

## Knowing well-being

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*Note to ERG folks: Later this month, I'm giving a 30-35 minute talk. This is the draft. It isn't really about epistemology, except as it connects to discussions about the value of knowledge. Because it's a talk, it lacks citations.. Thanks for reading and attending on a Thursday. (I'm teaching Friday afternoons this term.)*

1. I'll begin with the thesis of my talk. Roughly, my thesis is the biconditional:

KNOWLEDGE    You are doing well if and only if you know that you are.

I know I won't be able to establish the truth of KNOWLEDGE here and now. I myself have some doubts about it. Today I aim to say just a few things in defense of it, to increase your credence in the view. But mostly I aim to clarify it.

Half of this biconditional is trivially true. If you aren't doing well, then — since knowledge is factive — you can't know that you are doing well. By contrast, whenever you know that you are doing well, you *are* doing well. So, since knowing  $p$  entails  $p$ , anyone who knows that they doing well is indeed well off.

The other half of KNOWLEDGE, however, is — to put it mildly — not obviously true. For that's the claim that if you are doing well, then you know you are. Consider two people whose lives are otherwise the same: one knows they are well-off; the other does not. Whatever else is true about them, I maintain only the first person is in fact doing well.

I will defend KNOWLEDGE first by clarifying its logic/grammar (sections 2 and 3), by exploiting what's appealing about subjectivism about well-being (section 4), by exploiting what's appealing about objectivism about well-being (section 5), and by responding to some natural objections (section 6).

2. When I see you at this conference, I might ask you how you're doing. You might respond by telling me about some recent events or aspects of your life that have made you better or worse off. Perhaps you have a fun new hobby, or you recently caught the flu. Such answers are responsive. But they don't completely answer my question. I didn't ask how things have shifted for you, how things have gotten better or worse for you. I want to know, overall, how you are. Are you well?

The philosophy of well-being likewise takes one of two forms, forms that are often conflated. One form — certainly the most common — is to identify which *specific* kinds of things are good for us, and why. Arguments that pleasure or friendship are (or are not) intrinsically prudentially good for us are examples of this form of philosophy. Sometimes, we want to know what elements of our lives makes them better. This is a theory of various prudential *goods*. A prudential good is an event or a fact or some other element in your life, one that makes your life better than it would

otherwise be. For example, my listening to Stereolab last night is an event in my life that makes me better off than I would have been had I not listened to Stereolab. It was thus good for me, or a prudential good. Or, more fundamentally, we might say that my listening to Stereolab was pleasant, and pleasure is a prudential good.

A second and distinct form of philosophy characterizes the value of one's life *itself*. We want to know about our lives, not just about their parts or constituents. Yet even the language of "life" can mislead: I don't really want to know how your *life* is, except insofar as I want to know how *you* are. I want to know whether you are well. And I want to know whether I am well. Whether we are well surely *depends* upon the presence or absence of the aforementioned prudential goods and bads, but it might not be entirely exhausted by them.

Consider, for example, a simplistic life-satisfaction view of well-being, according to which you are doing well just in case you are satisfied with your life a whole. This view makes no claims about what's prudentially good for you – in particular, it bases nothing upon your attitudes toward the *particular* elements in your life. On this view, it really doesn't matter whether your life in fact contains particular things, nor even what you think the contents of your life are, nor how you feel about *those very contents*. All that matters is whether (or not) you are indeed satisfied with your life-as-a-whole.

These two topics of the philosophy of well-being raise related but distinct questions. One might think that these questions are very tightly connected. To argue this, one might separately argue for:

**REDUCTION** One is doing well *simply* because of the presence of prudential goods (and the absence of prudential bads) in one's life.

Socrates was perhaps the first to express something like a version of this idea: in the *Gorgias*, he says (possibly sincerely) that the goodness of a person depends entirely upon the presence of goods in their life (XXX). Call this a *goods-first* approach to well-being. It says the good life ultimately depends only upon prudential goods. To know whether someone is doing well, we need only to know the various features of their life, and whether those features are themselves prudential goods and bads. **REDUCTION** thus reduces the second form of the philosophy of well-being to the first.

Arguments that the *shape* of a life directly affects well-being implicitly deny **REDUCTION**. It is argued that two lives might contain the very same elements, but one life is better than the other because of *when* these goods obtain. These arguments recognize that something more than the bare presence of a prudential good makes a difference to well-being, but still hold that well-being depends upon other (viz. temporal) features of prudential goods, and their relation to one another.

A more radical way to deny **REDUCTION** is inspired by Aquinas. Aquinas thought that "goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea" (ST, I, 5, 1). Perhaps living (which is how beings like us animals exist) is good for us prior to any *further* elements of or details about our lives. Perhaps the baseline for a life is good, such that our lives are (somewhat?) good for us — unless we are overwhelmed by a plethora of prudential bads.

