THE GOOD LIFE

MICHAEL A BISHOP

Unifying the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being

THE GOOD LIFE

Unifying the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being

Michael A Bishop

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bishop, Michael A
The good life : unifying the philosophy and psychology of well-being / Michael A Bishop.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-992311-3 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Well-being.
2. Positive psychology. I. Title.
BF575.H27B547 2015
170'.44—dc23

2014021211

3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

For Taita

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have benefited greatly from presenting earlier versions of this material to the following audiences:

- The Symposium on Naturalism in Science, Kansas State University
- The Ethical and Social Scientific Perspectives on Well-Being, California State University, Long Beach
- The First Colombian Conference in Logic, Epistemology, and Philosophy of Science, Universidad de los Andes
- The Summer Institute for Bounded Rationality, the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany
- Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico City, Mexico
- The Moral Philosophy Research Group, Washington University at St. Louis
- Philosophy Department Colloquium, Union College
- The 7th International Symposium of Cognition, Logic and Communication: Morality and the Cognitive Sciences, Riga, Latvia

Many colleagues, friends, and students have been generous in helping me with this book. Valerie Tiberius and Steve McFarlane

gave me detailed and thoughtful comments on the entire manuscript. This book would be much poorer but for their generosity. I owe a special debt to Joe Mendola, who showed me how to improve the section on normativity while wisely ignoring my repeated and strenuous insistence that I was *done* with the book. I want to thank Daniel Haybron, J. D. Trout, Sam Wren-Lewis, Steve Downes, and Jack Justus for giving me valuable feedback on significant portions of the manuscript. In conversation, the comments and sometimes pointed objections of Francesco Orsi, Stephen Stich, Clifford Sosis, Timothy Schroeder, David Fajardo-Chica, John Doris, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong forced me to rethink my views and arguments. So many good people have helped me clarify my thoughts on these topics that I cannot hope to mention them all. But I would be remiss not to thank Anna Alexandrova, Erik Angner, Lorraine Besser-Jones, Sarah Chant, Paul Churchland, Heather Cipolletti, Daniel Cohnitz, Fiery Cushman, Gabriel De Marco, Adam Feltz, Abraham Graber, Joshua Greene, Soren Haggqvist, Gilbert Harman, Philip Kitcher, Joshua Knobe, Randy Larsen, James Lesher, Edouard Machery, Maximiliano Martinez, Maria Merritt, Dominic Murphy, Shaun Nichols, Jesse Prinz, Jason Raibley, Peter Railton, Stephanie Rocknak, Richard Samuels, Chandra Sripada, Michael Strevens, Charles Wallis, and Susan Wolf.

I would like to express my appreciation to the production team at Oxford University Press for their excellent work putting this book into production. And finally, I would like to thank Lucy Randall for her light, astute editorial touch and for graciously shepherding me through the publication process.

NOTE TO READERS

For those who want to understand the views in this book well enough to get through a cocktail conversation, I recommend reading the 16 or so pages that make up the introduction, first chapter, and conclusion. For those who wish to understand the views well enough to be able to dismiss them in good conscience, just the conclusion will do.

CONTENTS

Introduction

Philosophers and psychologists study well-being. And each group is saddled with its own peculiar problems. The philosophers, despite their many insights, are in a never-ending stalemate. And the psychologists, despite their many results, are incapable of providing a clear account of their discipline, Positive Psychology. The study of well-being has followed the outlines of a frivolous Hollywood romantic comedy. The young lovers "meet cute" in ancient Greece. But when psychology goes experimental in the nineteenth century, irreconcilable differences end their courtship. They part, each one alone, sadder, and in denial about how essential the other was to their success. Will the star-crossed lovers persist with their foolishness and continue their lonely struggles? Or will they resolve their differences, reunite dramatically, music swelling in the background—okay, enough. To understand this book, just know that I'm a sucker for the Hollywood ending.

The secret to getting the Hollywood ending, to resolving the stalemate for the philosophers and finding a secure foundation for the psychologists, is right under your nose. It's the first sentence of this page. The idea behind the inclusive approach to the study of well-being, the approach I'll be defending in this book,

is that if both philosophers and psychologists study well-being, then well-being—the real thing, whatever it is—will express itself in their labors. To discover the nature of well-being, we must begin with the assumption that both philosophers and scientists are roughly right about well-being, and then figure out what it is they're *all* roughly right about. (They can't all be exactly right. There's too much disagreement.)

