

COMMENTS ON ANNA ALEXANDROVA,
*A PHILOSOPHY FOR THE SCIENCE
OF WELL-BEING*

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There's a lot to like and admire in Anna Alexandrova's excellent book, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being* (2017). She explores the interface between science and philosophy in what she calls the *science of well-being*. Her questions, as she states them with characteristic clarity, are "how science should define well-being, how it should measure it, and the role of philosophy in all this" (xv). Given that *well-being* is clearly a normative concept, it would seem that a successful science of well-being inquiry must achieve excellence in evaluation as well as in empirical observation and theory. The science of well-being is normative in a way that the science of astronomy, for example, is not. To those engaged in this endeavor, she urges that their value commitments should not be hidden but "well-articulated and defended" (xv). To moral philosophers who aim to advise it, she urges that grand abstract theorizing about the nature of well-being that strives for universality and necessity will be of no use. Instead the philosopher of the science of well-being should be engaged in mid-level theorizing or, as she puts it, "contextual theorizing about what well-being amounts to in different circumstances that individuals and communities face" (xvi). Roughly, the idea of well-being here is what someone aims at (as ends not means) insofar as she is striving to be prudent. Well-being is what in itself makes someone's life go better for her rather than worse.

1

Alexandrova provides a sharper formulation of the question: "How can the science of well-being produce knowledge that is properly about well-being?" (xxx). Her answer in brief is that well-being must be measurable, or we will gain no knowledge of it by empirical observation. Hence, grand theorizing (at least as philosophers conceive it) is an irrelevance, because in seeking to identify claims about what constitutes well-being that hold always and everywhere, counterexamples will push the claims to become ever more intricate and complicated, but the well-being notions that emerge from this dialectic will not be measurable in any remotely practical way. But contextual notions of well-being, such as *well-being from the medical point*

of view or *economic well-being for hunter-gatherers* at least stand a fighting chance of being measurable, or of serving as models for empirical measures. So we should seek well-defended evaluative claims about how well-being contextually specified in various ways is best conceived. These can join up with empirical methods to yield knowledge about well-being.

She insightfully notes that the meaning of queries and answers using well-being language can vary with context in predictable ways that speakers and hearers standardly recognize. A person asked “How are you doing?” by a bystander after she has slipped on the ice, by a close friend inquiring about how she is coping with an inopportune pregnancy with impact on her career and marriage, and by a social worker visiting to determine whether she might be in need of government-provided social services in view of her pregnant condition is being asked three quite different questions, each with a fairly clear meaning, and calling for different responses. That is to say, in her words, “there are several notions legitimately referred to as ‘well-being’ that apply in different circumstances” (26).

Emphasis should be placed on her further assertion that the existence of contextually specific notions of well-being does not rule out existence of a context-free all things considered overall long run notion of well-being as well. After all, individuals routinely make life decisions that involve trade-offs between compartments of well-being.

Suppose you are told, from this point of view, that your well-being consists in *X*, and from this other point of view, your well-being consists in *Y*, and from this third point of view, your well-being consists of *Z*, and moreover there may be an indefinite further array of points of view. So far, you do not yet know what you should be seeking all things considered, so far as you well-being is concerned, whenever seeking *X* and *Y* and *Z* and whatever other contextual ideas of well-being there might be come in conflict, which is pretty much always going to be the case.

2

Following Nancy Cartwright, Alexandrova usefully distinguishes between a Vending Machine and a Toolbox view of theories. In ethics, a vending machine would be a set of normative principles that together do all the normative work that would ever need to be done. The theory is complete in the sense of determining unequivocally what should be done in any possible circumstances. In ethics, a toolbox view says that we should seek limited well-being ideas that are pragmatically useful for certain purposes in certain circumstances. If the toolbox moral philosopher wants to give guidance for the science of well-being, she should take care to be formulating standards such that we can empirically detect to what degree they are satisfied. Alexandrova says we should follow the toolbox approach.

In response, for reasons to be stated, I do not believe there is or should be a science of well-being to which philosophical theorists should be giving

normative guidance. The philosophy of social science should be helping guide scientists toward choice of methods and procedures that better advance the goals of value-free understanding of our universe, specifically the human bits of it.

