Philosophy and the Science of Subjective Well-Being

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Introduction: The Renaissance of Prudential Psychology

Philosophical reflection on the good life in coming decades will likely owe a tremendous debt to the burgeoning science of subjective well-being and the pioneers, like Ed Diener, who brought it to fruition. While the psychological dimensions of human welfare now occupy a prominent position in the social sciences, they have gotten surprisingly little attention in the recent philosophical literature. The situation appears to be changing, however, as philosophers inspired by the empirical research begin to examine more seriously the psychology of human flourishing. This is not to say that the philosophers of any era have kept entirely silent about such matters. While the term ‘subjective well-being’ has yet to take a significant place in the philosophical lexicon, philosophers have always evinced some interest in the subjective or psychological dimensions of human welfare, and sometimes quite a lot.

Philosophical work on the good life has traditionally been the province of ethical theory, which may be understood broadly to include all aspects of value theory. Ethics in this broad sense is one of three main branches of philosophical inquiry, alongside metaphysics and epistemology. Philosophers sometimes use ‘ethics’ more narrowly, as a synonym for ‘morality’ or ‘moral theory’. But ethical theorists frequently claim to be in the business of trying to answer Socrates’ question: how ought one to live? And this question ranges well beyond matters of right and wrong, dealing also with matters of well-being, flourishing, welfare, eudaimonia, or prudential value. There is some dispute about the precise equivalence of these expressions, which carry differing connotations. But all seem to concern the same cluster of issues: what benefits a person, is in her interest, or makes a person’s life go best for her. Thus contemporary theories of “well-being” or “welfare” appear to be direct competitors to ancient theories of “eudaimonia.” It can be useful, then, to employ these expressions interchangeably, whether or not they are strictly synonymous. That is how I will use them here.

Some philosophers have maintained that well-being is entirely a psychological affair: the only thing that matters for well-being is, ultimately, pleasure or some other mental states. Most, however, have tended toward the view that mental states comprise only a part of well-being. Robert Nozick’s (1974) “experience machine” case, for example, is widely taken to show that welfare cannot depend solely on mental states, or at least experiential states: for most people recoil at the thought of permanently plugging into a virtual reality machine, à la The Matrix, that offers a simulated life containing whatever experiences its occupant—who would think they were real—might want (Nozick, 1974). Such a life strikes many as pathetic, not enviable. Examples of this sort suggest that well-being depends on what our lives are actually like, and not just how they seem to us. If this is right, then well-being is not purely a psychological matter.

Judging by the dearth of recent philosophical work on well-being’s psychological dimensions, one might wonder whether philosophers have concluded that such matters aren’t terribly important or interesting at all. When happiness gets discussed at all, for instance, it is often only to be dismissed as a superficial state of cheerfulness. But perhaps the superficiality lies in the way people tend to think about happiness and related states, and not in the idea that such matters are of central importance in a good life. This, probably, would have been the view of most ancient philosophers, for whom the psychology of well-being was a major preoccupation. (For an excellent survey of Hellenistic ethics, see Annas, 1993.) Such thinkers took Socrates’ question quite seriously, and tried to articulate ideals of the good life that intelligent persons would, on
reflection, find compelling. None of the major schools of ancient ethical thought failed to maintain that the good life was a pleasant one, and most took great pains to show how this was so, often developing sophisticated doctrines about the mental aspects of flourishing. While the Cyrenaics espoused a simple form of hedonism centering on the pleasures of the moment, more discerning hedonists like the Epicureans, and perhaps Democritus, held subtler views about the pleasures worth seeking—in the Epicurean case, the “static” pleasures of tranquility or ataraxia, and in the Democritean case euthymia, which is often translated as “cheerfulness” but may have centered more on tranquility than this translation suggests. (The ideal of ataraxia also figured prominently in the work of the Skeptics.) The Epicureans had a lot to say, not just about pleasure, but about the varieties of desire and how to cultivate the proper desires. By contrast the Stoics, who posited virtue as the sole good, and believed pleasure and pain to be “indifferents,” might be expected to have been more reticent about such matters. But a highly developed psychology of well-being occupied the center of their ethics, partly because virtue for them involved getting one’s inner life, particularly one’s emotions, in proper order. And despite its freedom from the passions or apatheia, the virtuous life was clearly envisaged as a pleasant one involving ataraxia and various “good affects” or eupatheiai, including a kind of joy (chara). It was not a grueling or affectless, “eat your vegetables” affair. They did, admittedly, maintain that one could be eudaimon on the rack, so perhaps the sage’s life is only normally pleasant. But even the man on the rack could only be flourishing provided that he not let it bother him or in any way disturb his tranquility.

Plato tries hard in the Republic to defend a similar view of well-being, arguing at great length that the unvirtuous must be plagued by psychic disharmony, so that only the virtuous life is truly pleasant. Aristotle moderates such views by identifying well-being with virtuous activity, and counting goods of fortune in the assessment of well-being. He too discussed the psychological aspects of human flourishing at length, developing an influential view about the role of the emotions in a virtuous life, but also saying much about the character of pleasure and arguing that the life of virtue is the most pleasant.

It is doubtful that many ancients would have failed to grasp the significance of empirical research on subjective well-being. If, for instance, studies indicate that certain ways of life are surprisingly unfulfilling or downright unpleasant, this would likely qualify as an important finding according to any of the doctrines canvassed above. To be sure, qualifications would need to be made regarding the value of such states for the ancients. For example, people can enjoy themselves in questionable ways, say in leading lives of passive consumption that Aristotle deemed fit only for “grazing cattle.” Hence most ancients would not have considered high levels of subjective well-being to be sufficient for well-being. (Though perhaps the highest reaches of subjective well-being are possible only for those leading the best sort of life—recall Aristotle’s claim that the virtuous life is also the most pleasant.) Second, some of the states we associate with being happy, such as giddy elation, would have been thought undesirable by many ancient theorists—in some cases, as among the Stoics, intrinsically bad. Third, many ancients—Stoics and Aristotelians, for instance—rejected the idea that happiness, or any part of it, should be our goal. It is, for them, just a by-product of virtue—an agreeable accompaniment to the life well-lived. Finally, those same thinkers rejected the notion that happiness could be good in itself, apart from the activities and circumstances associated with it. It was essential that these mental states come about in the right way, at the right time. But such points hardly show subjective well-being not to be important, and it is doubtful that any ancient school should have taken such a view.
An interesting thing happens when we get to the modern era: serious reflection on the psychology of well-being becomes relatively scarce, even as accounts of well-being grow ever more psychologized. Indeed, serious reflection on well-being, period, became scarcer in the modern era. The literature on well-being is miniscule next to the colossal body of work on moral theory. With some notable exceptions, such as Mill, modern ethical theorists seem proportionately to be far less interested in the nature of well-being than their ancient counterparts. Even Utilitarianists, who ground their ethics in the promotion of well-being, often understood in hedonistic terms, have tended not to produce great works on the character of well-being or its psychology (though see Sidgwick, 1966; Griffin, 1986). Bentham’s discussion of pleasure is unusually thorough, and less crude than is often supposed, but it still is not, for all that, very interesting. (Existentialists and other “continental” philosophers have struck many as more edifying in discussing the good life, but this work is not well integrated with the “analytic” literature on well-being, on which the present chapter focuses.)