An austere version of pessimism holds the symmetrically opposite view. While some pessimists think that our lives are bad because, say, we always suffer, an austere pessimism holds that living is itself bad for us. Even in the absence of specific prudential bads, living is bad for us. Ill-being is the default setting.

I myself completely endorse neither Aquinas nor the pessimist. But I do endorse the basic idea that well-being itself may depend upon something other than the presence (or the timing) of prudential goods and bads present in a person's life. Like the simplistic life-satisfaction view of well-being sketched above, I think our well-being is bound up with our attitudes toward our life as a whole, and not merely toward the various elements of our lives. However, I don't think that *feeling satisfied* with your life is the important attitude. The important attitude is *knowing* that you are doing well.

3. Before arguing for the conditional "If you are living well, you know that you are", I need to clarify it further. Let's hone in on the antecedent of this conditional. The antecedent say "if you are living well". There are multiple ways to interpret it. Here are just a few reasonable interpretations:

- a) if you are better off than other people,
- b) if you are fairly well off,
- c) if you are doing better than some arbitrary or merely conventional threshold,
- d) if you are fully well-off,
- e) if you are infinitely well off.

I acknowledge that there are legitimate uses of the clause "if you are living well" for each of these interpretations. But here, unless otherwise indicated, I will mean "if you are fully well-off". I think that this is *one* acceptable interpretation.

Not everyone will agree with me that it *is* acceptable. In particular, if you think that infinite well-being is impossible, but you also think that there is no finite maximum well-being, then we won't see eye-to-eye. For then you might think that no matter how well someone is doing, they could be doing even better. And if that were so, no one could be fully well-off.

So as not to smuggle in an interpretation that favors my thesis, I'll be explicit about what *I* mean by the thesis. My thesis is thus: *you are fully well-off, if and only if you know that you are.*

I need to acknowledge that someone can be leading a *decently good* life even if they don't know that they are doing decently. Maybe they have unrealistic expectations. Maybe they are unreflective. Do you really need to know that you are living well in order to live well? The claim that you *must* know that you are well off can seem a bit much. Even if you don't know that you are living well, your life might be good *enough*. Call this *the good enough objection*.

There is something to the good enough objection. We certainly should not think that one's subjective stance towards one's own life is all that matters, or even that it always outweighs other

genuine prudential goods. And if one has enough genuine prudential goods, one's life might still be quite good.

The objection doesn't completely stick, though. We can and should distinguish between living truly well and having a life that's merely good enough. This distinction is roughly analogous to the distinction between a perfect score on an exam and a passing score on an exam. If you want an answer key to an exam, and I hand you a copy of an exam that has a passing score, I have not given you what you wanted. Likewise, if you want to know what it is to live well, and I show you a life that's good enough, I have not given you what you wanted. When we ask about what well-being *is*, we aren't interested in a life that's just good enough.

Here's another related worry to lay to rest. In my talking about whether someone is (fully) well-off, it might be thought I'm failing to make room for ordinary talk about someone becoming even better off than they had been. It seems like someone can be doing well, and then later be doing even more well. Or we say that one person is doing well, and another is doing even better. We do use comparative language when we talk about well-being, but it's hard to make sense of such language if you are *really* well-off only if you are fully well-off.

I respond to this worry by analogy. Consider two drinking glasses each of which has a lot of water in it. Although neither glass is (completely) full, we can still sensibly talk about which glass is more full than the other. We can use the comparative. And it isn't deeply paradoxical to say "This one glass is more full, but it's not full." Sometimes we express this with reduplication:

A: "Is the glass full?"

B: "Yeah, it's full! Well, it's not *full* full."

A glass is full, in *one* sense of the word, only if it can't contain more liquid. But we still usefully use the terms 'full' and 'more full' for objects that can contain more liquid.

Further, there's a difference between being fully well off and having a life that is, say, worth living. Socrates, of course, is reputed to have said that the unexamined life *isn't* worth living. This seems false. You can have a *worthwhile* life even if you don't examine it. It would be much more plausible to say instead that the unexamined life isn't a fully good life. Perhaps self-examination is indeed part of *the* good life, even if it isn't a necessary part of the good enough life. I don't want to take a stand on the value of self-examination here, but I think something similar holds about knowledge. Even if you can have a worthwhile life or a good enough life while not knowing how your life is, someone living a *fully* good life will know that they are doing well.

