant than well-being itself.

Intuition itself reveals the distinction between the concepts of well-being and quality of life. Intuitively, the deceived businessman is well-off, but his life goes poorly. Similarly, consider a severely retarded individual who does not realize how constrained her life is but is content. Her personal well-being does not suffer, yet her life does not go well. It also seems possible that a person's life can be improved by a change, even if this change is not considered an improvement from her perspective. Though the force of this evidence may be weak by itself, when combined with the earlier argument, it strongly suggests that the concept of well-being is more limited in scope and importance than formerly recognized.

Three lingering issues remain: First, it is not clear which among many external factors may be relevant to a person's life, though not to her well-being. Second, while it has been suggested that standards for evaluating lives and persons may differ, it has not been shown that they do in fact differ. Third, it is not clear how well-being and quality of life relate to one another, and whether we should aim to promote individual well-being, or the quality of lives. One practical application of this question concerns the case of legislation that paternalistically implements restrictions in order to promote well-being. Suppose that promoting well-being through regulation does not promote the quality of life of the coerced individuals. Would this undercut the justification for the legislation? Alternatively, would it be plausible to justify such legislation on grounds that it would improve quality of life, but not increase well-being?

These questions suggest "that the topic of welfare is even more complex than has been previously recognized. For if there are two subjects where previously it has been thought that there is only one, then things are much more than twice as complicated. We will need an account of what is good for me, an account of what is good for my life, and an account of the relationship between me and my life." [324]