Thoughts on Philosophy and the Science of Well-Being

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In Anna Alexandrova's stimulating book *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, she considers the Question of Value-Aptness: "How can the science of well-being produce knowledge that is properly about well-being?" More specifically: (1) How should we define well-being in a scientific project? (2) How should we measure it? And: (3) How is well-being science objective? (2017, xxx). Her approach is thoroughly pluralistic—she believes that there are a variety of concepts of well-being to which our theories should respond, that scientists can use different constructs, and that we need different measures for these constructs. She suggests creating "mid-level" philosophical theories that are about the well-being of different kinds of people in different circumstances to which constructs (and, thus, measures) might correspond, such as theories of child welfare, post-Brexit Britian's welfare, the welfare of the critically ill, and so forth. Moreover, she thinks the fact that individuals' well-being differs means that we cannot measure it properly, but we can still get useful aggregate information about well-being from existing measures (2017).

I find her general approach plausible, but there is a line of thought running throughout the book to which I would like to object. Alexandrova seems to think that philosophical theories are properly just "sources of inspiration or repositories of ideas about what well-being *might* be, ideas to be used in part and in part rejected or modified" for scientific work and that we just need to add other mid-level theories to the scientific tool-box (Alexandrova 2017, 46; Huebner 2015). She says, for instance, that

> philosophers describe their goal as the articulation of theories of well-being. Philosophers are interested in defining well-being, scientists in measuring it, so a division of labor suggests itself: let the philosopher tell the scientist the values that the measures are supposed to capture. Alas this proposal . . . is doomed from the start. The science of well-being should not seek out philosopher-kings the definitions of well-being usable in sciences must be sensitive not only to the normative theories of the good life but also the practical constraints of measurement and use of this knowledge. But the goals of theorizing about well-being in philosophy as it is currently practiced are not sensitive in this way. (Alexandrova 2017, xxxi)

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Also consider, “whatever general theory of well-being is correct, justifying local constructs is a context-specific affair in which the general theory plays only an indirect role . . . when values conflict, securing objectivity in science takes a political resolution, not an appeal to master theory” (2017, 45). Moreover, Alexandrova says: “If well-being is to play a useful role in life of today’s bureaucracies, which live by numbers—and this train appears to be unstoppable now—well-being may have to be *made* measurable even if it was not initially” (2017, 128). Alexandrova thinks we should resolve disagreement about well-being through an appropriately “deliberative process” (2017, xliii). Finally, she says that we cannot object that particular measures are unintuitive but should instead criticize the process by which measures are created “psychometric validation” (2017, xliv).

Alexandrova considers two perspectives on scientific theorizing which, following Nancy Cartwright, she calls the *Vending Machine* and *Toolbox* views. On the Vending Machine view, “a theory contains within itself the resources for the treatment of any concrete situation” (Alexandrova 2017, 35; Cartwright 1999, 185; Cartwright et al. 1995). Given Newtonian mechanics, we can figure out the movement of any object in any situation. Say a refrigerator on a ramp or banknotes in the wind. On the Toolbox view, “theories contain some but not all of the tools necessary for building models that represent real situations” (Alexandrova 2017, 35–36). They are incomplete and do not always work. Alexandrova does not deny that theories are important for measurement (in fact, she bases her critique of psychometrics on this fact), but she does seem to think that the fact that we need many different theories entails that we cannot just start from a theory to arrive at a measure that will work even for a given domain.

More precisely, Alexandrova seems to think that rejecting invariantism (the idea that there is a single correct theory of well-being) requires rejecting the Vending Machine view—that theories can determine what is necessary for successful measurement—and the key point of this commentary is to suggest that this need not be the case. I think that, ideally, theories would be vending machines for some perhaps very limited domain and purpose. At least, I will suggest that one thing we might fruitfully do is start with a full theory of the phenomenon for which we are trying to account and then try to model it. I will not argue that it is obligatory to do so or even that we will do better in every instance, but I will defend this Limited Vending Machine view that I take to be quite common in philosophical circles.