The vending machine in a different terminology is a regulative ideal that should guide our ethical theory practice. At any given time, the ethical theory we should accept is the evidence-relative (this means available-reasons-and-arguments relative) best theory for our time. So if it were the case that our best ethical ideas about well-being at a time should be joined up with social and medical science to determine how science of well-being inquiries should proceed, then our evidence-relative best approximation to a vending machine theory of well-being should fill this role. But we should deny the antecedent in this hypothetical.

I reject the “joining up” aspiration. There should be lots of good social science and other science that contain results that may prove useful for public policy selection (under favorable political conditions) and for individuals planning their lives. But the practice of social science should not be constrained or regulated by principles of well-being or normative accounts of well-being. The test for what directions to pursue in social science should be, given the current state of empirical knowledge, and the impact of recent discoveries in theory, method, and technology, what lines of inquiry offer the best prospects for making significant further advances in empirical science. What “joins up” with philosophical theories of well-being should not be a consideration that influences whether my NSF grant proposal succeeds, if I am a social scientist.

To put my worry in a nutshell: I do not believe there is, or should be, any such thing as a science of well-being any more than there is, or should be, a science of what is morally right and wrong. Questions of right and wrong are not empirical questions and they do not get resolved by the methods of empirical inquiry. Nor do questions concerning what is in itself good for you (IIGFY) get resolved by empirical observations or causal analysis. Of course, in the vicinity of ethics are empirical questions to which science and maybe especially social science can provide answers.

In all these endeavors, it is worth keeping straight what parts of questions about well-being levels across a group of people are empirical questions that empirical inquiry can in principle settle and what parts are normative or evaluative questions that have a different status and if answerable at all are answerable by quite other means.

3

What then should we say about the body of recent and current scientific endeavors that Alexandrova classifies as the science of well-being? First, there is not a natural kind here to be analyzed. Basic sciences, such as the atmospheric science of climate change and the basic physiology of human

bodies, uncontroversially are relevant to public policy choices made with the aim of improving people's well-being, but they do not share her five commitments that she regards as demarcating the science of well-being.¹ Second, as for the psychology, child development, medical science, economics, and development science endeavors on which she focuses, the general rubric is that they are studying phenomena that might have something or other to do with well-being and might be specially relevant to policy choice on that basis. The scientific merits of the inquiries carried out under this broad umbrella so far as I can see have nothing to do with the degree of soundness of the ethical ideas of well-being that might be inspiring some of them.

Moreover, the relations between what the inquiries Alexandrova lumps together under the misleading heading "the science of well-being" study and the claimed implications for public policy of those inquiries can be quite indirect, and not directly channeled through ideas of well-being at all. For example, welfare economists often propose that preference satisfaction (fulfillment of what individuals care about) should be the currency of distributive justice, so that social policy should strive to maximize the fulfillment of a social welfare function concerned with some notion of fair distribution of preference satisfaction. Some propose this tack not on the ground that satisfying your preferences is the true measure of your well-being, but on the ground that maximizing any function of true or genuine well-being is not the proper business of society or of government as an agency of society. Instead, what we owe one another is help that is properly respectful, and deferring to individuals' own judgments about what they want to strive for in their lives is respectful.²

Of course, any science can have implications for public policy and personal conduct choice. If science tells us that happiness, under a precise construal, tends to increase when people do X, we have been given some reason to adopt policies that increase the doing of X if we want to increase happiness so construed. Why suppose that there is any more intimate relation between advance in empirical knowledge and advances in ethical insight?

Alexandrova disagrees. To her credit, she explicitly discusses the classic argument advanced by Ernest Nagel (1962) that says simply, scientists qua scientists can investigate estimation (e.g., as that asserted in the last sentence of the previous paragraph), but do not make appraisals (apart from epistemic appraisals concerning methods and procedures for gaining empirical knowledge). She does not reject (what I take to be) Nagel's main claim that the empirical work of determining what causes what and of finding out what detectable properties things have can be done independently

¹ These are (1) "well-being is valuable," (2) "well-being claims are generalizable," (3) "the experience of well-being matters," (4) "well-being is measurable," and (5) "well-being science has applications."