Why the change? Such historical questions rarely have simple answers, but one factor may be a shift in views about personal authority in matters of well-being. The ancients apparently took it as a given that individuals are not, in general, authorities about their own welfare. Quite the opposite: probably most ancient philosophers followed Socrates’ lead in distinguishing “the many” and “the wise,” with the former and much larger class being, basically, dolts. Indeed, Aristotle notoriously maintained that some of us are so ill-fitted for self-governance that we are better off enslaved, with masters to look after us. Even Epicurean hedonists believed that most of us require considerable enlightenment about the true character of our interests; the pursuit of pleasure, correctly understood, is not at all what most people would expect. In fact there may have been no domain of personal welfare in which ancient philosophers considered the typical person to be authoritative. Thus the standard economic view of modernity, that well-being consists roughly in people getting whatever they happen to want, would have seemed childish if not insane to most ancient thinkers. Given this sort of background, the richness and depth of ancient thought about human flourishing should come as no surprise: if most of us are badly mistaken about our own interests, then a better understanding of well-being must be among our top priorities. Perhaps it should be the central task of intellectual inquiry, as it evidently was among the ancients. Nor should we be surprised if such thinkers paid close attention to the psychology of well-being: our minds are plainly the most important thing about us, yet most of us, according to the ancients, fail to grasp what states of mind are truly worth having, what their role is in a good life, and what states of mind are most conducive to achieving well-being.

The spirit of modernity is rather different. Inspired by Enlightenment optimism about the individual’s powers of reason and self-government, modern liberals tend to believe in one or another form of the sovereignty of the individual in matters of personal welfare: by and large, people know what’s best for them, and tend to act rationally in the promotion of their interests. We all make mistakes, of course, but not so much that we urgently need enlightenment about our own well-being. What people need more than anything, on this view, is freedom. In particular, they need the liberty and resources to pursue their various goals however they see fit. In general, people do best when empowered to shape their lives according to their own priorities.

This sort of view does not eliminate the need for philosophical work on well-being. But it does diminish its importance. People who are authorities about their own good don’t need enlightenment; they need empowerment. They need economics, not philosophy (or, for that matter, psychology). Thus, perhaps, did formal research on well-being pass largely from the philosop-
The science of subjective well-being has taken the lead in changing all that. Without challenging the core values of liberal modernity, researchers in this field have discovered a number of surprising facts about the psychology of welfare. For instance, that material conditions influence happiness far less than expected, and that people are systematically prone to make serious mistakes in predicting what will make them happy (see, e.g., Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Diener & Oishi, 2005; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). We clearly have a lot to learn about well-being, particularly its psychological aspects. And the questions being raised are partly philosophical: what does it mean to be happy? Is there a difference between happiness and satisfaction? How important are they? What do empirical findings tell us about the good life?

There has been a broad interdisciplinary resurgence of interest in the psychology of well-being, with the science of subjective well-being at its center. This effectively amounts to a new field of inquiry, which might be termed prudential psychology, paralleling the related field of moral psychology, and following the common usage of ‘prudential’ to denote matters of well-being. Because there are diverse ways of thinking about the psychological aspects of well-being, some of which deemphasize or go beyond the states encompassed by subjective well-being, it is useful to have a neutral term that can embrace a wide range of approaches. Ancient objectivists about human flourishing, contemporary researchers working on eudaimonic psychology, positive psychologists, “negative” psychologists studying misery and mental illness, and others all have views about the psychology of well-being. They all study prudential psychology. Like ‘moral psychology’, the term is sufficiently broad and theoretically neutral that it allows practitioners in various disciplines complete latitude in defining their own subspecialties and theoretical approaches to the subject. It is not meant to supplant terms like ‘positive psychology’, but to place various fields in a broader context that highlights their common interests and significance. It is possible for intelligent people to disagree about the promise of, say, hedonic versus eudaimonic psychology. But there can be little dispute about the importance of prudential psychology.

The Philosophy of Well-being and Happiness

Theories of Well-Being

To put subjective well-being research in historical and philosophical context, we need to understand how philosophers think about the more fundamental notion of well-being. The best-known philosophical taxonomy, offered by Derek Parfit, divides theories of well-being into three types: hedonistic, desire, and objective list theories (Parfit, 1984). But since then an important new approach has entered the scene, and an ancient family of theories has gained substantially in prominence. We will, then, distinguish five basic approaches here:

1. Hedonistic theories
2. Desire theories
3. Authentic happiness theories
4. Eudaimonistic (or “nature-fulfillment”) theories
5. List theories

Crudely, hedonism identifies well-being with pleasure. A bit more precisely, well-being
consists in a subject’s balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience. Hedonism about well-being should not be confused with other forms of hedonism, notably hedonism about happiness. Historical hedonists include, among others, Epicureans and classical Utilitarians. (Recent defenses of welfare hedonism include Crisp, in press; Feldman, 2004; Sprigge, 1987.) Hedonists vary on the exact specification of the theory, some preferring to focus on enjoyment and suffering, others pleasure and pain, and so forth. (For a good discussion of philosophical views of pleasure, see Sumner, 1996.) But the central idea is that what ultimately matters for welfare is the hedonic quality of individuals’ experience, and nothing more.

The chief attraction of this view is that it accommodates the plausible thought that, if anything matters for welfare, it is the pleasantness of our experience of life. Whereas it is far less obvious that something can benefit or harm us if it in no way enters our experience; moreover, nothing else seems to matter in just the way that pleasure and suffering do. Despite its attractions, most philosophers have rejected hedonism, either because of experience machine-type worries or “philosophy of swine” objections like those that led Mill (1979) to distinguish higher and lower quality pleasures. Roger Crisp’s (1997) example of Haydn and the oyster illustrates the latter worry: supposing an oyster can have pleasant experiences—of low level and quality—then one could apparently be better off with an extremely long oyster life versus the normal-length life of Haydn, however fulfilling his life may have been. For given enough time the oyster will accumulate a greater quantity of pleasure than any human could achieve (Crisp, 1997). Many find it implausible that an oyster could be better off than Haydn, and few have endorsed Mill’s attempt to remedy such concerns.

