

REPLY TO HAWKINS, HASSOUN, AND ARNESON

Anna Alexandrova

It is a great privilege to have three experts engaging with the ideas in my book in detail and with utmost seriousness. I am grateful to them for their labor and to the editor for the opportunity to open and to keep going a new conversation about the nature of knowledge about well-being. This goal—to reorient the discussion away from what well-being is as seen from a philosopher’s pedestal, to what sort of science is possible and desirable about it—was the primary goal of this book. Much of philosophy of well-being is concerned with the former and is busy tackling traditional questions about the subjectivity or objectivity of well-being, its relation to happiness, virtue, or meaning. I do not offer a solution for these venerable puzzles in the book; rather, I change the subject. When we switch the point of view from the traditional axiological one to the perspective of philosophy of science, different issues become visible—namely, objectivity and measurement—and, once taken seriously, these issues enable scientists and communities to address urgent practical challenges of producing and using evidence about well-being. The old venerable question of which theory of well-being is the best turns into a question about which construct is suitable for a particular context of application and, on the basis of what evidence; how we should go about validating measures of well-being (for example, for medicine and policy) and how this can be done while respecting ideals of science and justice. Instead of talking about well-being in the abstract, we talk about good knowledge-making practices about well-being. The new lens I am urging is epistemic and practical, and I am still convinced it is valuable, including for philosophers.

Along with this new lens, the book puts forward some specific arguments about the status of well-being concepts, theories, and the epistemology that goes along with them. So, a critic can focus on the lens as a whole or on the arguments that I take to realize this lens. It is lucky that I got both. Two of my critics—Hawkins and Hassoun—zero in on the details of my arguments, identifying places where these arguments do not work, overstep, or are plainly missing. The third critic, Arneson, does this too, but also sets his sight higher—on the very idea of a science of well-being. In the following discussion, I address this feedback in turn. The first kind of critique I largely accept (and in some places even take further than the critics), while the second kind I will resist as well as I can.

Hawkins on Contextualism

Hawkins addresses my arguments in Chapter 1, in which I look for and find lacking a single unified concept of well-being and propose that assertions about well-being obey contextualist semantics. My case is based on the observations of diversity in the use of the language of well-being across different spheres of life and contexts of inquiry. By way of evidence, I offer a made up but realistic scenario of Masha whose well-being is assessed radically differently by three observers as she navigates her day, and also numerous cases from the sciences where well-being is defined differently depending on discipline and goals of research. Hawkins is unconvinced.

All of my evidence concerns the language related to well-being and, while I have the case for claiming that well-being terms have different meanings, I do not have the case for the stronger claim I want to make—that there is no stable concept of well-being. She points out that what I take to be well-being locutions are in fact ‘multi-purpose’ terms that address different normative considerations—such as the duties of strangers to prevent obvious harm (or, we might add, the duties of social scientists to study the causes of suffering). Hawkins points out that “this hardly establishes by itself, that the specific language of prudential value is used to make very different kinds of assessments and that therefore we must look to context to understand what a term like ‘well-being’ means” (this volume, 531).

Quite right she is. The evidence I gave is suggestive rather than conclusive, and it depends on the assumption that there is no sharp line to be drawn between the language of well-being and the language of other values. Indeed, all my evidence is linguistic, while the claims I make are conceptual. I am not too worried about granting her these points. I am not sure what other evidence except linguistic is available to me in this case and it is surely possible to resist my conclusions on the basis of this evidence. But she goes further when she claims the following: “None of this supports the claim that prudential value terms have multiple meanings or uses, since Masha is neither talking about prudential value nor using such terms” (532). I may have not given conclusive evidence, but have I really given zero evidence? I wouldn’t go that far. It seems uncontroversial, for example, that there is what I called *threshold dependence*—in other words, how much well-being one has to have to count as doing well varies by context such that in a harsh environment the standard is lower than in an environment of plenty. What I called *constitutive dependence* (i.e., variation in the very goods taken to be relevant to well-being) is probably more controversial.¹ But when Hawkins retorts that neither the Good Samaritan nor the social worker are concerned with Masha’s well-being

¹ Hawkins does not say so, but looking back I now worry that my appeal to constitutive dependence as evidence for contextualism is confused. Constitutive dependence is far more compatible with what I called differential realization (i.e., the view that no single set of

proper, she deploys a classic circumscriptionist move—a move to deny that the concept of well-being admits of vagueness and instability. It is useful to be clear, as she is, that my argument does not clinch my conclusions, but rejecting all my evidence as entirely inconclusive and irrelevant requires a commitment to the very idea I am attacking.