² Marc Fleurbaey (2012) explicitly takes this line. He is not alone.

of taking any stands on normative issues other than epistemic normative issues. Estimation claims and appraisal claims can be distinguished. An estimation claim can be appraisal-free. She does not so far as I can see rest her case on arguing that facts and values are inseparable and mixed together in some metaphysical soup that constitutes our universe. Instead, she holds that although estimation claims and appraisal claims are separable and independent, we should understand the proper job of a scientist as encompassing both tasks.

This is supposed to emerge if we ask, “Which normative standard should scientists use in their estimation claims?” I do not believe there is a principled or significant answer to this question. Social scientists will tend to study topics that are of interest for many disparate reasons to large numbers of people. The causal claims and empirical fact observations they come up with will usually be useful to people with opposed normative orientations.

Alexandrova’s concern that the normative and empirical issues should be joined up is not that attempting to separate them is impractical. It is rather that scientists in the course of coming to know empirical facts will have acquired knowledge of values specific to the domain of inquiry, and it is better overall if their knowledge of values shapes their conduct of inquiry. There is a “process of co-evolution” of factual understanding and moral understanding. Knowing some facts in some domain helps improve one’s value judgments regarding that domain, and further inquiry shaped by this factual and moral knowledge helps one to gain further empirical knowledge, which in turn facilitates greater moral insight, and so on.

We should be deeply suspicious of the “co-evolution” claim. Alexandrova provides no reasons for believing that learning what causes what in some empirical domain gives one any special expertise with respect to moral questions that arise in the domain. When pronouncements combine empirical and ethical elements, the soundness of the empirical and moral claims being asserted are different issues that are settled by different methods of inquiry. I simply do not believe that knowing facts about topic X in and of itself improves one’s ability to detect moral facts about topic X.

Moreover, there is a normative reason for separation of spheres. It happens to be the case that in our present state of moral and empirical knowledge, science as a tool for advancing empirical knowledge has a much stronger track record than the ragbag of moral inquiry tools we presently have. For all we know, in our present state of inquiry, moral nihilism could turn out to be true—there just is no true or false when it comes to assertions of moral claims. Either they turn out to be pseudo-assertions or there just is no metaphysical fact of the matter, as to what is true, for any ethical question one might raise. Whatever the ultimate ethical truth here turns out to be and whether or not we will eventually make significant progress to discovering it, the fact remains that science as an ongoing enterprise has

achieved success beyond what ethical inquiry has so far attained, and we have a growing body of scientific claims with strong warrant of objectivity.³

It is morally important to maintain this separation between science and nonscience, partly for the sake of preventing corruption or dilution of the scientific enterprise and partly for the sake of helping the general public maintain a proper appreciation of science and what it is good for and what it accomplishes and to what degree it can claim epistemic authority.

Moreover, since being a good scientist gives one no special authority or expertise regarding ethical questions, Alexandrova's call for "practicing science and philosophy in a joined up manner" (xxxiv) risks encouraging scientists illegitimately to claim moral authority in their areas of empirical expertise, and such bogus claims to moral authority are distracting or worse for ethical guidance and may prompt populist dismissal of warranted claims to empirical authority that can be made on behalf of empirical science.⁴

4

Back to the proper practice of science including social science. We should worry that joining up empirical inquiry and mid-level moral theorizing in the way that Alexandrova envisages would threaten corruption of scientific judgment issues and narrow our ideas as to what count as legitimate topics for investigation and what counts as good science achievement. Bad ethics can inspire good science; good ethics can inspire bad science.

If a social scientist is investigating social phenomena that closely bear on matters that affect people's prospects for living better rather than worse (and for good quality life to be fairly divided across persons), she might want to pay heed to better rather than worse ways of conceiving what in itself makes people's lives go better rather than worse. But the value of the social science estimation rides independent of the appraisal that is here guiding it.

In a summary overview, Alexandrova writes, "Against the claim that well-being is unmeasurable I argued that it could be, provided that we predicate well-being of kinds of people in specific circumstances" (154). Carrying out this program by way of illustration, she rehearses and defends

³ The issue here is somewhat complicated by the fact that we use "science" as an honorific term that refers to our normatively best ways of figuring out what's so and as a descriptive term that refers to the actual ongoing enterprise of people professionally employed in investigating empirical issues especially basic issues in any given society at any time in the modern age.