As of now, the theory to beat is the desire theory of well-being, also called the desire or preference satisfaction or fulfillment account. The dominant account among economists and philosophers over the last century or so, the desire theory identifies well-being with the (actual) satisfaction of the individual’s desires. Experience machines don’t trouble such views, since many of our desires will go unfulfilled in an experience machine. Desire theories come in many varieties, the most important type being informed-desire theories, which restrict the desires that count to the ones we would have given full information (rationality, reflection, etc.). (Such theories include, to name a few, those of Brandt, 1979; Hare, 1981; Harsanyi, 1982; Rawls, 1971; and Sidgwick, 1966. For related views, see Carson, 2000; Darwall, 1983; Griffin, 1986, 2000; Railton, 1986a, 1986b.) These variants predominate, since many find it intuitively obvious that we don’t gain from the satisfaction of desires that are grounded in ignorance or irrationality. Desire theories have a number of attractions, one being that they forge an obvious link between agents’ welfare and their motives. Moreover, they are extremely flexible, able to accommodate the full range of goods that people seek in their lives. But most importantly, they seem to comport with the liberal sensibilities of modernity: what’s best for me depends on what I care about, and on such matters I am sovereign. This seems appealingly non-paternalistic.

Yet desire theories have come in for withering criticism in recent decades on a variety of counts, and may be on the decline. One difficulty is that people’s desires can be self-sacrificial or hostile to their own interests, or simply concerned with distant affairs having no bearing on their own lives. The problem is that people can desire anything, including things that seem irrelevant or detrimental to their well-being (Darwall, 2002; Sumner, 1996). Another is how to devise an information or rationality constraint that gives sufficient critical power—recognizing that people do make mistakes—without departing so much from agents’ actual perspectives that the theory loses the connection with individual sovereignty that drew people to it in the first place. (What
do the priorities I would have if omniscient, perfectly rational, etc. have to do with me? See Loeb, 1995; Rosati, 1995.) Also influential have been “happy slave”-type worries concerning adaptation: desires adapt to the possibilities people face, so that the aspirations of those with modest prospects tend likewise to be modest. Oppressed women, for instance, can content themselves with being treated like property. Merely getting what they want would, it seems, leave them with impoverished lives (Elster, 1983; Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1987).

The third theory, L. W. Sumner’s authentic happiness view, is meant to rectify the most serious difficulties with hedonistic and desire theories while retaining their emphasis on subjective experience and individual sovereignty (Sumner, 1996, 2000). His view identifies well-being with being authentically happy: being happy, where one’s happiness is both informed about the conditions of one’s life and autonomous, meaning that it reflects values that are truly one’s own and not the result of manipulation or oppressive social conditioning. “Happiness” here is something like subjective well-being, involving both global attitudes of life satisfaction and positive affect, though Sumner calls his view a “life satisfaction” account. The root idea is that one’s happiness should reflect a response of one’s own, to a life that is one’s own, ostensibly ruling out experience machine and happy slave objections. Whereas desire theories face the problem of how irrelevant desires, or fulfillments that don’t impact my experience, can affect my well-being, the authentic happiness view incorporates an experience requirement: only what affects my happiness can benefit me. The response to Sumner’s account is still taking shape (but see LeBar, 2004; Haybron, in press-b), but one concern is whether any subjectivist theory has the critical power to manage common intuitions about impoverished lives, or where normal human goods are lacking. Why couldn’t a passive couch potato or even a slave be authentically happy, having reflected on her values and decided to affirm her life just as it is?

Such concerns have given much impetus to Aristotelian accounts of well-being, which have stirred considerable interest since the revival of virtue ethics and the rise of the Sen-Nussbaum capabilities approach in political theory. Comprising the best-known variety of our fourth type of theory—to be explained shortly—Aristotelian views identify well-being with “well-functioning,” which is to say functioning or living well as a human being: the fulfillment of human nature. This consists, in the first instance, in a life of excellent or virtuous activity, though this is sometimes put less astringently, as a “fully” or “truly” human life. Aristotelian views and close relations appear in, e.g., Darwall, 2002; Foot, 2001; Hurka, 1993; Hurthhouse, 1999; Kraut, 2002; LeBar, 2004; Murphy, 2001; Nussbaum, 1988, 1992, 1993, 2000a, 2000b; Sher, 1997; Toner, in press. (The Aristotelian literature has yet to integrate fully with contemporary work on well-being, so it is often difficult to tell where an author stands on well-being. Hurka, e.g., rejects a “well-being” interpretation of his view.)

The idea behind such theories is that we flourish by fully exercising our human capacities. It is not simply a matter of being morally virtuous, although moral virtue is essential to well-being as Aristotelians see it. Thus a ruthless corporate executive with little concern for others could not flourish according to the Aristotelian, however successful she might be according to her own priorities. Such a life would be stripped bare of crucial elements of other-concern that give normal human lives much of their shape. Similarly, the couch potato’s life of passive consumption would strike the Aristotelian as barely human, a sad waste of potential. Aristotelian theories address widespread intuitions about the importance of personal development and leading a “full life” replete with the essentials of a normal human life. (A disability that strips the individual of normal sexual capacities, say, seems to mark an irreplaceable loss that no amount of
happiness can compensate for.) Yet these views face serious objections as well. First, they can
seem to make well-being alien to the individual: how can what benefits me depend on what hu-
man beings in general are like? Species norms are not obviously relevant to questions of per-
sonal benefit. A second concern is that, while virtue does seem important for well-being in most
cases, the connection might be weaker than Aristotelians think. Sometimes virtue seems not so
beneficial, as in a talented philosopher whose excellence brings little satisfaction. And sometimes
the unvirtuous really do seem to flourish. A related point is that Aristotelian accounts may seem
to accord too marginal a role for pleasure and other aspects of subjective well-being. While truly
virtuous activity is indeed counted pleasant by Aristotelians, the pleasure apparently matters sim-
ply as a “completion” or by-product of excellence, a congenial bonus attending what really mat-
ters. This idea has some appeal when thinking about the way we plan our own lives, but less so
from other perspectives, as when assessing our children’s well-being: we do not think their hap-
piness or suffering are mere by-products or concomitants of what really matters. They are, in
great part, what really matters.

Aristotle’s writings are so influential that commentators often use terms like ‘eudaimoni-
tic’ or ‘eudaimonic’ simply to denote Aristotelian theories of well-being, or views that emphasize
perfection or virtue. But Aristotelians formed only one of the schools of Hellenistic ethics that
scholars denote, collectively, as eudaimonistic. Definitions vary, but (ethical) eudaimonism tends
to refer to ancient theories that ground ethics in the notion of eudaimonia—the idea being that
this is our agreed-upon goal that properly structures our deliberations about how to live, and the
theory’s job is to determine the nature of this goal (see, e.g., Annas, 1993). Some ancient eudai-
monists, like the Epicureans, denied that eudaimonia consists in perfection. If there was an im-
portant feature that eudaimonistic accounts of well-being shared in common, it was the teleologi-
cal idea that well-being consists in nature-fulfillment. Epicureans arguably agreed with Aristotle
that well-being involves the fulfillment of our natures as human beings; but they believed that we
fulfilled our natures by achieving pleasure.

