The Wellbeing Analogy

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Abstract: The diversity of meanings or applications of "wellbeing" fuel a discussion about its context-dependence or not. This article will first introduce this discussion. Next, it will present the classical logical notion of analogy considering it as a possible answer to the discussion. After that, Section 3 will apply analogy to wellbeing and will suggest its possible "primary meaning". Finally, a short conclusion will follow.

Keywords: well-being; analogy; Aristotle; eudaimonia

La analogía del bienestar

Resumen: *La diversidad de significados o aplicaciones de "bienestar" alimenta una discusión sobre su dependencia del contexto o no. Este artículo primero introducirá esta discusión. A continuación, presentará la noción lógica clásica de analogía considerándola como una posible respuesta a la discusión. Posteriormente, la Sección 3 aplicará la analogía al bienestar y sugerirá su posible "significado principal". Finalmente, se hará una breve conclusión.*

Palabras clave: *bienestar; analogía; Aristóteles; eudaimonia*

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The academic literature on wellbeing describes different theoretical approaches to it. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* entry for "well-being", Roger Crisp states that "It has become standard to distinguish theories of well-being as either hedonist theories, desire theories, or objective list theories" (2021: 1). Hedonists view wellbeing as maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In desire theories, wellbeing depends on the satisfaction of people's preferences or desires. Finally, "Objective list theories are usually understood as theories which list items constituting well-being that consist neither merely in pleasurable experience nor in desire-satisfaction. Such items might include, for example, knowledge or friendship" (Crisp, 2021). These are philosophical theories, and their common characteristic is also described by Crisp: "Well-being is most commonly used in philosophy to describe what is non-instrumentally or ultimately good *for* a person" (2021: 1). However, not all the expressions found in Google refer to a non-instrumental or ultimate good.

Guy Fletcher's (2013) typology of wellbeing theories paves the way to another theory, perfectionism. Fletcher classifies these theories by taking into account the characteristic of their claims—i.e., enumerative or explanatory. For him, objective lists and hedonist theories enumerate the constituents of wellbeing, while desire-fulfilment and perfectionist theories are explanatory, because they explain why something contributes to someone's wellbeing. Perfectionism explains why the development of certain human capacities contributes to our wellbeing (Bradford, 2016). Fletcher notes that some theories —like Aristotle's, which links human nature to wellbeing— are both enumerative and explanatory (2013: 209).

Additionally, as Polly Mitchell and Anna Alexandrova explain, "many local concepts of well-being will be inappropriately applied to many people: concepts of child well-being, end-of-life well-being, disease-specific well-being, and so on, only make sense when used with particular people, in appropriate contexts" (2021: 2425). This is why they uphold a contextualist theory of wellbeing: "conceptual pluralism" (2021: 2424ff.). Overall, there are very different theories on wellbeing.

A dictionary entry for wellbeing reads, "the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy". The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as "the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous: welfare", and it defines welfare as "the state of doing well especially in respect to good fortune, happiness, well-being, or prosperity".

A Google search for "wellbeing" yields a number of very different things associated with well-being—for example "mental well-being", "well-being Hotel", "Well-being clinical centre", "an infusion for well-being", "well-being courses", "school well-being", "the science of well-being", "Well-being Trust", "well-being in life", "well-being at work", "well-being economy" and "economic well-being", "ecological well-being", "employee well-being", "well-being training", "inner well-being", "well-being project", "social well-being", "psychological well-being", "well-being initiative", "physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, financial and social well-being", and "the Nation well-being", to name but a few.

A conclusion one may extract from this search is that wellbeing is a remarkably broad notion applicable to very different things. One may also wonder if there is a specific meaning of wellbeing, and other meanings that are metaphorical or analogical.

In addition, this diversity of meanings or applications of wellbeing fuel a discussion about its context-dependence or lack thereof. Context-dependency may be an answer to the diversity of applications of well-being. The next section will introduce this discussion. In agreement with this position, I will argue that "wellbeing" is an analogical concept in the classical sense of analogy. Section 2 will introduce and explain analogy, showing that there is a primary analogue or "focal meaning" of analogue terms and other derivative meanings. Section 3 will apply analogy to wellbeing, proposing a primary meaning of the latter. This thesis will be that the also classical concept of *eudaimonia* fits with this primary meaning, thus proposing a bridge between contemporary notions of wellbeing and classical philosophy. Finally, I will summarize my conclusions.