⁴ To clarify: Alexandrova herself does not claim that scientists have special moral expertise. Nor does she believe any ethical theory, even the close-to-the-ground varieties she favors, can settle what measure of well-being is best, or should guide scientific practice or policy choice. She holds that "Where philosophy gives out, politics should step in. The only way to practice trustworthy science is to make this choice in a deliberative public setting in which the relevant parties are included" (102). I don't see that we should accord the outcome of public deliberation special normative authority any more than we should imagine that majority votes in democratic societies settle moral questions of right and wrong or good and bad.

a theory of well-being for children she has advanced with a coauthor in prior work. Here we see how moral philosophy deployed at mid-level can provide useful guidance for the science of well-being.

Alexandrova and Ramesh Raghavan (2015) propose that children do well to the extent that they

- (1) develop those state-appropriate capacities that would, for all we know, equip them for a successful future, given their environment, and
- (2) engage with the world in child-appropriate ways—for example, with curiosity and exploration, spontaneity, and emotional security.

This is offered as a sketch, so it would be inappropriate to criticize it as vague. My worry is rather that from a bare objective list standpoint, it admits of clear counterexamples. Children can do well without fulfilling 1 and 2. Children can fail to do well while fulfilling 1 and 2.

Some children will certainly or probably die at a very young age, so preparing them for late childhood or adolescent or adulthood success is not a sensible strategy for improving their lifetime welfare. Other children will unavoidably have bleak prospects as adults, and will be poor transformers of resources into well-being, so that developing their capacities for the future would do much less for their lifetime overall well-being than maximizing their childhood well-being even at cost to their future.

Some children are cognitively impaired, to the point that although great expenditure of resources would boost their stage-appropriate capacities by a tiny bit, the better course for them is to boost their present enjoyment and try to arrange a future environment that will give them as good a balance of pleasure over pain as they can get.

Some children have well-being prospects concentrated in early life, so preparing them for future adult achievement is a low priority. For example, parents and coaches who press a child toward Olympic-level figure skating achievement are making a gamble with the child's life prospects. Often the gamble is a bad bet, but not always. When the gamble is sensible, putting all one's eggs in the single basket of early achievement is the best strategy for maximizing the child's lifetime well-being.

Some children have little capacity for "child-appropriate" development. They are ill-equipped by nature for the goods we associate with childhood and better equipped for the goods we associate with adulthood. For such children, maximizing their good, over the life course or even just in childhood years, involves helping them gain adult-appropriate fulfillment now (certain achievements, sophisticated types of friendship) at the expense of such meager child-appropriate goods as they are capable of.

All these problems disappear if we uphold a simple, bare, objective list view, which says what is best for any individual, over the course of her life or at a time, is gaining as much of tokens of the types of good, weighted by their value so far as this is discernible, that are items on the list.

A person's specific circumstances, including her inborn motivational tendencies and dispositions toward forming dispositions as well as the likely social environment she will face, are of supreme importance for figuring out a good life plan for any individual. You cannot begin to read a life plan off the objective list, because individuals differ in myriad ways. If we could attain a Vending Machine theory of what is IIGFY, a life plan for any individual could be derived from the full statement of the objective list normative principles plus a statement of the relevant empirical facts of her circumstances (the relevant facts being those that will impede or facilitate her gaining stuff on the list). Short of that, it is still not the case that there are different objective lists for different types of people or for people in different circumstances. I would say there is one list, period. This says what is IIGFY if you are a being capable of having any welfare at all. Other things equal, it would boost my dog's well-being if he could be given genetic therapy that would enable him to learn physics. There is no specific dog-specific list of objective goods. Nor is there a human-child-specific list.

You might say, for public policy choice, what might be true for rare idiosyncratic individuals is a nonissue. In response, I surmise that some of the counterexamples I have discussed are empirically common. In any event, it is false that public policy should never tailor its strategies to what is good for particular individuals taken one by one. Medical practice should be as individual-specific as we can feasibly make it. An appropriate social policy for improving the quality of life of homeless destitute individuals might be to assign each a social worker with a set budget, the social worker then having large discretion to work out, in conjunction with the individual to be helped, what ways of spending money to improve his life would make sense and be most effective.

In these remarks, I have drifted into criticizing Alexandrova's proposal regarding the nature of children's well-being as a proposal for social policy. I believe it is best suited to that role, even if vulnerable to the stated criticisms. If the proposal is taken as a guideline for the science of well-being, I would say there is less to recommend it.

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