Thus we might usefully distinguish welfare eudaimonism as a fourth approach to well-
being, where we start with a conception of human nature or—if we are specifically interested in
self-fulfillment—the self, and take well-being to consist in the fulfillment of that nature. Aristote-
lian views form the best-known variety of eudaimonism. But this sort of approach is not limited
to the ancients, and versions of it arguably inform Mill’s (1991) discussion of individuality in On
Liberty, eudaimonistic approaches to the psychology of well-being, and the work of many other
moderns. A eudaimonistic account incorporating a form of authentic happiness as a central ele-
ment of self-fulfillment is sketched in Haybron, in press-b. (For general discussion of the notion
of self-fulfillment, see Gewirth, 1998; Feinberg, 1992. For a review of eudaimonic psychology,
see Ryan & Deci, 2001.) It is even possible to found desire accounts and other subjectivisms on a
eudaimonistic framework: perhaps the self is defined by one’s desires, and thus we fulfill our
selves by fulfilling our desires. Eudaimonism merits classification as a distinct family of theories,
however, because all share the same fundamental motivation: the idea that well-being consists in
nature-fulfillment. Differences arise in their views of a person’s nature, and of what it means to
fulfill that nature. Subjectivists like Sumner and most desire theorists, by contrast, start from very
different foundations, such as the ideal of individual sovereignty.

Fifth, we have list theories of well-being, which identify well-being with some brute list
of goods, such as knowledge, friendship, accomplishment, pleasure, etc. Likely examples of such
accounts include Arneson, 1999; Brink, 1989; Gert, 1998; Griffin, 1986, 2000; Scanlon, 1993,
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1999. (Finnis, 1980 and Murphy, 2001 offer lists grounded in a broadly Aristotelian Natural Law framework.) Their appeal derives from the fact that other approaches seem incapable of encompassing the full range of our intuitions about well-being. The elements on most proposed lists do strike many as intrinsically beneficial, so why adopt a theory that excludes them? On the other hand, with no principled basis for populating one’s list of goods in a certain way, the whole enterprise can seem deeply ad hoc. Moreover, it does not illuminate the nature of well-being very much; what do all the items share, such that they all have the same kind of value? But even critics of list theories can grant their utility for laying out the appearances: if an item appears on most lists, then any account of well-being will likely need to make room for it lest it seem implausibly counterintuitive.

When assessing theories of well-being, it is essential to distinguish well-being from the broader notion of the good life. While we sometimes use ‘the good life’ simply as a synonym for ‘well-being’, it seems we usually mean a life that is desirable or choiceworthy: not just morally good, or good for the individual leading it, but good, period. Since few would deny that it is desirable both to flourish and to be virtuous, virtually all ethical doctrines will maintain that the good life involves both virtue and well-being, and perhaps aesthetic or other values as well. Disagreements will concern the relative importance of these values and the relation between them. The important thing here is to see what happens when we don’t carefully distinguish the notions of well-being and the good life: it can foster bad arguments for certain views of well-being. For instance, commentators often infer that well-being requires virtue because we wouldn’t consider a life good without it: bad people can’t flourish because such lives do not strike us as good ones. But such contentions prove nothing: on the most natural reading of “good lives,” virtually no one would dispute that the good life requires morality. For such a claim amounts to nothing more than that it is desirable to be moral, which is not a very interesting suggestion. What most contemporaries deny is that well-being is impossible absent moral goodness. This claim may well be true, but talking about the requirements of a good life won’t help to establish it.

What Does ‘Happiness’ Mean?

‘Happiness’ has many meanings, but most scholarly work centers on two of them. (For further discussion, see Haybron, 2000, 2003.) The first usage, more prominent in the philosophical literature than elsewhere, treats ‘happiness’ as basically a synonym for ‘well-being’. The uses of ‘happiness’ to discuss premodern philosophy almost always takes this meaning, as when it is used—controversially—to translate ‘eudaimonia’. To ascribe happiness to people, in the well-being sense, is to say that their lives are going well for them. It is to make a value judgment about their lives. This usage is the most natural reading of talk about leading a happy life, as opposed simply to being happy. For while being happy seems to be a property of the person, and can sensibly be regarded as a purely psychological matter, most people probably would not say as much about the idea of having a happy life, which plausibly involves non-mental states of affairs as well. Thus you might find it intuitive to say that Nozick’s (1974) experience machine user could be happy, even if his life isn’t a happy one at all. The abstract noun ‘happiness’ often evokes the “well-being” reading as well, as in “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

More commonly, ‘happiness’ bears a purely psychological meaning, denoting some broad and typically lasting aspect of the individual’s state of mind: being happy. (But note that the well-being and psychological senses of happiness refer to entirely distinct kinds, not species of a common genus.) This is the standard usage in the subjective well-being literature, and the pre-
dominant usage in the vernacular. The state in question should be distinguished from the acute emotion or mood of feeling happy. Many would argue that someone could be happy without ever feeling happy, say by achieving tranquility. (As tranquility has usually been understood through the ages, it is clearly a quite pleasant state of mind, not simply the absence of upset.) Using the term in this psychological sense involves no more commitment to matters of value than the use of ‘tranquility’ or ‘depression’: one can say, quite coherently, that a person is happy, even though her life is utterly pathetic. When parents say that they want their children to be “happy and healthy,” for instance, they obviously aren’t using ‘happiness’ to mean well-being. Subjective well-being researchers often make claims about happiness: how happy people are and so forth. These researchers normally do not take themselves to be making value judgments about people’s lives when describing them as happy; they are simply attributing states of mind.

Connecting these points to the philosophical literature: in the psychological sense of ‘happiness’ that concerns subjective well-being researchers, Aristotle had no theory of happiness. (Or if he did, it wasn’t his theory of eudaimonia.) He had a theory of well-being. Compare the Epicureans, who held eudaimonia to consist solely in the pleasures of tranquility. Despite appearances, we should not translate their ‘eudaimonia’ as ‘happiness’ in the psychological sense. For when Epicurus espoused hedonism about eudaimonia, he was not simply making a psychological claim. He was making a claim about value, saying that what ultimately benefits a person is nothing other than pleasure (trans. 1994). ‘Eudaimonia’ meant the same thing for Epicurus and Aristotle: a life that is good for the person leading it. The two philosophers did not have a merely verbal or conceptual disagreement about eudaimonia; they had a substantive ethical disagreement about what sort of life is best for human beings. And while it is possible to trace the history of thought about (in the well-being sense) “happiness” by noting that views of well-being have grown more subjectivist, such a history does not include contemporary work on “happiness” in the psychological sense. For that work is perfectly compatible with objectivist views of well-being. Aristotelians can readily agree with Sumner’s (1996) life satisfaction account of happiness and Ed and Carol Diener’s (1996) suggestion that most people are happy, since in calling people “happy” those authors make no value judgment, no claim about whether they are flourishing. At the same time, Sumner’s (1996) account of welfare as authentic happiness is explicitly subjectivist, and many subjective well-being researchers seem to hold subjectivist views of well-being. (For a possible example, see Diener et al., 1998. The authors do not claim that subjective well-being alone is sufficient for well-being. For an explicit acknowledgement that there are other values besides subjective well-being, see Diener & Scollon, 2003.) On that point, and on the value of happiness, Aristotle would plainly disagree.