I am, however, very sympathetic to her other objection—namely that, while I expose the supposed context dependence of the language of well-being, I do not offer a roadmap for how to handle the diversity. For Hawkins, I am far too blasé and casual about the consequences of this instability (if it really exists). She worries that “so little is said about why this should matter, and what our response to the situation ought to be” (532-533). If I am right on contextualism, then there is so much work to do—for example, to distinguish clearly between different concepts of well-being and to delineate the proper domain of application for each. I, on the other hand, act as if the shifts in meaning of well-being are easily navigated and there is no mess to sort out.

Guilty as charged! A map from concepts to contexts is a natural extension of contextualism. That was indeed an initial goal as I started working on the book. I envisaged a rule book for how researchers in different spheres of activities should go about delineating the right concept of well-being for their purposes. I didn’t finish this project because other controversies loomed as far more consequential to me—in particular, substantive disagreements about the constitution and the measurement of well-being. Frankly, I don’t know that there is a particularly bad mess to sort out. I believe that well-being locutions do vary in their meaning with context, but it’s less clear to me now that this variation is at the heart this science’s greatest controversies, and it’s even less clear to me that a philosopher king or queen should take it upon themselves to provide a conceptual map for scientists and the public to follow. In this sense, the contextualism I explore in Chapter 1 is not central or indeed necessary to the claims I put forward in the rest of the book about the importance of mid-level rather than high theories and their crucial role for measurement. But Hawkins is exactly right to press me on this. One aspect of her commentary left me wanting more, however. She says that she is sympathetic to my concerns about the philosophy of well-being as it is currently practiced, but she does not say which ones. I would have liked to hear what exactly she is sympathetic to in my story.

Hassoun on Measurement

Hassoun’s focus is on the relation between the theories of well-being and its measurement. In Chapter 2, I attack the Vending Machine vision,

affairs always and everywhere realizes well-being). See Fletcher’s variabilism (2009) for a non-contextualist theory that is nevertheless friendly to constitutive dependence.

according to which there is a single, correct, high theory of prudential value that, together with assumptions, deductively implies a valid measure of well-being for any specific practical context. This vision is unrealistic, I argue there, as there is no such powerful theory and no such assumptions available. (If you accept contextualism, the Vending Machine view is not just unrealistic but also unfriendly to contextual variations.) In the absence of such a master theory, good measurement requires treating existing high theories of well-being as tools out of which mid-level theories should be built. Mid-level theories are about kinds of people in specific circumstances rather than about an abstract individual and they in turn license specific measurement or detection procedures (what I call the Toolbox View). The denial of a single correct theory of well-being is a claim I call Variantism, and I contrast it with Invariantism, the claim that there is such a theory. Hassoun insightfully disentangles the two critiques that I wrongly run together; it is one thing to urge Variantism, but it's quite another to treat theories of well-being as mere tools that do not determine measures. Even if Variantism is true (nice that she is willing to grant that), the rejection of the Vending Machine view does not follow. She points out that good measurement of *X* must start with a full and properly articulated theory of *X*, and this theory must determine the measurement of *X*, not just be one input into it and certainly not merely an inspiration. She supports this with a compelling example from her work on measurement of poverty. She also gives general reasons for why theory is essential to measurement; without it, measurement can succeed only accidentally.

I appreciate Hassoun's proposal to separate the issue of justification of measurement (Vending Machine versus the Toolbox) from the issue of unity of theories of well-being (Variantism versus Invariantism). I also welcome the opportunity to formulate the Toolbox view with more care. I spend a great deal of space in the second half of the book urging that measurement of well-being can only succeed when there are credible mid-level theories. That is after all the point of Chapter 6, which accuses psychometrics of theory avoidance. These ideas are very much in line with Hassoun's insistence on the necessity of theory. So, what is the disagreement between us?