The inclusive approach gives us two simple tests for knowing when we have found the correct theory of well-being: When philosophers build their various accounts of well-being, the true theory will imply that they are all successfully describing *well-being*, even if they have some of the details wrong. And when psychologists use their various methods to study well-being, the true theory will imply that they are all studying *well-being*, even if they have some of the details wrong. The true theory will explain how philosophers and psychologists, despite their sometimes dramatic disagreements, have been studying the same thing—well-being—all this time. If this approach strikes you as problematic, ask yourself: Where *else* would you begin to try to discover the nature of well-being but with the best research done by philosophers and scientists on the subject? Given the serious troubles facing the lone philosopher and the lone psychologist, we cannot rely on just one of them. We need the Hollywood ending.

Consider first the philosopher's plight. Three theories of well-being dominate the philosophical landscape: hedonism, Aristotelianism, and the informed desire theory. The basic idea behind hedonism is that your well-being is a function of the balance of your pleasure over your pain. It is the James Brown ("I feel good!") theory of well-being. The gist of Aristotle's view is that well-being involves having a virtuous character that promotes your flourishing—an active, healthy engagement with the world. It is the Chuck Berry ("Johnny B. Goode") theory of

well-being. And the informed desire theory holds that well-being involves getting what you want, usually on the assumption that you're properly rational and informed. It is the Mick Jagger ("You can't always get what you want") theory of well-being.

No contemporary philosopher argues for or against any of these theories by appealing to science, to the results psychologists have unearthed about well-being. Now, it's true that most philosophers couldn't have paid attention to the science, as philosophers have been at this for millennia and psychologists for mere decades. But most philosophers today would argue that the problem isn't that psychologists are so late to the party. The problem is that science is *incapable* of delivering evidence that could confirm or disconfirm a philosophical theory about well-being. Their argument for ignoring science goes something like this: "Take any scientific discovery that purports to be about well-being. Whether or not it really is about well-being depends on what well-being is. And it is philosophy that tells us what well-being is. To have a philosophical theory of well-being rely on scientific evidence would be to put the cart before the horse."

This disavowal of scientific evidence has a serious consequence. It leaves philosophers with only their own considered judgments about well-being to serve as evidence for their theories. And different philosophers have different considered judgments. Some philosophers have broadly hedonistic judgments, others have broadly Aristotelian judgments, and yet others have judgments that follow the contours of the informed desire theory. So while philosophers will sometimes agree that some particular version of (say) hedonism is false, as long as there are enough clever philosophers whose commonsense judgments are broadly hedonistic, hedonism will survive. Philosophers are masters at developing coherent theories that answer to their own opinions. So as long as there is a broad diversity in the commonsense

judgments of philosophers, theoretical consensus will remain a pipe dream. The inclusive approach breaks this stalemate by making our theories answer to more than just philosophers' considered judgments.

Psychologists who study happiness and well-being face a related problem. Their discipline, often called Positive Psychology, appears to be a giant hodgepodge. It has no agreed upon definition. For example, two leaders of the field offer a characterization that is a list of 26 items Positive Psychology is "about." The list includes satisfaction, courage, aesthetic sensibility, spirituality, wisdom, nurturance, moderation, and work ethic (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 5). The authors do not explain how they drew up this list. Why does spirituality make it but not pleasure? Perhaps there is a reason—and perhaps the reason is just that no such list could be complete. But we might see this loose characterization and worry that Positive Psychology is not a principled, well-defined scientific discipline, but a research program built on the subjective views of some psychologists about the right way to live.

To properly address this worry, psychologists must engage with philosophy, but not *only* with the philosophical literature on well-being. That literature, as I pointed out a couple paragraphs back, is too fragmented to provide Positive Psychology with a solid foundation. What Positive Psychology needs is a bit of fairly conventional philosophy of science. Philosophy of science is a branch of philosophy that seeks to understand particular scientific theories or disciplines (e.g., How should we interpret quantum mechanics? What is biological fitness?) as well as some basic features of science in general (e.g., What is the relationship between theory and evidence? Does science make progress? And if so, what is the nature of that progress?). If we start with some fairly uncontroversial assumptions about how science works, we can stitch together the methods of science

and philosophy to form an inclusive approach to the study of well-being. And then we can use this approach to resolve the stalemate problem for philosophers and the foundation problem for psychologists.