I. The Discussion on the Context-Dependence of Wellbeing

In her 2017 book on the philosophy of "the science of well-being," Anna Alexandrova notes that the constructs of wellbeing used by sciences — psychology, economics, development sciences, political science, and medical sciences— are plural. She thus concludes that philosophy must provide corresponding plural concepts of wellbeing. She states (2017: xxxviii):

> I favour a version of contextualism according to which the semantic content of well-being expressions changes with the context in which it is asserted. In some contexts well-being means all-things-considered evaluation and in others a more limited judgement about certain specific conditions of life.

She explains what her proposal means and summarizes (2017: 23):

> Contextualism is a view that well-being expressions have varying content depending on the context in which well-being is assessed. This context is fixed by the features of the practical environment of the speaker at the time when the judgement is made. These features can include facts about the subject's values and commitments, the relevant contrast classes (e.g., to whom the subject is being compared), what the relationship between the subject and the speaker is, what resources are available to the speaker qua potential benefactor, and perhaps many others.

She offers the example of children's wellbeing, which differs from adults' wellbeing. However, she does not mean that there is not a general substantive theory of wellbeing, but she supports mid-level theories adapting to different constructs. At this point, there may be a "variation" between well-being as a concept and as a theory. In the 2021 paper she co-authored with Mitchell, they "do not deny or eliminate the overarching concept of well-being. Rather we maintain that, to the extent that this exists, it is conceptually thin and needs substantive specification in order for it to be used to make well-being ascriptions in practice" (2021: 2427). This is what they call "conceptual pluralism".

Stephen Campbell (2016) undertakes a complete review of the different concepts of wellbeing held by its different theories. Using a number of examples, he shows that there is a conflation of concepts of wellbeing, concluding that we should thus uphold a conceptual pluralism.

Guy Fletcher stands against Alexandrova and Campbell's contextualism. Alexandrova (2017: 5) had rejected "circumscriptionism"—the position that circumscribes the concept of wellbeing to the one defined by philosophers. Fletcher, instead, advocates for "an innocent form of circumscriptionism" (2019: 703). He clarifies:

> My alternative is thus a mild form of context-sensitivity, one that retains the idea that well-being is fundamentally context-insensitive, even if it is a matter of context which *aspects of* well-being we talk about and which levels of well-being count as doing well (2019: 710, cursive in the text).

Mitchell and Alexandrova (2021: 2427) seem comfortable with this notion. They state:

> More nuanced objective list theories include Guy Fletcher's defence of what he calls aspectualism about well-being—the view that in different contexts we are interested in different aspects of well-being (Fletcher 2019). General assessments of well-being, for Fletcher, capture well-being proper, and will consider a person's overall well-being, taking into account particular aspectual assessments.

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a tension stemming from the fact that the term "wellbeing" is used in different ways or means different things. Nonetheless, these different meanings share something in common. This is the case of the analogical terms that I will explain in the next section.

II. Analogical Terms

Classical logic divides names according to their meaning into univocal, equivocal, and analogical. Aristotle defines univocity in *Categories*:

> Things are univocally (*synónyma*) named, when not only they bear the same name but the name means the same in each case —has the same definition corresponding. Thus a man and an ox are called "animals" (1a 6-7).

This is not the case of wellbeing as showed in the previous sections. Concerning equivocal names, Aristotle also defines them: "Things are equivocally (*omónyma*) named, when they have the name only in common, the definition (or statement of essence) corresponding with the name being different" (*Categories* 1a 1-2). However, this difference can be total or partial. For example, as often happens, two different persons can have the same name: the difference is consequently total. The cases of total difference are numerous[1]. It seems that this not the case of wellbeing. The different applications of wellbeing share something in common.

Equivocal names with partial differences have also been considered by Aristotle as a subdivision of equivocation. Medieval logicians have called them analogical names, an expression that has lasted[2].

Aristotle provides some examples of analogy. He refers to this subdivision of equivocal names as homonymous *pròs hén* —that is "equivocal in respect to one." These names have different but related meanings —one of which is the "focal" or primary meaning to which the other, derivative meanings refer and are connected. An example used by Aristotle is "healthy": the focal meaning of healthy relates to a healthy human body; its derivative meanings may refer to healthy foods, sports, medicines, and so on (cf.

Metaphysics, IV, 2, 1003a 34 and ff.). Homonymy *pròs hén* also applies to being.