To see its source, we need to revisit why I soured on the Vending Machine view in the first place. The scorn I heap on it in Chapter 2 reflects my scepticism that existing high theories of well-being—namely, the Big Three (hedonism, subjectivism, and the objective list), are capable of being operationalized to the point of licensing credible measures. Hassoun asks 'Why give up the ghost?' (this volume, 525), the ghost being presumably the operationalization of high theories. I say, because the plausible versions of them have so many bells and whistles, required to deal with counterexamples, as to make them unoperationalizable. So, when they play a role in measurement they do so only as inspirations and rightly so. I do not heap the same scorn on the mid-level theories because they are devised with

the goal of measurement in mind. Does that mean I should have endorsed the Vending Machine view for mid-level theories and reserved the Toolbox view only for high theories?

Yes and no. Mid-level theories may be closer to practice and more operationalizable than high theories, but we never escape the fact that measurement needs more than just theory. At its heart, the Vending Machine view is an ideal of measurement that sees the theory of a phenomenon as being the only consideration when assessing the validity of measures of that phenomenon. Hassoun claims that this view is common in ‘philosophical circles.’ Maybe in some, but the literature in history and philosophy of science is full of discussions of the relative independence of measurement and theorizing in the physical sciences (Chang 2004; van Fraassen 2010; Cartwright 1999). This literature emphasizes the frequent absence of a good theory of *X* even while active efforts are being made to measure *X*, and how theory and measurement co-evolve. It also exposes the necessity for operationalization of local knowledge independent of theory. Besides, there are also pragmatic requirements for measurement that don’t apply to theorizing; measures have to be usable, transportable, reproducible, and they have to enable scientific coordination and communication. For these reasons, I would reject the Vending Machine view even for mid-level theories. But, spurred by Hassoun, I am also glad to admit that in the book I made the Toolbox View sound too permissive. In fact, theory is not dispensable for measurement and scientists cannot pick and choose which one they like. Properly formulated, the Toolbox View acknowledges the necessity of a plausible theory of *X* for the purposes of measurement of *X*, while also acknowledging the necessity of extra-theoretical considerations too.

Arneson on Value-Freedom

Arneson’s extensive and thorough comments raise a special challenge because although he understands my project maximally charitably and exactly right, he accepts almost none of its basic presuppositions. He rejects the very idea of a science of well-being in practice and in theory and, with it, he rejects both the right of scientists to claim to have knowledge about well-being qua scientists and the obligation to justify their concepts and measures. His world is one of neat separation between reasoning about values and reasoning about facts, in which the former gets done by a priori means and the latter by means of empirical inquiry. A priori reasoning properly applied should lead us to the objective list theory that he is known for and that, in his view, is a perfectly good Vending Machine. It articulates the states and processes that have prudential value and, if scientists happen to be (they don’t have to!) in possession of causal facts about these states and processes, then we can have effective public policy aimed at well-being. But scientists should not try to align their research with any social priorities

and should instead strive for “value-free understanding of our universe, specifically the human bits of it” (where the definition of these ‘human bits’ is presumably not informed by social priorities) (this volume, 515). Consequently, we should not hold scientific research to the standard of value-aptness.

It is useful to have him express these classical ideas with strength and lucidity, for simple Millian reasons of benefits in intellectual diversity. The worldview expressed in my book is obviously informed by a very different vision. I am influenced by philosophies that do not separate ethics from science and science from ethics as sharply as he does, such as Elizabeth Anderson’s (2004) pragmatist moral epistemology and Philip Kitcher’s (2001) ideal of a well-ordered science, to mention just two. I could object to Arneson by pointing out that human concepts are not like that (cleanly factual or cleanly normative), and for this reason any act of knowledge making is also an ethical act. I could also press on the limits of the objective list theory he favors over the theory of child well-being I developed with Ramesh Raghavan (2015). But I can’t imagine that anything I say at this high level of abstraction will be at all convincing to anyone already sympathetic to Arneson’s vision. However, I can show that the more practical worries he expresses about the potentially dangerous consequences of my views, although important to be aware of, are not worries for me alone and are not inherent in the vision of science I put forward.