First, however, it will help to consider the argument Alexandrova gives for theory diversity—not because I deny that a variety of theories are useful, but because it illustrates a key gap in what I think is her implicit argument supporting the idea that we can just use theories as tools (beyond her critique of the Vending Machine view). I want to argue that one can accept a pluralistic view about theories of well-being, but that once the right theory is specified for a context, it can imply a measure and that we might judge measures based on how closely they approximate the relevant theory. That is, we can distinguish between mid- and high-level theories and even grant that variantism may be true, but endorse the idea that theories are vending machines for a limited domain and assess the goodness of measures by appeal to such theories.

She argues:

> *Premise 1:* The Philosophical toolbox of the science of well-being includes many, not only one, of the current theories of well-being.
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> *Premise 2:* Depending on context, different contents of the toolbox play a role in different constructs of well-being.
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> *Premise 3:* Constructs of well-being, at least sometimes, specify the constituents, rather than mere causes or correlates, of well-being.
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> *Premise 4:* Constructs of well-being in the sciences, at least sometimes, do a good job picking out well-being in a given context.
>
> *Conclusion:* So different states, as specified by different theories, constitute well-being in different contexts. (Alexandrova 2017, 45–46)

Let us grant premises 1–3 for the sake of argument. To defend 4, she just says that it would be surprising if the science were not sometimes successful. If the premise is intended to state that "[c]onstructs of well-being in the sciences, at least sometimes, do a good job picking out [*a particular type of*] well-being in a given context," it would be at least somewhat contentious, but I think we can grant it too (2017, 46).

To make this argument valid, she also needs to say something like: If "constructs of well-being in the sciences, at least sometimes, do a good job picking out well-being in a given context . . . different states, as specified by different theories, constitute well-being in different contexts" (Alexandrova 2017, 46). This could be false (for all she's said) because, for instance, all the correct theories pick out only one kind of well-being. But if we grant that some different constructs that correlate to different theories are correct, we get her conclusion.

The problem I want to point to is that none of this supports the idea that it is a good idea for scientists to proceed in the usual way—just drawing on theories as tools when they need them, modifying them as they like, and so forth. Although Alexandrova does not say that it does, I cannot find anything else in her book that better supports the approach she seems to endorse. She simply endorses variantism (roughly the idea that there are many good theories of well-being that can be realized in different ways) and then moves to the conclusion that we should enrich the scientific toolbox with mid-level theories about different sub-types of well-being. The argument above provides her support for what strikes me as the most contentious part of variablism (theory diversity understood as a methodological thesis). She tries to derive this thesis from the idea she calls WBV2—"no single substantive theory specifies the realizers of every concept of well-being"—but it is not obvious that this requires rejecting the Limited Vending Machine view on which there is some domain in which we can start from a single theory to arrive at a well-justified measure (or measures; Alexandrova 2017, 43). I think Alexandrova could most plausibly argue that since "constructs of well-being in the sciences, at least sometimes, do a good job picking out [*a particular type of*] well-being in a given context," there is nothing wrong with using scientific theories as toolboxes (2017, 45). But I am not convinced. Scientists may sometimes succeed in measuring something important simply due to chance or because they have an intuitive sense of what matters. This is especially likely if there are enough of them doing enough different kinds of things, but this does not suffice to support the idea that scientists should just have a toolbox of theories.

The only other thing Alexandrova says against the Vending Machine view does not suffice to undermine it either. She says that it is not plausible that a measure of the welfare of people with vertebra factures can be derived from any major philosophical theory. While I agree, that does not bear on the question I want to consider—whether we *should* view philosophical theories as simply part of a toolbox that scientists can draw on for inspiration.