Connecting this with empirical research: Since ‘happiness’ doesn’t even translate itself in large swaths of contemporary English, the job of finding equivalents in other languages is bound to be difficult. A term in Chinese might translate ‘happiness’ in the well-being sense where it means well-being, but not in the psychological sense in which it is used when Americans are asked how happy they are. (I suspect this is the case with whatever word turns up as ‘happiness’ in fortune cookies.) Suppose you could take the American questionnaire and put it to ancient Greeks. How would you render ‘happy’? Not as ‘eudaimon’, and in fact it is not obvious that any equivalent existed in ancient Greek. *Euthymia*, roughly cheerfulness, or *ataraxia*, tranquility, may come close in certain ways, but probably neither gets the meaning entirely right. If you ask Americans how happy they are, and Greeks how *eudaimon* they are, you are asking two different questions, one psychological and one ethical. You might get a decent correlation in the answers,
but that’s because perceived happiness and welfare probably correlate reasonably well. Carelessness with the language can infect empirical research in other ways as well. For example, one instrument asks, “How would you say things are these days in your life—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Setting aside the absence of a clearly negative or even neutral option, the question is incoherent: it starts out inquiring about how respondents’ lives are going, and ends with a query about how happy they are (with their lives, or period?).

A crude test for determining what people mean by ‘happiness’ is this: when they say things like “Mary is happy,” are they thereby claiming that Mary’s life is going well for her? Or are they just describing her state of mind? And when they claim that “happiness consists in X,” are they thereby saying that what ultimately benefits a person is X? Or are they simply identifying a mental state? In each case, the first answer indicates a “well-being” reading of ‘happiness’, the second answer a psychological one. It would probably be helpful if commentators used ‘happiness’ exclusively in the psychological sense, and used ‘well-being’ and other terms for the well-being notion. (Save perhaps in translating historical works, where usable alternatives are scarce.) In what follows I will use ‘happiness’ solely in the psychological sense.

Theories of Happiness

Philosophers have traditionally distinguished two accounts of happiness: hedonism, and the life satisfaction theory. Hedonists identify happiness with the individual’s balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience, in the same way that welfare hedonists do. (See, e.g., Brandt, 1979, 1989; Carson, 1978, 1981; Davis, 1981b, 1981a; Griffin, 1979, 1986; Kahneman, 1999; Mayerfeld, 1996, 1999; Sprigge, 1987, 1991.) The difference, of course, is that the hedonist about happiness need not accept the stronger doctrine of welfare hedonism; this emerges clearly in arguments against the classical Utilitarian focus on happiness as the aim of social choice. Such arguments tend to grant the identification of happiness with pleasure, but challenge the idea that this should be our primary or sole concern, and often as well the idea that happiness is all that matters for well-being. Also common are life satisfaction theories, which identify happiness with having a favorable attitude toward one’s life as a whole. This basic schema can be filled out in a variety of ways, but typically involves some sort of global judgment, an endorsement or affirmation of one’s life as a whole. This judgment may be more or less explicit, and may involve or accompany some form of affect. It may also involve or accompany some aggregate of judgments about particular items or domains within one’s life. (Variants of the life satisfaction view appear to include Barrow, 1980, 1991; Benditt, 1974, 1978; Campbell, 1973; Montague, 1967; Nozick, 1989; Rescher, 1972, 1980; Sumner, 1996; Telfer, 1980; Veenhoven, 1984, 1997; Von Wright, 1963. Those making life satisfaction central or identical to well-being—often using the word ‘happiness’ for it—appear to include Almeder, 2000; Kekes, 1982, 1988, 1992; McFall, 1989; Meynell, 1969; Tatarkiewicz, 1976; Thomas, 1968, among others.)

A third theory, the emotional state view, departs from hedonism in a different way: instead of identifying happiness with pleasant experience, it identifies happiness with an agent’s emotional condition as a whole (Haybron, 2005). This includes nonexperiential aspects of emotions and moods (or perhaps just moods), and excludes pleasures that don’t directly involve the individual’s emotional state. It might also include a person’s propensity for experiencing various moods, which can vary over time. Happiness on such a view is more nearly the opposite of depression or anxiety, whereas hedonistic happiness is simply opposed to unpleasantness. One reason for taking such a view is intuitive: psychologically superficial pleasures do not obviously
make a difference in how happy one is—the typical pleasure of eating a cracker, say, or even the intense pleasure of an orgasm that nonetheless fails to move one, as can happen with meaningless sexual activity. The intuitive distinction seems akin to distinctions made by some ancient philosophers; consider, for instance, the following passage from Epictetus’s (1925) Discourses: “‘I have a headache.’ Well, do not say ‘Alas!’ ‘I have an earache.’ Do not say ‘Alas!’ And I am not saying that it is not permissible to groan, only do not groan in the centre of your being” (1925, 1.18.19, emph. added). The Stoics did not expect us never to feel pain, or unpleasant sensations, which would plainly be impossible; rather, the idea was not to let such things get to us, to impact our emotional conditions.

But why should we care to press such a distinction in characterizing happiness? The hedonic difference between happiness on an emotional state versus a hedonistic view is probably minimal. But while little will be lost, what will be gained? For one thing, the more “central” affects involving our emotional conditions may bear a special relation to the person or the self, whereas more “peripheral” affects, like the pleasantness of eating a cracker, might pertain to the subpersonal aspects of our psychologies. Since well-being is commonly linked to ideas of self-fulfillment, as we saw earlier, this sort of distinction might signal a difference in the importance of these states (Haybron, in press-b). Another reason to focus on emotional condition rather than experience alone is the greater psychological depth of the former: its impact on our mental lives, physiology, and behavior is much deeper and more pervasive. This enhances the explanatory and predictive significance of happiness, but more importantly it captures the idea that happiness concerns the individual’s psychological orientation or disposition: to be happy is not just to be subjected to a certain sequence of experiences, but for one’s very being to manifest a favorable orientation toward the conditions of one’s life—a kind of psychic affirmation of one’s life. This reflects a point of similarity with life satisfaction views of happiness: contra hedonism, both views take happiness to be substantially dispositional, involving some sort of favorable orientation toward one’s life. But life satisfaction views tend to emphasize reflective or rational endorsement, whereas emotional state views emphasize the verdicts of our emotional natures.