Consider also the following analogy. Imagine someone goes to a physician for a thorough exam, and the physician reports "Good news! There's nothing wrong with you. You are perfectly healthy." I take it that this could be a sensible thing to say. A healthy body is a body that operates as it should, given the kind of creature one is. To be fully healthy, you don't need superpowers, nor the powers of a cheetah or an octopus. Being fully healthy is a coherent (though rare) possibility. Perhaps some people at some point in their lives have been fully healthy.

If so, people who are fully healthy could not be healthier. For if they *could* be even healthier, then they weren't fully healthy to begin with. I think well-being is like this. It's possible to be fully well-off. And so KNOWLEDGE claims that anyone who is fully well-off knows that they are.

Another detail worth discussing concerns why the thesis is phrased in terms knowledge rather than belief. Why not run the claim merely in terms of belief?

There are at least two reasons to go with knowledge rather than belief. First, it's just clearly not true that believing that you're well-off suffices for being well-off. Sometimes a person thinks that they are doing well, but they are incorrect. Were it so easy!

Second, it would be odd were it true that in order to be living well, you had to believe that you were, but you still might be unwarranted in so believing this. If we are characterizing what it is to fully live well, why stop at belief, when knowledge seems better?

Nonetheless, I can imagine one reason for preferring to put the thesis in terms of belief rather than knowledge. Perhaps thinking that you are well-off is a (partially) *self-fulfilling* belief. Perhaps having a positive attitude about your life is necessary for living fully well. So, on this hypothesis, you are fully well-off only if you, perhaps unwarrantedly, believe that you are – but somehow, having this unwarranted belief makes it true that you are well off. Thus, in the end, you are fully well-off only if you truly but perhaps unwarrantedly believe that you are well-off. This, I guess, is possible.

But I am not going to rest my case on the thought that such a belief can be true because it's self-fulfilling, even though I do acknowledge that having a positive attitude *can* be good for you. So, that's why I choose to defend the thesis in terms of knowledge rather than belief.

4. So much for how to interpret KNOWLEDGE. Next I will say why subjectivists should be friendly to it.

Subjectivism about well-being aims to capture an important facet about living well. There seems to be an important constitutive connection between your well-being and your own evaluative perspective, and subjectivism seems well-positioned to capture this connection.

There are many different ways your life might be good, but only some of them bear upon whether *you yourself* are living well. The lives of the martyrs are indeed inspiring, and an inspirational life is one way a life can be a good life. But this hardly shows that the martyrs were living well – well for themselves. Rather, their lives are good in so far as they show *us* something about what's important. They themselves genuinely suffered.

So, when thinking about the concept of well-being, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that we are exploring a concept naturally addressed from a first-person perspective. We shouldn't think about it strictly third-personally. Would my being a martyr be good *for me*? Probably not. That it's good for others or for posterity or for some important cause is a different matter.

One way to articulate the importance of the first-person perspective is by what's called The Resonance Constraint. Although variously formulated, the Resonance Constraint says that there must be some necessary connection between what's good for you and what you care about. Different authors understand caring as either a matter of desiring, or valuing, or believing to be valuable. I'm setting aside these internecine differences here. Instead I want to focus on the earlier distinction between the prudential goods in your life and whether *you* are doing well.

Philosophers developed the idea of the Resonance Constraint as a requirement on what can count as a prudential good. The idea is that some one thing in your life is good for you only if it 'resonates' with you. Here I am suggesting that something similar holds about, not just various particular prudential goods, but about your life itself as well. That is, *you* are doing well only if your life resonates with you, only if you yourself judge you are doing well. It would be "intolerably alienating" to think that a person is doing fully well, even though they themselves think otherwise.

The truth of subjectivism about well-being rests on its claim to take seriously the perspective of the person whose well-being is in question. And nothing would be more antithetical to that claim than to disregard a person's assessment of their own life. If you ignore a person's own opinion about whether they are doing well in your assessment of whether they are indeed doing well, don't call yourself a subjectivist.

To illustrate, suppose Ivan's life is full of things that philosophers rightly claim to be prudential goods. He achieves his goals, he has a loving family, his basic needs are met, he has time for play and reflection, etc. Moreover, Ivan knows that that his life is rich in these ways, and he also correctly thinks that they are indeed prudential goods. If asked "Is your having a loving family good for you?", Ivan would unhesitatingly and truthfully answer "Yes". Name a prudential good, and Ivan's got it, and he knows it. Name a serious prudential bad, and Ivan lacks it, and he knows that too.

Still, Ivan might coherently wonder how well he's doing, how well his life is. Looking around at the circumstances of his life, and his usual subjective reactions to them, he acknowledges that everything appears to be in order. All his views about the prudential goods and bads are correct. But he still feels at a loss. He can't put a finger on it, but he senses that something is not right. Characters in Russian novels occasionally find themselves in such a predicament, and their authors are on to something.