Moreover, I believe that many philosophers are worried about the Toolbox view for reasons that have nothing to do with invariantism—the idea that there is one correct theory of well-being. At least *I* worry that scientists often do not understand what they are trying to do—they often do not have a well-worked out theory at all—and, so, use the wrong measures for the wrong purposes, develop poor proxies, or simply fail to measure what matters (Hassoun 2011; 2012). Consider common measures of poverty which divide by the total number of people in a population. These measures may capture *the population's poverty*, but they do not capture *the amount of poverty in the population* for they suggest poverty can decrease just because more rich people are born or migrate into an area (Hassoun 2014).

So how should researchers proceed on the Limited Vending Machine view? First, I believe that how we should create a measure of well-being depends on *what* we want to measure and *why* we want to measure it. We might want an aggregate measure of individual well-being in a small population or a measure of particular individuals' well-being or something else. I can easily imagine that Alexandrova's call for philosophers to provide theories of, for example, a nation's well-being after Brexit or the well-being of humans as a kind might (like many measures of poverty) fail to accurately capture a kind of well-being we should promote, because these things are not appropriately sensitive to the ways individuals fare.[1] Then, once we have a theory about what we want to measure, I think we should try to operationalize that theory well enough for our purpose. Even if the best way to come up with an adequate measure of welfare is to work backwards from existing measures, we still need to know what we are trying to measure and how the existing measures relate to that to develop good measures.[2]

Consider how we might try to measure welfare by reflecting first on its nature and the reason why we want to measure it. Suppose that welfare is composed (on some account) of preference satisfaction and we need to arrive at a static, population-based, measure that can tell us what qualifies as a minimally good life defined as having 50% of the mean level of satisfaction. If researchers can operationalize preference satisfaction appropriately on the theory, they will arrive at a well-justified measure. The devil is, of course, in the detail. But why give up the ghost? There are already some plausible population level measures of subjective well-being (at least in some domains) (Benjamin et al. 2014; Flynn et al. 2015; Al-Janabi et al. 2012; Barrotta 2008). Though, even if we only aim to measure aggregate population level well-being, researchers would have to decide whether it was reasonable to say that, in aggregate (and on average in the population), fulfilling all preferences is equally important (or provide another account of how preferences matter sufficiently clear to allow us to measure welfare on the theory).

Alternately, consider how we might try to measure welfare on an objective list theory (Hassoun 2018). Suppose that an individual's welfare is a function of the quality of her relationships, knowledge, appreciation, achievements, worthwhile activities, and perhaps other things like the balance of pleasure over pain she experiences over the course of her life. Suppose, moreover, that we are interested in a measure that can tell us how any particular individual is doing. Focusing on what we need to know to develop such a measure clarifies some dimensions along which philosophical theories must be further developed. How would one measure each of these things? Researchers might start by examining relationship quality, but it is likely they will have to say something about the importance of the number of relationships people can sustain as well as about their quality. Perhaps it only matters that an individual has one good friend, but many think that familial relationships of different kinds are incredibly important—it may matter, for instance, that the she can have children (Braybrooke 1987). Researchers also need to know what constitutes a quality relationship—is

[1] We may need to think hard about what constitutes welfare in general before saying, for example, that we should have a view about the national welfare or the welfare of people with vertebral fractures and bone diseases. The former may simply be a category mistake, and the later may be too specific to qualify as an account of welfare (or may lump the welfare of different sub-categories of people together in a way that is not that helpful).