A fourth family of views, hybrid theories, attempts an irenic solution to our diverse intuitions about happiness: identify happiness with both life satisfaction and pleasure or emotional state, perhaps along with other states such as domain satisfactions. The most obvious candidate here is subjective well-being, which is typically defined as a compound of life satisfaction, domain satisfactions, and positive and negative affect. (Researchers often seem to identify happiness with subjective well-being, sometimes with life satisfaction, and perhaps most commonly with emotional or hedonic state.) The chief appeal of hybrid theories is their inclusiveness: all the components of subjective well-being seem important, and there is probably no component of subjective well-being that does not at times get included in “happiness” in ordinary usage.

How do we determine which theory is correct? Traditional philosophical methods of conceptual or linguistic analysis can give us some guidance, indicating that some accounts offer a better fit with the ordinary concept of happiness. Thus it has been argued that hedonism is false to the concept of happiness as we know it; the intuitions taken to support hedonism point instead to an emotional state view (Haybron, 2001, 2005). And some have argued that life satisfaction is compatible with profoundly negative emotional states like depression—a suffering artist might not value emotional matters much, and wholeheartedly affirm her life (Carson, 1981; Davis, 1981b; Haybron, 2005). Yet it can seem counterintuitive to deem such a person happy. At the same time, people do sometimes use ‘happiness’ to denote states of life satisfaction: life satisfac-
tion theories do seem faithful to some ordinary uses of ‘happiness’. The trouble is that HAPPINESS appears to be a “mongrel concept,” as Ned Block (1995) called the concept of consciousness: the ordinary notion is simply a bit of a mess. We use the term to denote different things in different contexts, and often have no clear sense what we are referring to. This suggests that accounts of happiness must be somewhat revisionary, and that we must assess theories on grounds other than simple fidelity to the lay concept of happiness (“descriptive adequacy,” in Sumner’s (1996) terms). An obvious candidate is practical utility: which conception of happiness best answers to our interests in the notion? We talk about happiness because we care about it. The question is why we care about it, and which psychological states within the extension of the ordinary term make the most sense of this concern. Even if there is no simple answer to the question what happiness is, it may well turn out that our interests in happiness cluster so strongly around a particular psychological kind that happiness can best, or most profitably, be understood in terms of that type of state (Haybron, 2003).

The most interesting questions here concern the choice between life satisfaction and affect-based views like hedonism and the emotional state theory. Proponents of life satisfaction see two major advantages to their account. First, life satisfaction is holistic, ranging over the whole of one’s life, or the totality of one’s life over a certain period of time. It reflects not just the aggregate of moments in one’s life, but also the global quality of one’s life taken as a whole. And we seem to care not just about the total quantity of good in our lives, but about its distribution—a happy ending, say, counts for more than a happy middle. Second, life satisfaction seems more closely linked to our priorities than affect is, as the suffering artist case illustrates. While a focus on affect makes sense insofar as we care about such matters, most people care about other things as well, and how our lives are going relative to our priorities may not be fully mirrored in our affective states. Life satisfaction theories thus seem to fit more closely with ideals of individual sovereignty, on which how well my life is going for me is for me to decide. My satisfaction with my life seems to embody that judgment. Of course a theory of happiness need not capture everything that matters for well-being; the point is that a life satisfaction view might explain why we should care so much about happiness, and so enjoy substantive as well as intuitive support.

But a number of substantive difficulties attend the life satisfaction view. One concern is that life satisfaction attitudes seem to be both governed by ethical norms and perspectival in ways that can drive a very deep wedge between life satisfaction and well-being, however we wish to understand well-being. How satisfied we are with our lives thus depends, not just on how well our lives are going relative to our priorities, but also on it seems fitting to us to respond to our lives, as well as on the somewhat arbitrary perspective from which we choose to look at our lives at any given time (Haybron, 2005, in press-c). For example, a cancer patient might be more satisfied with his life than he was before the diagnosis, for he now looks at his life from a different perspective and emphasizes different virtues like fortitude and gratitude as opposed to (say) humility and non-complacency. Such norms don’t just make him think he ought to be satisfied with his life; they cause him to think about his life in ways that make him genuinely more appreciative of it. Yet he need not think himself better off at all: he might believe himself worse off than he was when he was less satisfied. Neither judgment need seem to him or us to be mistaken: it’s just that he now looks at his life differently. Indeed, he might think he’s doing badly, even as he is satisfied with his life: he endorses it, warts and all, and is grateful just have his not-so-good life rather than some of the much worse alternatives. Life satisfaction attitudes are not simply judgments about well-being: they are endorsements, and they embody not just our view of the quality
of our lives, but also our ideals concerning how to respond to our lives.

If this suggestion is correct, then the identification of life satisfaction with happiness is problematical: for we frequently use happiness as a proxy for well-being, a reasonably concrete and value-free stand-in that facilitates quick-and-dirty assessments of welfare. Given the discovery that someone is happy, we naturally infer that he is doing well; if we learn that someone is unhappy, we reasonably conclude that she is doing poorly. Such inferences are defeasible: if we later find that the happy Ned is actually a brain in a vat, we need not decide that he isn’t happy after all; we simply withdraw the conclusion that he is doing well. So long as happiness tracks well-being well enough in most cases, this sort of practice is perfectly respectable. But if we identify happiness with life satisfaction, then we may have a problem: maybe Sally is satisfied only because she values being grateful for the good things in life. This sort of case may not be merely a theoretical possibility: perhaps the very high rates of self-reported life satisfaction in the United States and many other places substantially reflects a broad acceptance of norms of gratitude and a general tendency to emphasize the positives, or perhaps a sense that not to endorse your life amounts to a lack of self-regard. It is not implausible that most people, even those enduring great hardship, can readily find grounds for satisfaction with their lives. Maybe most people do, at least in certain cultures, tending only to be dissatisfied when their condition is truly wretched. Life probably has to be pretty hard for a person to be incapable of affirming it.

It is important to recognize that such an argument, if cogent, threatens only the idea that life satisfaction could answer to our practical interests in happiness, and may thus weaken the case for life satisfaction theories of happiness. It does not show that self-reports of life satisfaction aren’t useful measures of well-being, in precisely the way we would expect: by giving information about how people’s lives are going relative to their priorities. For even if such reports systematically deviate from well-being, possibly to the point that they are well nigh useless in the individual case, they can still tell us a lot about how populations of people are doing: many discrepancies will wash out over large samples, and others may at most threaten claims about absolute levels of well-being, while leaving most correlational results intact. (Such points illustrate how philosophers’ instincts can be misleading: we tend to worry about whether somewhere, in some possible world, there lives a strange man who constitutes an exception our theory. Thus many philosophers distrust self-report measures given how easy it is to imagine someone getting it wrong. But science centers on generalizations, not individuals, and errors that seem epistemically fatal in the individual case may be benign for the study of populations.)

