Critical Assessment of the World Happiness Report's Public Conception of Well-Being

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1 Introduction

What makes for a good public conception of well-being? Four reasonable criteria for a public conception of well-being are (i) importance to self, (ii) importance to others, (iii) neutrality, and (iv) measurability.[1] (i) refers to what a well-informed person considers good for themselves, (ii) refers to what other citizens have reason to promote through the state, (iii) refers to the matter that there is reasonable disagreement about well-being, (iv) refers to that the conception is measurable.

   I will assess whether the World Happiness Report is a good public conception of well-being. I will focus on importance to self and measurability in my essay. Importance to self is important, because individuals are most interested in their own well-being and they are best suited to assess their own circumstances. Measurability is important, because it would enable "monitoring of trends, the identification of problem groups in the population, and the analysis of why some people are happy and others are not."[2] I will not focus on importance to others and neutrality because of space constraints.

2 World Happiness Report

The latest World Happiness Report assesses global happiness by ranking 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be.[3] The first report was published in

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[1] I learned about these criteria from Professor Alex Voorhoeve during the Lent Term in Philosophy and Public Policy course.

[2] Richard Layard, "Measuring Subjective Well-Being," Science 327, no. 5965 (January 29, 2010): 535.

[3] "World Happiness Report 2019," accessed February 24, 2020, http://worldhappiness.report/.

2012 receiving support from the UN High Level Meeting on happiness and well-being.[4] It is published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and supported by the Ernesto Illy Foundation.[5]

The authors of the report say that happiness can be defined as an 'emotion' ("Were you happy yesterday?") and as an 'evaluation' ("Are you happy with your life as a whole?").[6] They prefer the latter definition. The report refers to 'subjective well-being' as 'life evaluation' and they use 'happiness' and 'subjective well-being' exchangeably.[7]

The report uses Cantril Ladder to measure life evaluations. Survey respondents are "asked to place the status of their lives on a "ladder" scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 means the worst possible life and 10 the best possible life."[8] The authors collect data about emotions (called positive and negative affect in the report), but they do not consider these central to the concept of happiness to be aimed at by public policy.

3   Is it important to self?

The criterion of importance to self assesses whether a public conception of well-being is connected to what an individual, if well informed, thinks is good for themselves. There are three dominant accounts of well-being discussed in the literature: objective list, preference satisfaction, and mental states.[9] The objective list account claims that what is best for someone is what fulfills the basic needs and rights of humans.[10] The preference satisfaction account claims that what is best for someone is what satisfies their preferences the most.[11] The mental state account claims that what is best for someone is what provides the most pleasure and the least pain.[12]

As explained above, the conception used in the report aims at assessing respondents' life satisfaction rather than their emotions at specific moments. Thus, the account of well-being they use is ultimately a preference satisfaction one. The authors justify it in the following way: "A very poor person might report himself to be happy emotionally at a specific time, while also reporting a much lower sense of happiness with life as a whole; and indeed, people living in extreme poverty do express low levels of happiness with

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[4]"World Happiness Report 2017," accessed February 24, 2020, http://worldhappiness.report/.

[5]"World Happiness Report 2017."

[6]John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, "World Happiness Report 2013" (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2013), 3.

[7]John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, "World Happiness Report 2016, Update (Vol. I)" (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2016), 14.

[8]John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, "World Happiness Report 2019" (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2019), 12.

[9]Paul Dolan and Robert Metcalfe, "Measuring Subjective Wellbeing: Recommendations on Measures for Use by National Governments," Journal of Social Policy 41, no. 2 (April 2012): 411.

[10]Dolan and Metcalfe.

[11]Dolan and Metcalfe.

[12]Dolan and Metcalfe.

life as a whole. Such answers should spur our societies to work harder to end extreme poverty."[13]

Are the authors of the World Happiness Report justified in preferring the preference satisfaction account over the objective list and mental state accounts? The preference satisfaction account has the strength that it allows individuals to decide for themselves what makes them happy,[14] but so does the mental state account. This is very important, because in liberal communities it is strongly believed that individuals know best what is good for them or at least get it right more often than others, and when states decide to interfere, they often do it wrongly. The objective list account, on the other hand, does not allow for it, because it claims that an individual is not happy when they are not fulfilling basic human needs and rights.

However, the report does not assume that people can just be asked what makes them happy, because depending on how they are asked they give different answers. They might be satisfied with their life overall but report low levels of emotional well-being. It appears that the authors actually implement the objective list account to some extent as they assume that someone cannot be happy unless they have sufficient financial resources, or in other words, are not extremely poor. The authors do let people decide for themselves what makes them happy, but they only trust those answers, which correspond well to their list of objective values, such as wealth over poverty. If the authors indeed want to maintain that people can decide for themselves what makes them happy, then the justification that a person in extreme poverty cannot be happy will not work.

Unrestricted preference satisfaction accounts do not seem plausible, because it can easily be imagined that someone's preferences are satisfied only after they have ceased to exist. It seems that someone's life cannot go better or worse for them unless their state of mind is directly affected.[15] In order for the preference satisfaction account to be plausible, the authors of the report have to refer to reasonable preferences or informed preferences. The same could, of course, be true of the mental state account as it seems implausible that someone's mental state should be improved if they receive a lot of pleasure from sadistic hobbies, for example.

A big strength of evaluating life satisfaction rather than experiences at specific moments is that it seems to track what really increases people's well-being better. There is a famous objection to the mental state account called the experience machine thought experiment. Very roughly, people are asked whether they would step into an experience machine, which would provide them with the best experiences possible, for their lifetime. Very few people say that they would do that, indicating that experiences are not the only thing that matters giving much more strength to the preference satisfaction account.