[2] Moreover, even if we should not have too much faith in the measures scientists are using, they may still be the best estimates available.

this a matter of satisfaction, or something more objective? Every choice researchers make will affect the way they construct the measure. Suppose that all that matters is that an individual is satisfied with all the relationships she has and that she has at least some of them. If so, researchers could turn to measures of relationship satisfaction, such as the Relationship Assessment Scale to at least proxy for this component of the minimally good life or (if they all prove inadequate) construct a new one (Hendrick 1988). With a more complicated theory, researchers not only need to measure the different qualities) of relationships; they need to explain how to weigh them against each other and the number or kinds of relationships an individual has. It may even be difficult to measure something that appears simpler, like pleasure. Some suggest pleasure just is desire fulfillment, others that it is a felt evaluation, and yet others that it is a simple unanalyzable feature of experience that makes it attractive (Katz 2005; Heathwood 2006). Similar observations apply to the other components of the account—researchers need to explain what constitutes knowledge, valuable achievement, worthwhile activity, and so forth.[3] Then they can consider what existing measures capture the relevant phenomenon, or they can construct a new one that will suffice for the measurement purpose. Moreover, researchers also have to explain how to combine these measures into an overall index to say how the individual fares. Obviously, the philosophical theory requires further development here to be operationalizable.

So what should we conclude? I believe that having a well-justified account of what one wants to measure is often important for good scientific

[3] How should we quantify knowledge, for example? Most would agree that it is not only the number of facts one knows, but the quality of one's knowledge that counts and perhaps one only needs the opportunity to secure knowledge beyond a certain point to fare well. Would a measure of educational attainment do? Perhaps not if the number of years of education do not really capture what students learn. Is appreciation distinct from pleasure? Perhaps aesthetic appreciation need not involve pleasure at all but could amount to an experience of the sublime. Maybe we care about many non-pleasurable experiences. If we have an account of the kinds of appreciation or experiences that matter, we should be sure not to double count pleasure (insofar as these experiences involve it) unless the theory tells us this is legitimate. And measuring the extent to which people engage, or have the chance to engage, in worthwhile activities is probably no easier. One needs to explain what constitutes an activity and what makes activities worthwhile. This may even involve a whole account of the activities' moral and intellectual value unless one specifies that the only prudentially valuable activities are those that contribute to other aspects of one's welfare. In which case, it is not obvious that we must measure them at all. If worthwhile activities are independently valuable, and no reasonably good measures for capturing their value exist, one might propose creating a measure of these from a survey tool asking people how satisfied they are with their achievements, etc., but there are serious reasons to doubt people are good judges in many cases. If so, one would need to either develop new measures or argue that the existing measures do a good enough job of approximating well-being for one's purposes. Moreover, insofar as the account is supposed to be sensitive to differences between individuals and their values, the measure is, at best, a proxy for individuals' welfare—whatever policies one arrives at using the measure should allow for exceptions and include procedures for considering individuals' needs, even if the measure suggests they have met the relevant threshold.

inquiry but that, in some cases, the differences between measures based on competing theories will matter only at the margins or not at all and, in these cases, we can be theory neutral. Moreover, I think that figuring out what questions we need to answer to measure well-being may be just as important for theory development as it is for measurement itself. I do not think that we should just view theories as toolboxes or sources of inspiration for scientific practices. In doing so, we may too easily sacrifice the philosophical (and scientific) rigor necessary to actually measure well-being. Ultimately, however, what approach is best is itself an empirical question. Where is deliberation and politics in all this? Only in the scientific and philosophical review process, sensitivity analysis and external validation.[4] We should not figure out what theory is right by voting on it, nor should we figure out what construct we should measure, nor decide on a measure that way. And the fact that bureaucracies want to measure well-being does not mean well-being has "to be *made* measurable" (Alexandrova 2017, 128). The relevant question is: If we don't provide a measure, what will happen? Perhaps we will be none the worse off. In any case, how we should interact with bureaucracies intent on measurement (as scientists or philosophers) is a thoroughly ethical question that cannot be resolved without serious inquiry. Of course, scientists and philosophers may also need to get better at politics to get people to employ the right measures. But these comments have ranged far and wide enough, I think. So I will content myself with trying to address further questions about these matters another time.

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[4] I am also skeptical of the idea that coherentist validation as practiced by psychologists, even if informed by theory, is the best approach to validation. I prefer the axiomatic, or philosophical, approach to justification (in conjunction with a wider variety of scientific validation exercises).

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