Given the limitations of narrower theories of happiness, a hybrid account may seem an attractive solution. But this strategy raises difficulties of its own. If we arrive at a hybrid theory by this route, it is liable to seem like either the marriage of two unpromising accounts, or of a promising account with an unpromising one. It is not obvious that such a union will yield wholesome results. And people have different intuitions about what counts as happiness, so that no theory can accommodate all of them. Any theory that tries to risks pleasing no one. A second concern is that the various components of any hybrid, such as subjective well-being, are liable to matter for quite different reasons. While it is helpful to employ blanket concepts like that of subjective well-being to encompass some broad domain in which we have an interest, most purposes may be better served by focusing on more specific psychological kinds, for instance distinguishing life satisfaction from happiness, understood as a matter of hedonic or emotional state.

The Role of Intuitions in Value Inquiry
Some explanation of philosophical methodology is in order, since it can seem baffling or downright suspicious to researchers schooled in the scientific method. I will focus on philosophical inquiry into matters of value. There is currently much dispute about the nature of philosophy and the methods appropriate to it, so anything I can say will be contentious. But a glance through philosophy journals of recent decades, if not the history of philosophical reflection, suggests a considerable degree of consistency in approach, with disputes mainly concerning the relative weight of various considerations, or about theoretical issues with little bearing on philosophical practice. Perhaps the most common procedure is to seek some sort of *reflective equilibrium* between the claims of one’s theory and our intuitions about particular cases. That is, we try to get a theory that accommodates most of our intuitions about the subject matter, and where the theory clashes with our intuitions about particular cases, we attempt to adjust the theory or reconsider the way we think about those cases. We may find that what originally seemed intuitive no longer seems that way on reflection. The ideal is to arrive at an equilibrium state where theory and considered intuitions match without conflict. Some philosophers reject this sort of dependence on intuitions, preferring for instance to let theoretical considerations drive their inquiries. Still, it is not clear how ethics can get by without some reliance on intuitive considerations. If your theory implies that it would be okay for me to set my cat ablaze just for kicks, then we know there’s something deeply wrong with your theory. It’s just an intuition we have—there is no purely empirical or logical test to verify it—but it seems like a pretty good intuition. Shall we be so dismissive of our ethical sensibilities that we allow our ethical theories to float free of such judgments? The interesting question is how to explain what intuitions could possibly have to do with the truth of value claims. Quantum mechanics is preposterously counterintuitive, but we don’t for all that reject it: that’s the way reality is. Why couldn’t ethics turn out to be like that?

One reason would be if values and human sensibilities are inherently connected. There are, more or less, four major views about the metaphysics of value, which we can associate roughly with Plato, Aquinas, Kant, and Hume. Platonists take values to exist wholly independently of human cognition, just as atoms and quarks do; on this view, it is not clear how we could know about them, but the standard answer is that we grasp truths about value through intuition. Aquinas (1990) took roughly the view that humans and values were made for each other: God created us in such a way that certain things would self-evidently be valuable for us, and that this would be self-evident to us on reflection. Human sensibilities were fashioned to fit with the good, and the good was grounded in human nature. Kantians (1997) ground value—at least, moral value—in reason: matters of right and wrong are determined by the canons of rationality, as any rational being, whatever its contingent sensibilities, could recognize. Finally, Humeans ground values in the contingencies of human sentiment: the human mind projects value onto the world, so that value depends at least partly on our affective and conative makeup. Humeans need not maintain that value is purely subjective in the sense that we cannot be mistaken about it; perhaps what counts are the values we would agree on under ideal conditions, for instance.

Notice that, on any of these views, the use of intuitions to support theories of value could make perfect sense. While much more would need to be said actually to vindicate intuitional evidence, its philosophical uses should at least seem intelligible. Moreover, this is not a domain where we should expect the truth to be utterly bizarre in the manner of quantum physics: the truth here is supposed to shape the way we live. It has to be something we can live with.

The real difficulty is determining which intuitions count, how to weigh them against theoretical considerations, and how to deal with the diversity of people’s intuitions. There is no gen-
erally accepted answer to these questions, but in practice what gets counted are the theoretically informed intuitions of those philosophers who are engaged in the debate. In the literature on well-being, this tends to be analytically trained Anglophone philosophers with little knowledge of non-Western thought, most of them politically left-leaning upper-middle class Caucasian males whose livelihood depends on other members of this group holding a favorable opinion of their work. It is reasonable to wonder how authoritative the claims emanating from this group could be. The most pressing worry is whether there isn’t a gross sampling bias in the philosophical literature, with philosophical claims tested against such a biased sample that the vetting process is hopelessly flawed. For even where philosophers seem united in their opinions, why think that this tiny and relatively homogenous community, clustered in places like New York and Oxford, should have any authority concerning what’s best for people in the jungles of Papua New Guinea or the hollows of West Virginia? Worries like this may seem to counsel not taking a stand on values at all, or at least abstaining from applying philosophical accounts of well-being to matters of public concern. Better, perhaps, simply to let the people judge for themselves.

To some extent, this seems like exactly the right response, and it is an excellent reason for people of all convictions to take seriously the science of subjective well-being, which examines how people’s lives are going from their perspective. This is particularly so when making policy decisions. For to ask this sort of question, rather than simply evaluating people’s well-being according to some objective theory of human flourishing, may be essential to a democratic society, and to treating people with respect. We do not treat people with respect when we make decisions concerning their welfare without any regard to how they see things. If the history of philosophical reflection has taught us anything, it is that we should approach questions of value with a large dose of humility. Even for defenders of Aristotelian and other objective accounts of well-being, there should be no question about the importance of attending to people’s opinions about their lives and what’s best for them. We might be wrong.

We might go further and try to abstain from making value judgments altogether, deferring completely to individuals’ own verdicts on matters of well-being. But this would probably be a mistake, even setting aside the fact that such a decision already involves a tendentious value judgment (viz., that decisions should be made by aggregating people’s opinions). For one thing, our attitudes are frequently ill-formed and unstable. And we all recognize that many of our beliefs would not hold up under reflection, or for that matter in the crucible of experience. Most people would likely grant that such judgments are flawed: the fact that you would no longer accept certain beliefs if you simply thought things through is likely to seem, to you, a rather lethal objection to them. Sometimes we find good reason to believe that aspects of popular opinion are indeed incapable of sustaining reflection. When this happens, what should we do? It is not obvious that treating people with respect means we must rely wholly on their expressed opinions, however convinced we are that they would discard those views if they simply put a little thought into them. Should people want to be treated this way? Perhaps it would be patronizing, a way of ignoring their capacity to reason. Think of the contempt in which voters tend to hold politicians who slavishly follow the polls. Arguably, this reflects not just a perceived lack of character, but a sense that such panderers treat us like children.

