

[COMMENT]

VALERIE TIBERIUS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH FOR PHILOSOPHERS

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I

In the history of Western philosophy, questions of well-being and happiness have played a central role for some 2,500 years. Yet, when it comes to the systematic empirical study of happiness and satisfaction, philosophers are relative latecomers. Empirically-minded psychologists began studying systematically the determinants and distribution of happiness and satisfaction – understood as positive or desirable subjectively experienced mental states – during the 1920's and 30's, as personality psychology emerged as a *bona fide* subdiscipline of psychology shortly after World War I (Angner, 2005a). The first philosopher to take this literature seriously, to my knowledge, was Nicholas Rescher (1972). The topic reappeared in the philosophical literature in the 90's, as L. W. Sumner (1996) developed his account of well-being as life satisfaction in a manner that appears to have been inspired by the empirical literature, and again in the 00's, when a number of younger philosophers, apparently independently, turned to this literature in order to examine how it can inform, and be informed by, moral philosophy and philosophy of science (Alexandrova, 2005; Angner, 2005b; Haybron, 2000; Tiberius, 2006).

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One of these philosophers is Valerie Tiberius, whose paper “Well-being: Psychological research for philosophers” (2006) offers an excellent introduction to the literature on happiness and satisfaction, as well as a helpful survey of pivotal philosophical problems in the area. The paper usefully identifies analogies between the philosophical and psychological literature, as when it argues that “research programs in social and personality psychology correspond roughly to the divisions among philosophical theories” (p. 494).¹ Equally usefully, the paper identifies a number of disanalogies, as when it points out that hedonistic accounts of well-being – which are widely adopted in the psychological literature (Angner, 2010b) – have been as unpopular among philosophers as they have been popular among psychologists (p. 496). As Tiberius (p. 496-497) points out, even the most vocal defender of hedonism in the philosophical literature, Fred Feldman (e.g., 2004), rejects the version of hedonism that is implicit in the work of a great number of psychologists. As Tiberius notes, this area “cries out for interdisciplinary work” (p. 494) and her paper takes important steps in that direction.

II

The main contribution of Tiberius’s paper, in my view, is that it draws attention to what may be the central challenge facing any effort to build a *bona fide* science of well-being using measures of happiness, satisfaction, and other positive subjectively experienced mental states. Measures of happiness and satisfaction are often referred to as *subjective measures of well-being* to signal that they

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references are to Tiberius (2006).

purport to represent *well-being*, and not just happiness or satisfaction.² The availability of adequate measures of well-being is, of course, critical to any serious effort to build a science of well-being.

Any measure of well-being must satisfy at least two criteria. First, the measure must be a measure of well-being in some *normatively relevant* sense of “well-being.” Call this the *relevance* criterion. If our measure of well-being does not satisfy the relevance criterion, the measure does not represent “what we have when our lives are going well for us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good *for us*” (p. 493). Second, the measure must be *valid*, that is, it must succeed in representing that which it purports to represent. Call this the *validity* criterion. If our measure does not satisfy the validity criterion, the measure fails to represent what it purports to represent, and consequently cannot legitimately be used as a measure of it. I leave it open whether there are other adequacy criteria, but I note that any measure of well-being that simultaneously satisfies the relevance and validity criteria has much to be said for it, given that it successfully represents well-being in some normatively relevant sense.

The challenge stems from the fact that it does not seem possible to simultaneously satisfy these two criteria. As long as a subjective measure of well-being is presented as representing happiness or satisfaction in the sense of a positive subjectively experienced mental state, a case can be made that the measure is valid; in fact, psychologists have gone to great lengths to establish the validity of such measures in accordance with best psychometric practice (Angner, 2010c). Yet, as Tiberius points out, as long as a subjective measure is presented as representing well-being in the sense of some

² Such measures are also sometimes called *measures of subjective well-being*, where “subjective well-being” denotes whatever subjectively experienced mental state attracts the author’s attention.