Aristotle explains, "There are many senses in which being can be said, but they are related to a central point, one definite kind of thing" (*Metaphysics*, IV, 2, 1003a 33). Being means a concrete thing, a substance, what a thing is (an essence), and an accident, such as quality or quantity. All these realities are beings to a major or minor degree. Beings or entities present themselves, according to Aristotle, in about ten categories or predicates. Aristotle explained and developed this idea in his book *Categories*. As Ralph McInerny explains,

> when things are named analogically, the multiple signification of the common name can be reduced to a certain unity. [...] on the other hand, the common notion signified by the name is not shared equally by all the things which receive the name; [...] one of the things is primarily signified, and others are signified insofar as they refer in some way to this thing (1961: 75 and 76).

In the next section, I will propose applying analogy to the contemporary notion of wellbeing.

III. The Wellbeing Analogy

The key to applying analogy to wellbeing is to detect what the focal meaning of the name is. It must be general enough to connect its other uses to its primary meaning. The dictionary definitions stated in the Introduction refer to health, prosperity, happiness.

Yet, Muslims may think that these ends are not so relevant, and they may value religious faith —which cannot be bought— over them. They may even view this definition as "Europeanizing" or expressing the ideals of Western Enlightenment. For example, Seyed Hadi Arabi (2016), drawing from Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Mulla Sadra, stresses the importance of otherworldly wellbeing, wisdom, and ethical virtue.

In the Bible's Book of Wisdom, King Solomon states that he prefers wisdom above kingdoms and thrones, and esteemed riches, above precious stones, and all gold, above health and beauty (Chapter 7, 8-10).

Nonetheless, these differing views on the elements that contribute to wellbeing do not imply that it is completely subjective or relative. Arabi

stresses the relevance of otherworldly wellbeing, wisdom, and ethical virtue, while Solomon highlights wisdom. Indeed, these ends could prove more relevant for these authors than health and prosperity, but they do not cancel the latter.

Mitchell and Alexandrova (2021: 2415ff.) complain about philosophical monist definitions of wellbeing that do not factor in its contexts. In turn, Campbell claims that "the concept of well-being involves a kind of 'subject-relativity' that is lacking in the concept of good simpliciter" (2016: 403). Analogy allows for the combination of unity and plurality, if we define a general focal meaning that can be performed in different ways. I mentioned above that Crisp states that wellbeing is a non-instrumental or ultimate good. Circling back to Aristotle, this characterization of wellbeing fits in with the "dominant end" interpretation of his notion of *eudaimonia*. There are two main interpretations of the meaning of *eudaimonia* for Aristotle. One interpretation is the "inclusive view" of *eudaimonia* promoted by John Lloyd Ackrill (1980). It holds that *eudaimonia* is an inclusive end consisting of second-order ends, such as capabilities. The other interpretation has been provided by Richard Kraut (1989), who asserts that *eudaimonia* is a dominant end different from the second-order ends, which are sought not only for the sake of themselves but also for the sake of *eudaimonia*, to which they are subordinated.

Eudaimonia, felicitously translated as fulfilment or flourishing (instead of happiness), is an ultimate final end that can be reached in different ways, depending on an individual's specific circumstances, age, corporation, class, society, etc[3].

This conceptualization of wellbeing automatically does away with hedonist theories, which are monistic, and also "rigid" objective-list theories. I call them "rigid" because they establish a particular list referring to wellbeing. This does not mean that we have to discard pleasure and other ends considered by objective-list theories as contributing to wellbeing. Still, these ends are not unexceptionable in all cases.

The rigid monist positions match the alternative interpretation of Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, the "inclusive end" conception according to which, in order to achieve well-being, we need to have all its constituents. For the dominant end conception, instead, it is not necessary to have all the ends contributing to *eudaimonia*, because the contribution of every individual end might change from one person to the next, and not all are

always necessary. Our objective-list theory may not be rigid, like Aristotle's. Indeed, Aristotle adopts a more fluid view when he lists the non-instrumental ends that contribute to *eudaimonia*, and he always includes pleasure as one of them, along with virtue and honour[4].

The lists, as gathered by Fletcher (2016: 149), are:

> Finnis
>
> Life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, "religion."
>
> Fletcher
>
> Achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, virtue[5].
>
> Murphy
>
> Life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in play and work, excellence in agency, inner peace, friendship and community, religion, happiness.
>
> Parfit
>
> Moral goodness, rational activity, development of abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, awareness of true beauty.

In effect, it can be argued that these ends contribute to *eudaimonia*, but not all them are always necessary, and there can be other ends that contribute to it in specific situations, cultures, ages, etc[6].