Positive Psychology has attracted a lot of attention because of its potential to offer practical advice backed by science. It can tell individuals, institutions, and governments that some activity or policy is likely to promote well-being. Such recommendations have raised two families of objections. The first is evidential. Practical advice must be supported by strong evidence. Will the proposed activity or policy really bring about the desired result? Will it be effective only for some people but not others? Will it backfire and harm some people? Every thoughtful proponent of Positive Psychology recognizes the importance of addressing this evidential worry. But it is not the topic of this book.

The second line of argument against the recommendations derived from Positive Psychology is a philosophical one: If Positive Psychology makes recommendations, and it does, then it must be in the business of promoting *something.* Some critics think we should shun Positive Psychology because it promotes a delusional optimism-at-all-costs attitude. Others decry Positive Psychology as assuming a superficial form of hedonism that promotes shallow happy feelings at the expense of deeper, more enduring goods. Yet others see accounts of Positive Psychology that embrace characteristics that not everyone deems valuable—such as work ethic or spirituality—and they come to believe that the discipline is built on a provincial, moralistic conception of the good life. These interpretations may be uncharitable, but the lack of a clear explanation of what Positive Psychology is about opens it up to this criticism. If Positive Psychology is not in the business of promoting delusional optimism or Dudley Do-Right morality, then what is it promoting?

My contention is that Positive Psychology rests on a plausible and attractive conception of well-being. It is essential for us to get clear about this. Because before we can know how strenuously to pursue well-being, or even whether to pursue it at all, we need to know what well-being is. That is what this book is about.

Chapter 1

The Network Theory of Well-Being

I want to describe the network theory of well-being as I might to a friend or sibling: simply, succinctly and with no theoretical fuss. I will not try to satisfy the nattering critic that sits on my shoulder, or yours. We'll have the rest of the book to deal with them. A good way to start is with an exercise. How would you explain that a person has a high degree of well-being without actually using the word "well-being" or its synonyms? If you aren't already corrupted by a philosophical theory, you might offer a thumbnail sketch like this: "Felicity is in a happy and fulfilling committed relationship, she has close and caring friends, she keeps fit by playing tennis, a sport she enjoys, and her professional life is both successful and satisfying." Most people's description will include both objective and subjective facts about the person. These facts include:

1. positive feelings, moods, emotions (e.g., joy, contentment),
2. positive attitudes (e.g., optimism, hope, openness to new experiences),
3. positive traits (e.g., friendliness, curiosity, perseverance), and

4. accomplishments (e.g., strong relationships, professional success, fulfilling hobbies or projects).

So far, so good. But how does this ramshackle set of facts fit into a coherent whole? How are we supposed to unite them into a coherent theory of well-being? The answer I propose is simple: We don't have to. The world has already joined them together in a web of cause and effect. The network theory holds that to have well-being is to be "stuck" in a self-perpetuating cycle of positive emotions, positive attitudes, positive traits, and successful engagement with the world.

Felicity's well-being is not an accidental conglomeration of happy facts. These states—her committed relationship, her friendships, her exercise regimen, her professional success, her confidence and sense of mastery, her joie de vivre, her friendliness, her moxie and adventurousness, her curiosity, her hope and optimism—build upon and foster one another, forming a kind of causal web or network. A person high in well-being is in a positive cycle or "groove." Take any fact that is part of Felicity's well-being, say, her professional success. It is caused by other facts that make up Felicity's well-being—her curiosity, moxie, optimism, and confidence, her exercise regimen, her social support. And it is also a cause of some of those facts. Her professional success bolsters her income, her optimism, her confidence, and the strength of her relationships. Felicity's professional success is a node in a causal network of facts that make up part of her well-being (Figure 1.1). What is true of Felicity's professional success is also true of other components of her well-being. Each is embedded in a causal web of positive feelings, positive attitudes, positive traits, and accomplishments.

An important feature of Figure 1.1 is that certain states (her optimism, confidence, and social support) both strengthen and are strengthened by her professional success. Felicity's well-being

FIGURE 1.1

Professional Success as a Node in a Positive Causal Network

consists of some cyclical processes (Figure 1.2). Her professional success leads her to acquire, maintain, or strengthen other positive features of her person; and in turn these positive features help foster her professional success; and so on.

Many elements of well-being involve such positive cycles. For example, Felicity's optimism helps her overcome challenges and makes her more successful socially and professionally, and having success tends to bolster Felicity's optimism (Seligman 1990). Felicity's friendships and committed relationship provide her with various kinds of material and psychological support, which help to make Felicity more trusting, more extraverted,

FIGURE 1.2

A Positive Professional Success Cycle