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[13]John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, "World Happiness Report 2013" (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2013), 3.

[14]Dolan and Metcalfe, "Measuring Subjective Wellbeing," 411.

[15]Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1986), 494.

Although this appears to be a strong argument in favor of it, the experience machine thought experiment has recently been heavily criticized due to its flawed methodology.[16]

4   Is it measurable?

The criterion of measurability assesses whether a public conception of well-being is measurable. There are three distinct metrics preferred in the literature of well-being measurement: hedonic metrics, evaluative metrics, and eudaimonic metrics.[17] Hedonic metrics assess individuals' affective states and how a variety of conditions and activities affect these.[18] Evaluative metrics assess individuals' satisfaction with their lives on the whole.[19] Eudaimonic metrics assess how much individuals have meaning or purpose in their lives.[20] For all of these metrics, participants are asked about their demographic and social factors and how happy they are based on different accounts of well-being.[21]

The World Happiness Report asks their participants, "Are you happy with your life as a whole?". They are also "asked to place the status of their lives on a "ladder" scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 means the worst possible life and 10 the best possible life." This conception has the limitation of interpersonal comparison: the result cannot be interpreted very easily in comparison with other participants. When a participant says that they are 8 out of 10 happy with their lives, then it is not possible to say that they are twice as happy as someone who answers that they are 4 out of 10 happy.[22]

There have been suggested approaches to deal with this issue. One such an approach is a simulation of interpersonal utility in which people are asked to imagine being in the shoes of other people with their tastes, education, social background, cultural values, and psychological makeup, and then evaluate how much their preferences would be satisfied from any given alternative option.[23] This approach has the problem of being computationally very demanding, but it seems plausibly helpful with approximating interpersonal comparison. Just anecdotally, it seems that people make interpersonal comparisons all the time by imagining being in the shoes of other people. This would be a more rigorous approach to doing it. That said, to my knowledge the World Happiness Report uses no such approach and therefore, cannot score as well on the measurability criterion.

A response to this objection is that the answers to the preference satisfaction questionnaires correlate well with the reports of friends, plausible causes of well-being, plausible

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[16]Ben Bramble, "The Experience Machine," Philosophy Compass 11, no. 3 (2016): 139-140.

[17]Carol Graham, Kate Laffan, and Sergio Pinto, "Well-Being in Metrics and Policy," Science 362, no. 6412 (October 19, 2018): 287.

[18]Graham, Laffan, and Pinto.

[19]Graham, Laffan, and Pinto.

[20]Graham, Laffan, and Pinto.

[21]Graham, Laffan, and Pinto.

[22]Graham, Laffan, and Pinto, 288.

[23]Alvin I. Goldman, "Simulation and Interpersonal Utility," Ethics 105, no. 4 (1995): 717.

effects of well-being, physical functioning, and measures of brain activity.[24] This indicates that this conception may be quite measurable as it is reliable and consistent and perhaps even some level of interpersonal comparison is justified. It may not achieve the ideal cardinal measurability, but it almost definitely achieves the ordinal measurability[25], because the variables identified explain a large proportion of variation in happiness scores: "GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption ... explain almost three-quarters of the variation in national annual average ladder scores among countries."[26]

However, there is also reason to doubt that people's evaluation of their life as a whole is reliable due to issues with how well they remember how their preferences have been satisfied. When they are asked to rate their life as a whole, they are unable to remember all the preferences they have satisfied. Instead, they probably perform mental computations that have very little to do with that.[27] Furthermore, they likely provide answers that they feel they are supposed to provide normatively.[28] An individual living in a Nordic country may think that surely their preferences are satisfied when the economy is good, equality is high, and the government is trustworthy. This judgment may be independent of the individual's actual preference satisfaction.

One suggestion for how to measure experiences has been to measure moment-based happiness. This means measuring the quality of experiences of people each moment. Two of the most popular methods for that are the experience sampling method and the day reconstruction method.[29] For the former, people are asked at random moments to say how they are feeling and what they are currently doing. For the latter, people are asked to think about their previous day, split it into short episodes, and evaluate how they were feeling and what they were doing at the time. Something like this could potentially be implemented for the preference satisfaction account as well. Individuals could be asked at random moments throughout the day (or some other interval) to evaluate how well their preferences have been satisfied recently. Later, those data points could be aggregated or evaluated on the whole.

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[24]Layard, "Measuring Subjective Well-Being," 534.

[25]By cardinal measurability, I mean that it is possible to state by how much the average happiness of one nation is higher than the other nation, whereas by ordinal measurability, I mean that it is possible to state whether the average happiness of one nation is merely higher than the other without knowing by how much exactly.

[26]John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, "World Happiness Report 2018" (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2018), 14.

[27]Daniel Kahneman and Robert Sugden, "Experienced Utility as a Standard of Policy Evaluation," Environmental & Resource Economics 32, no. 1 (2005): 174.

[28]Kahneman and Sugden.

[29]Kahneman and Sugden, 175.

5 Conclusion

Overall, I judge the World Happiness Report to be moderately good as a public conception of well-being on the criteria of importance to self and measurability. The World Happiness Report has the following strengths: it is quite anti-paternalistic providing people the option to decide for themselves what makes them happy and it seems to track quite well what increases their well-being. The World Happiness Report has the following weaknesses: it achieves ordinal measurability but not cardinal measurability and interpersonal comparison, and it might not be very reliable, because it relies too much on people's memory when deciding whether they are happy with their life on the whole.

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