The focal meaning of wellbeing that I am proposing is *eudaimonia* — understood as living well in the sense of a theory of the good (perfectionism), rationally corrected or enlarged by other ends that are relevant in specific situations or stages in life, etc., without specifying them at this level of focal meaning. *Eudaimonia* meets the essential characteristic mentioned by Crisp: it is a non-instrumental ultimate good. The derivative meanings of wellbeing are its rationally argued specific definitions[7]. Rationality is required to define specific forms of wellbeing, as an antidote to any form of capricious subjectivity. Different analogue meanings of wellbeing contribute to its primary or focal meaning, the *eudamonia* of particular individuals, groups or societies. If those meanings do not contribute to its central meaning, I propose that they are merely metaphorical meanings of wellbeing.

Aristotle maintains that there are some basic traits of humanity —such as rationality and sociality (*Politics* I, 2)— that contribute to *eudaimonia*, but he does not specify the ways of achieving it. For him, human beings have some essential and constant features, but the remaining characteristics would have to be ascertained or determined by practical reason and agreed upon by mutual consent. Those "anthropological constants" entail the human capacity for theoretical and practical knowledge and reasoning and are oriented towards the human function (or *ergon*): to live a life of virtues according to reason in order to achieve a good life leading to *eudaimonia*.

Living well, fulfilling, or flourishing all imply the exercise of practical rationality. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* or flourishing is "an activity of the soul in accordance to reason." As Lorraine Besser-Jones, in her article linking *eudaimonism* with wellbeing states,

> One nice aspect of this focus on practical rationality is its ability to highlight an individual's agency. Through exercising practical rationality and developing practical wisdom, the individual can construct and shape her life. She can reflect on her goals and how they fit together, thereby comprising a framework for her to make decisions about which ends to pursue and which course of actions to embrace (2016: 189).

This process is not automatic. It is a must rather than a fact. It implies a rational reflection and a decision to act according to the conclusion of reasoning. Why? Because, as Aristotle states in *Eudemian Ethics*, when referring to the ends contributing to *eudaimonia*, "It is a sign of much folly not to order one's life in view of a goal" (I, 2, 1214b 11).

Indeed, wellbeing is normative; it involves values, and the science of wellbeing is value-laden (Alexandrova 2016: 391). This value-ladenness does not avoid objectivity if values are correctly argued and, in the case of communities (social wellbeing), subjected to rational discussion as well (Alexandrova 2016: 398). We need to provide an account of the specific compositions of wellbeing.

IV. Conclusion

Analogy adds to the theory of wellbeing because it enables us to consider its general focal meaning as well as derivative meanings that adapt this general concept to specific contexts. I proposed to consider *eudaimonia* –an activity aiming at the good and adapted to specific contexts– as the focal meaning of

wellbeing. The wellbeing of children, adults, and the elderly are derivative meanings. “Mental well-being”, “well-being Hotel”, “Well-being clinical centre”, “an infusion for well-being”, “well-being courses”, “school well-being”, and other expressions mentioned in the Introduction are also derivative meanings of well-being. Analogy eliminates the tension between generality and specificity.

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[1] For a list, see for example, https://people.sc.fsu.edu/~jburkardt/fun/wordplay/equivocal_words.html

[2] For medieval theories of analogy, see Jennifer Ashworth, 2017 and Ralph McInerny, 1961.

[3] On the relation between flourishing and well-being, see Kraut (2007: 5).

[4] In XX, I explained the Aristotelian distinction between (a) ends that can be considered only as means, only pursued for the sake of something else (first-order or instrumental ends); (b) ends that are desirable in themselves and also pursued for the sake of the final end (second-order or non-instrumental ends), and (c) ends that are only desirable in themselves (third-order or final ends: usually known as *eudaimonia*).

[5] Fletcher's (2009) list includes pleasure, knowledge, autonomy, and friendship (2009: 26), while his list in 2013 features achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, and virtue (2013: 214).

[6] For example, we cannot affirm that a single individual, a person within the autistic spectrum, or a hermit do not have well-being because they respectively lack children, knowledge, or sociability.

[7] For example, concerning children, Aristotle asserts, "children's bodies should be given attention before their souls, and the appetites should be the next part of them to be regulated. But the regulation of their appetites should be intended for the benefit of their minds —just as the attention given to their bodies should be intended for the benefit of their souls" (*Politics* VII, 15, 1334b 25-28).