

Article

Special Issue: *Cross-Cultural Studies in Well-Being*

Particulars of Well-Being

Owen Flanagan, Mona Letourneau and Wenqing Zhao

*Center for Comparative Philosophy, Philosophy Department, Duke University (USA)***Editor** | Gregg D. Caruso, Corning Community College, SUNY (USA)/Owen Flanagan, Duke University, USA.**Correspondence** | Owen Flanagan, Duke University, USA; **Email:** ojf@duke.edu**Citation** | Flanagan, O., Letourneau, M. and Zhao, W. (2019). Particulars of Well-Being. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 6(1): 1-5.**DOI** | <https://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2019.6.1.1.5>

These are good times for the study of happiness and well-being. Philosophers and social scientists are attempting to provide precise definitions of ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’, distinguish between happiness and well-being, taxonomize the varieties of each, and develop useful metrics for measuring happiness and well-being. The 2018 World Happiness Report (<http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2018/>), like its predecessors since 2012, ranks countries – now 156 – in terms of overall happiness, happiness of immigrants, and so on. The teams that produce the World Happiness Reports claim that six variables explain most -- as much as 70% -- of the variation in the rankings of happiness among nation states:

- GDP per capita
- Social Support (among family and friends; welfare and social security)
- Healthy life expectancy
- Freedom to make life choices
- Generosity (level of sharing)
- Perception of government corruption

These six variables lead some scholars to insist that the distinction between happiness and well-being is not optional, not simply a matter of semantics, but mandatory, required by the nature of things. The reason is because such things as GDP, social support, life expectancy are what they are independent of whether any particular individual notices what they are, is

pleased by how much money they have, how long they will live, and so on. This observation leads to a distinction between happiness measures and well-being measures along lines that claim that ‘happiness’ is comprised entirely of subjective mental states (feelings and judgments), whereas ‘well-being’, which might take into account happiness as an important component of overall well-being, also measures additional elements that are objective, such as GDP, social support, life span.

Happiness theorists (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/>) prefer measures that focus on conscious states of mind and thus count absolute number of pleasant experiences per diem, ratio of pleasant to unpleasant experiences per diem; positive/negative affect ratio per diem; overall judgments of subjective well being by domain (family, work, education); and overall sustained dominant emotional orientation/mood/attitude. Often, and somewhat confusingly, these measures of happiness are called ‘subjective well-being’ measures. Sometimes when the measures are given as overall quality of life scores (via self-reports) they are referred to in terms of ‘overall life satisfaction.’

Well-being theorists (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>) consider happiness (some kinds at least) desirable but not an absolutely necessary aspect of a life well-lived, and definitely not sufficient for

well-being. Why? One reason is that there are some excellent, heroic people who lived very well but were not – by dint of temperament or misfortune or even sometimes due to their commitment to social justice – happy.

Well-being theorists insist that certain objective goods, such as clean water, education, and meaningful work are necessary for well-being even if particular individuals or groups of individuals might not be made subjectively happy or sad by their having or not having such things as clean water, good education, and meaningful work. The idea is that such things are good independently of what particular individuals or groups feel or think about them.

So understood, the World Happiness Report 2018, like its predecessors, mixes measures of happiness with measures of well being, with what following Aristotle, are called eudaimonistic measures, measures of what makes for a good human life overall, independently of whether it leads to feeling good.

Distinguishing between happiness and well-being is helpful for capturing the intuition that many excellent human lives – Socrates's, Florence Nightingale's, Dorothy Day's, Nelson Mandela's – were morally magnificent, worthy of social esteem and great self-respect, but not particularly happy ones.

The original impulse for this special issue on **Cross-Cultural Studies of Well-Being** was motivated by the belief that the standard methods for studying happiness and well-being and the standard metrics for measuring them, as helpful as they are, miss certain idiosyncratic, fine grained, and relevant details of particular cultural conceptions of well-being. We live in times in which the most well-advertised and alluring conception of well-being across the earth is associated with the tastes and wealth of denizens of Western modernity, and where happiness is conceived in ways that lean towards a culturally specific type familiar from American culture and shared internationally on social media and in television and movies.

But there are many philosophical conceptions -- some historical, some living, some part alive, part bygone but which still can be felt in the collective memories, in the blood and bones of certain contemporary peo-

ples – that do not embrace the Western modernist view. Not only do these traditions make different assumptions about the importance of happiness (at least certain kinds) and the nature well-being, some of them also embody different and potentially valuable ideas about human social relations as well as human relations to nature, specifically the possibilities of non-instrumental relations to nature, and greater care and concern for the future of the earth.

We approached Gregg Caruso, the chief editor of the journal *Science, Religion, and Culture*, with our idea to do a special issue. *Science, Religion, and Culture* seemed the perfect venue since we hoped to collect papers from authors who were fluent with the recent scientific attempts to measure happiness and well-being, but who were also experts on non-dominant traditions, and who could provide fine-grained analysis of alternative, often living but recessive, conceptions of happiness and well-being. We were looking for scholars with the sensibilities of comparative philosophers, religious studies scholars, and cultural psychologists and anthropologists.

Chief editor Gregg Caruso was enthusiastic and with his blessing we issued this call for papers in 2016.