For the same reason, we cannot replace philosophical ethics with surveys testing lay intuitions about matters of value. While such methods offer an important means of addressing “sampling bias” concerns, their utility has limits: people’s intuitions evolve when they pause to think things over, sometimes radically. Probably most schools of ancient ethics struck casual observers
as counterintuitive, just as they strike us: it is only after taking the time to think seriously about one’s life, and to grasp the rationales behind such theories, that one could possibly have found them to be at all plausible. Yet some of these schools were rather popular and influential. There is no substitute for philosophical reflection on matters of value, and since it is neither possible nor desirable for everyone to do so in great depth, there will probably always be some role for philosophers to play in sharpening our understanding of what matters in life.

The trick is to bring philosophical insights into the public arena, using them to influence policy, without creating an “expertocracy” that imposes alien values on an uncomprehending populace. This will naturally involve a delicate balancing act: once we get in the business of divining people’s “true” values, or otherwise departing from their express judgments regarding their well-being and values, it can be a short road to paternalistic hell. It will accordingly be important for scholars and policymakers to make their deliberations on such matters as democratic, transparent, and accessible as possible, so that the people affected have a voice in the process and can judge whether the “experts” are basing their decisions on values they find acceptable.

Conclusion: Opportunities for Cross-fertilization

I will close by briefly noting a few additional areas in which philosophers and empirical researchers might benefit from each other’s efforts. The list is, naturally, selective.

The Importance of Tranquility

Certain types of affect matter to us more than others, and one challenge for subjective well-being research is to ensure that measures of affect adequately track the most important states, and do not overemphasize less important ones. Tranquility, for example, received considerable attention from the ancients. It was the goal for human beings according to some schools, and similar views commonly arise in non-Western thought, for instance among Buddhists. Not merely inner calm, tranquility should probably be understood more broadly as a kind of inner surety, stability, or imperturbability: “settledness,” or psychically being fully at home in one’s life. (See Griswold, 1996; Haybron, 2005. Tranquility need not be seen as a state of low arousal, and could be compatible with exuberance.) Today, ordinary happiness talk seems to load heavily on paradigm moods of feeling happy or sad. Yet other affects also seem important to happiness, so that this tendency may not hold up under reflection: many would be loath to deem happy someone who is unsettled or lacks peace of mind, whereas someone who enjoys tranquility may well be counted happy even without being particularly cheerful. (If this is right, then even low to moderate levels of negative affect might rule out being happy, contrary to the traditional requirement of at least fifty percent negative affect.) Perhaps much subjective well-being research is similarly biased toward cheerfulness or feeling happy, for instance in studies asking respondents to report how happy they are. And findings about adaptation might be exaggerated if the affects being measured tend to be more susceptible to adaptation than others: for instance, sadness may be more evanescent than stress. Given the prevalence of concerns about stress and anxiety, it is imperative that we understand the nature of tranquility and its role in happiness and well-being. And subjective well-being researchers may need to attend more closely to how people are doing in this regard.

Understanding Self-reports.

The meaning and accuracy of self-reports in subjective well-being research are the subjects of continuing investigation. These are basically empirical questions, but philosophers can still pitch in, say by laying out the in-principle possibilities for error. It may turn out that people can, at least in principle, make a far greater variety of mistakes about their hedonic experience than we
would have guessed (Haybron, in press-a). Such inquiries can help to sharpen otherwise inchoate worries about the reliability of self-reports, helping investigators both to address such problems and to rebut skeptics by challenging them to indicate exactly what sorts of errors might plausibly be infecting the data. (Armchair quarterbacks casually dismissive of self-reports are a dime a dozen; but no compelling argument has yet been suggested for dispensing with such measures.) Moreover, self-reports often reflect the way people think about matters of value, as we saw in connection with life satisfaction theories of happiness. Since philosophical reflection aims partly to clarify the concerns driving our responses to value, it may help us to understand the processes driving self-reports, and hence to explain them and understand their significance (Haybron, in press-c).

**Virtue and Subjective Well-being.**

A central concern of the positive psychology movement has been to research the strengths or virtues that contribute to human flourishing. Clearly, certain traits of character will tend more than others to foster subjective well-being; the question is what these traits are and how they promote subjective well-being. This sort of inquiry is interdisciplinary: while it is an empirical question how a given trait impacts subjective well-being, philosophical inquiry is needed to establish which traits are virtues. (Valerie Tiberius is doing some important work along these lines, including a book in progress; see, e.g., Tiberius, 2002.) For example, perhaps some ways of being unrealistic amount to vices even while tending to promote subjective well-being. Empirical results can also be relevant to establishing the status of certain traits as virtues: if a trait tends to help its possessors lead more satisfying lives, this seems a point in favor of its being a virtue—at the very least, a prudential virtue. A further question is how far indicators of well-being should go beyond subjective well-being, perhaps tracking some of the virtues, like optimism, that seem especially significant for a good life.

**Challenges to Traditional Views in Ethics and Political Philosophy.**

Most ethical theories rest on some view of human nature, and hence are susceptible to empirical challenge. Aristotelian ethics, for instance, gives our rational faculties a central role in the proper governance of human life. It is possible that the science of subjective well-being and associated disciplines will help to confirm or undermine this view, for instance if it turns out that subrational processes play a larger role in the direction of human life than the Aristotelian account permits (see, e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Also vulnerable may be views about the types of social arrangements that promote human well-being. Liberal modernity has it that people tend to fare best when given extremely broad scope to shape their lives as they see fit. Yet there is growing evidence that people are susceptible to a wide range of systematic errors in the pursuit of happiness. At least conceivably, we might find that people tend to fare better in certain social forms that offer individuals a narrower range of options in determining the shape of their lives than many affluent Westerners enjoy. Or, perhaps, that paternalistic interventions aimed at correcting for certain errors will prove more effective than many would have guessed, so that governments may have a surprisingly large role to play in the promotion of happiness. Perhaps some interventions will be both effective at promoting well-being and Orwellian, threatening consequentialist arguments for liberal restrictions on paternalism—and thus threatening either consequentialism or liberalism itself. Political philosophers, among others, will probably be well ad-
vised to attend to developments in the science of happiness.¹

Further reading
1. The best entry point to the philosophical literature in this area, containing lucid discussions of both well-being and happiness by a subjectivist about well-being, is Sumner, 1996. (Also excellent is Roger Crisp’s entry on well-being in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/. Griffin, 1986 is a contemporary classic, but somewhat less accessible.)
2. Most philosophical work under the rubric of ‘happiness’ uses the term synonymously with ‘well-being’ or confuses the psychological and well-being senses of the term, and so can be misleading; proceed with caution. Both points apply to Kraut, 1979, which nonetheless offers a good and oft-cited discussion of the well-being sense of ‘happiness.’ (Compare the excellent discussion of Aristotelian accounts of “well-being” in Kraut, 2002.)
3. For a powerful and accessible defense of the Aristotelian perspective against subjectivist views of well-being, see Nussbaum, 2000b.

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