subjectively experienced mental state, it cannot be said to be (using my terminology) a relevant measure of well-being. If we want to make sure that the measures are relevant in this sense, we must understand “well-being” differently, perhaps as referring to “*informed* desire-satisfaction, *authentic* life-satisfaction, or *truth-adjusted* pleasure” (p. 497). But if we understand “well-being” along these lines, we have little evidence to support the claim that such measures are valid measures of well-being. Because authentic life satisfaction is different from life satisfaction – if it were not, we would have no real reason to move from the latter to the former in our discussions about the nature of well-being – even a perfectly valid measure of life satisfaction may be invalid as a measure of authentic life satisfaction. Tiberius does offer some constructive suggestions concerning how psychologists can go about establishing the validity of more relevant measures (pp. 499-500), yet establishing the validity of a measure in accordance with the strictures of best psychometric practice is hard work and the outcome of such an exercise uncertain. In brief, there seems to be real tension between the relevance and validity criteria; it does not seem possible to simultaneously satisfy both. This entails that there are limits to how valid subjective measures of well-being can be while remaining relevant, and to how relevant they can be while remaining valid.

III

As it happens, orthodox economists face much the same challenge. Tiberius only mentions economics in passing, but the comparison is instructive. Orthodox economic measures of welfare – I use the terms “well-being” and “welfare” interchangeably – are based on preference-satisfaction accounts of well-being (Angner, 2009). That is, economic welfare measures are designed to represent, not the degree to which people are in some subjectively experienced mental state, but the degree to which their preferences are satisfied. Preference-satisfaction accounts are radically different from mental-state accounts, since it is quite possible to feel happy or satisfied even though

one's preferences are not satisfied, and *vice versa*. Economists were originally drawn to preference-satisfaction accounts because they thought preferences could be directly inferred from observable choices, and because they took choice data to be more reliable than subjective reports about mental states (Angner & Loewenstein, in press). On the assumption that people's choices satisfy certain conditions, economists can make a solid case that their measures satisfy the validity criterion (Angner, 2010c). Yet, the account of well-being implicit in this line of reasoning is implausible: for all sorts of reasons – including immaturity, ignorance, and irrationality – people would not in general be better off if their actual (or *realized*) preferences were satisfied. Philosophically sophisticated economists like John C. Harsanyi (1977), therefore, argue that what counts are people's "true" (or *idealized*) preferences: the preferences that people would have if they were perfectly informed, ideally rational, and so on. If an economic welfare measure is understood as representing people's idealized preferences, it is arguably more relevant. Yet, idealized preferences are different from realized preferences, and therefore even a perfectly valid measure of realized-preference satisfaction may be invalid as a measure of idealized-preference satisfaction. Again, there seems to be real tension between the relevance and validity criteria; it does not seem possible to simultaneously satisfy both.

IV

Even if there is real tension between the relevance and validity criteria, this need not be a death spell to the project of build a *bona fide* science of well-being using measures of happiness, satisfaction, and other positive subjectively experienced mental states. As illustrated in the previous section, other welfare measures have flaws too; hence, an honest comparison between subjective measures of well-being and, e.g., orthodox economic welfare measures might favor the former over the latter. And of course, we can use measures of happiness and satisfaction to study the determinants and distribution of mental states like happiness and satisfaction, which are interesting in their own right.

Nevertheless, the fact – if it is one – that subjective measures of well-being cannot simultaneously be relevant and valid should moderate our enthusiasm for these measures *qua* measures of well-being. The tension undercuts the argument that subjective measures are superior to other welfare measures because they are more direct measures of well-being (Angner, 2010a). The tension also suggests that it would be a mistake to use subjective measures as the ultimate standard by which to assess public policy, as e.g. Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman have argued: “Our thesis is that well-being should become a primary focus of policymakers, and that its rigorous measurement is a primary policy imperative.... [We] propose that well-being ought to be the ultimate goal around which economic, health, and social policies are built” (Diener & Seligman, 2004, pp. 1-2). Finally, the tension indicates that subjective measures of well-being may not, in the final analysis, offer a cure-all for the social sciences.

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