One way to describe Ivan's loss is to say that he is not satisfied with his life. If he were already satisfied with his life, he wouldn't deeply wonder whether he's doing well or ill. Thus it seems that one needs not only prudential goods, but also to be satisfied with one's life. Another way to describe things is that Ivan thinks he could be doing significantly better, although he is in the dark about what it would take. I'm not sure what the best way to flesh out his attitude is, nor even whether there is just one correct way to do so. But I think it's pretty clear that if Ivan thinks he's not doing well, then he's not doing well. And if Ivan is agnostic about whether he's doing well, then again he could be doing better. Best of all is to think—nay, to know—that you are doing well. Nothing less is ideal for you.

5. There are reasons to think that *not* all prudential goods are grounded in the subjective states of the person whose life is under evaluation. Arguably, things like love, friendship, virtue, and the respect of others are all good for you, somewhat independently of what you think about them.

When philosophers produce lists of objective goods, they usually put knowledge on the list as well. Here I won't rehearse their arguments for including knowledge. I'll just see what they imply.

I will grant, however, that there are many facts that it seems it's in no way beneficial to know. If I were to know who the first person to score 500,000 on Tetris was, I would in no way be better off by knowing this. And this is probably so for most facts.

But, arguably, some facts are different. While it makes no difference to the quality of my life to know this obscure fact about the history of Tetris, the same should not be said about many facts about my *own* life. That is, even if it doubtful that knowledge is always good for you, *self-*knowledge seems to be beneficial. It's much more plausible to think that self-knowledge is objectively good for you than to think that knowledge more generally is objectively good for you.

Of course, there are many facts about myself that it probably would not benefit me to know. For instance, if I were to know the date of the first time I scored 50,000 on Tetris, I would in no way be better off by knowing this. Knowing that fact about myself just doesn't matter. And this is probably so for most facts about myself.

But, arguably, some facts about myself are different. While it makes no different to the quality of my life to know this obscure fact about my history with Tetris, the same should not be said for facts about the quality of my own life. In other words, it matters to the quality of my own life what I know about the quality of my own life.

Or it *can* matter. In arguing that those who are fully well-off know this about themselves, I don't mean to further imply that *everyone* benefits by knowing how well off they are. I presume that some people who are doing badly would be even worse off were they to know how badly off they were. And this may even be so for some people whose lives are okay. Knowing this may be bad for them, or at least not good for them. My claim concerns only those who are well off without qualification or diminution. Those who are *fully* well off know how they are doing. This is a bit of knowledge that seems objectively good for them.

But I worry now that I myself have conflated two things that earlier I encouraged us to distinguish. I said we should distinguish between prudential goods – those particular things that makes a life better or worse – and the quality of a life itself, the thought being that the latter might not be determined fully by the former. And so here it looks like I'm saying that knowing how well you are doing is (or can be) just another prudential good.

I do think there is a problem with saying that such knowledge is a prudential good. That problem involves circularity. It seems convoluted to say that X is F because X thinks X is F. This is because the concept we are trying to understand better (F) appears on both sides of the conditional, thereby presupposing an understanding of the very concept we were hoping to illuminate. In our case, it seems convoluted to say that you are well-off in part because you

think/know you are well-off. For just *what* is it that you know? I will not here try to determine whether this particular circularity is a genuine problem, much less solve it if it is. I only flag it as something worth worrying about later.

In the end, I *don't* claim that knowing how you're doing is (or can be) a prudential good. Rather, I only want to exploit the fact that many objective list theorists *do* hold that knowledge is prudentially good as a sign that it is (perhaps also) plausible to think that the person who is doing well knows at least this one fact.

## 6. Objections and Replies

Objection: Suppose it's true that if you think your life is bad, then you aren't fully well off. Even so, that would not establish the controversial conditional embedded in KNOWLEDGE. For it is possible neither to think that you are doing badly, nor to think that you are doing well. One might have *no* thoughts about the quality of one's own life. So it isn't clear that you must know that you are doing well in order to be doing well. Perhaps some people who are doing well lack such evaluative thoughts altogether.

Reply: Yes, it's technically possible to have no view about how you're doing. But I think it's extremely rare at best. Perhaps my imagination is unusually weak, but I can't see how one could go through life with no thought whatsoever about whether one is doing well or ill. I agree that one rarely *attends* to how well or ill one is doing. There are other things to attend to. But that fact doesn't show that one completely lacks a view about the matter. I rarely attend to the fact that Los Angeles is not in Delaware. But I know that Los Angeles is not in Delaware even when I'm attending only to other things. Likewise, if I were to know that I'm doing well, I would rarely attend to that fact. But I would still know it. So, we should not worry about the fact that someone who is fully well-off would not think about this with any frequency.

(Help me fill out this section.)