Arneson argues that giving science both duties and responsibilities to speak about well-being corrupts, dilutes, and unfairly restricts it. The corruption effect is that scientists will imagine themselves to be moral authorities and start teaching everyone how to live. The dilution effect is ‘populist dismissal’—that is, the public will lose their proper respect for experts on facts and perceive them instead as political and biased. The third effect is that imposing value-aptness constrains scientists too much, forcing them to study only those aspects of human experience that pass such a test and ignoring others that may be interesting and important but for reasons other than value-aptness.

Let me accept each of these three as valid and important considerations that no critic of the value-free ideal such as myself should ignore. (Arneson’s precise formulation of these dangers can be questioned, but that’s an aside.) But let us be clear that there is nothing in my vision of the science of well-being that would warrant corruption, dilution, or undue constraint of science. I address corruption in Chapter 4, where I urge scientists not to assume dictatorship over the choice of well-being constructs and instead to expose such constructs to deliberation that involves everyone affected by their scientific choices. Scientists have some expertise about well-being in virtue of their work, but they are certainly not the sole experts, and they should be aware of the danger of oppression when the expert oversteps her bounds (a common occurrence throughout history of science and not all

specific to well-being experts). I do not address dilution explicitly, but it is clear that the value-apt ideal is fully committed to respecting expertise. As for undue restriction, it does not follow from my vision of the science of well-being that scientists should not study interesting phenomena that have nothing to do with well-being, but only that to the extent that they are engaged in the science of well-being value-aptness should be their constraint.

We could go further and explore ways in which responsible practice of this science can incorporate a requirement to respect differences in conceptions of good life and preserve a certain neutrality so important to liberal politics (as do Haybron and Tiberius [2015]). In any case, the general lesson is that the value-apt ideal of science can be sensitive to the many ways in which value judgments can undermine or enhance the scientific project. It doesn't open the floodgates any more than do the familiar ethical constraints on research, such as the limits on human or animal experiments.

So, the issue here is plainly empirical: Does the value-free or the value-apt ideal as a matter of fact ensure responsible scientific practices and healthy public understanding of science? Dilution of scientific authority and its abuse by scientists themselves are obviously live contemporary problems, but their etiology is genuinely uncertain. This etiology is within the purview of sociology of science, and it is unresolvable by speculation. Historical evidence is mixed: abuse of science has happened both under a value-free regime (to the extent that it has ever been realized, perhaps in post-World War II American science) and under the more common value-laden one. So, the dangers Arneson helpfully formulates are challenges to the social organization of science in general and not specific to the ideal I advocate in the book. If I had to guess, I would guess that the sociological features of science—namely, the institutions of publication, grants, their abuses, and the relatively elite composition of universities—are far better explanations of the ongoing challenges to the authority of science than whether it undertakes to be value-free or value-apt.

Anna Alexandrova
University of Cambridge
E-mail: aa686@cam.ac.uk

References:

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2004. "Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce." *Hypatia* 19 (1): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2004.tb01266.x>.
- Cartwright, Nancy. 1999. *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chang, Hasok. 2004. *Inventing Temperature: Measurement and Scientific Progress*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fletcher, Guy. 2009. "Rejecting Well-Being Invariabilism." *Philosophical Papers* 38 (1): 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568640902933452>.

- Haybron, Daniel M. and Valerie Tiberious. 2015. "Well-Being Policy: What Standard of Well-Being?" *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (4): 712–733. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2015.23>.
- Kitcher, Philip. 2001. *Science, Truth, and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Raghavan, Ramesh and Anna Alexandrova. 2015. "Toward a Theory of Child Well-Being." *Social Indicators Research* 121 (3): 887–902. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0665-z>.
- van Fraassen, Bas C. 2010. *Scientific Representation: Paradoxes of Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.