Special Issue Title: Cross-Cultural Studies of Well-Being a special journal issue in Science, Religion & Culture, an international peer reviewed open access journal.

The study of well-being is a lively topic in science as well as in philosophy and religious studies. Major questions include:

- What is well-being?
- What makes for a good human life?
- Is it the total amount of hedonic pleasure?
- A sense of subjective fulfillment?
- Something objective?
- What does well-being have to do with happiness?
- To what extent is well-being a matter of having meaning and purpose?
- Is religious faith predictive of well-being?
- Are true beliefs predictive of well-being?
- Does well-being have certain universal features, conditions?
- If so, what are these universal features?
- Are some of the particular goods that make for well-being internal to different cultural-philosophical-religious traditions?

This special issue seeks articles that explore questions of well-being. We focus on the last question on the list above: Are some of the goods that make for well-being internal to different cultural-philosophical and religious traditions? In particular, we are interested in papers that explore conceptions of well-being that are not WEIRD (Western-Educated-Industrialized-Rich-Democratic). We seek papers that:

Reveal how a specific philosophical or religious tradition conceives well-being generally or a specific aspect of well-being that puts pressure of the scientific study of well-being, at least insofar as the science of well-being tries to identify trans-cultural features of well-being.

Reveals insights or resources in some specific philosophical or religious tradition for thinking about well-being that ought to be noticed and discussed in the scientific or philosophical literature on well-being, but that receives insufficient attention.

The 16 papers you have before you collectively do exactly what we hoped. They bring a needlepoint of detail to the ways in which different conceptions of both happiness and well-being are embodied in different traditions. They all address the question: **Are some of the particular goods that make for well-being internal to different cultural-philosophical-religious traditions?** They all answer ‘yes.’

We have papers from philosophers, religious study scholars, anthropologists, medical ethicists, psychologists, a psychotherapist, and indigenous studies scholars. As the reader will soon see many different traditions advertise different mental state types as ideal, and they embed different metaphysics, different epistemologies, and different ethical conceptions in their ideal visions. These are all differences that make a difference to happiness and well-being for the people who abide the relevant conceptions.

The papers highlight the many ways in which there have been and still are competing, culturally and tradition specific conceptions of well-being across the earth. So, for example, Daoists and American liberals do not associate the same mental states with happi-

ness; and Maya and modern Chinese do not conceive of social sacrifice and its contribution to well-being in the same way.

Besides this competition between cultures and traditions, many of the papers highlight how much conflict there now is inside various nation states between competing conceptions of well-being. The fact that conceptions of happiness and well-being are contested in both theory and practice is explicit in most of the papers in this special issue. One plausible conjecture is that this situation of clashing or competing conceptions is a special problem nowadays in globalized, multicultural ecologies, where people of different traditions come together and seek, at a minimum, to find a *modus vivendi*.

Here are two from many examples of existentially significant contestations between conceptions of well-being discussed in the special issue:

- A certain familial conception of well-being in rural China now competes with the siren call of the good life offered in modern Chinese cities like Shenzhen (the first Special Economic Zone in China). People move to the steel and glass metropolis of Shenzhen for all it offers. There is assimilation to its largely Western, modernist picture of the good life, but there is also a sense of loss for what was good from before, from ‘back there,’ from home (Kho).
- In the Andes (specifically in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia) there is competition between the mandate to develop natural resources and to maximize individual well-being, on the one side, and indigenous philosophies that emphasize communal success and living in harmony with nature (*sumak kawsay*). Different “ontological orientations” are playing out even in complicated constitutional discussions of whether *Pacha Mama* (Mother Earth) can be conceived as having rights. Indigenous people say yes, lobbyists for oil companies say no (Allen).

Besides the constant refrain of contesting conceptions of happiness and well-being, the papers collected here explain the sources of some of these contestations in terms of deep-seated differences of metaphysical, epistemic, and ethical opinion about what true happiness and genuine well-being consist in. These metaphysical, epistemic, and ethical differences of opin-

ion are typically rooted in long historical struggles to articulate a normative vision for a particular people in a particular lineage. Such philosophies reflect local knowledge. Furthermore, material culture – be it in the form of shiny skyscrapers or the everyday practices of Andean shepherds to responsibly and compassionately raise herd animals and potatoes to adulthood (*uywa*) – emblemizes and reinforces the dominant view in a locale or among a people. Here are several examples:

- Many of the traditions discussed – Hindu, Andean, Zulu, Maya, Aztec – place high value on the quality of human relations with “invisible neighbors,” sometimes, these are deities or deceased ancestors; other times they are animated nature (animals, plants, earth, sky). Persons live well only if they are in harmonious relations with these non-human and invisible persons (Allen, Burkhardt, Jeske, Ligo, Maffie).
- Several traditions discussed - Daoist, Jain, Zulu - emphasize the ontological precariousness and impermanence of all that is and thus the illusion that humans can conquer the world, protect life from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and secure happiness by great effort (Maffie, Phillips and Schaefer, Yuan, Zhang).
- Daoism questions the very idea that there is such a thing as a determinate best way to live and be that could be deployed to define well-being in any universal way (Yuan, Zhang).
- One variety of existentialist philosophy suggests that the lack of a determinate picture of well-being should sensibly cause anguish that comes from each person’s responsibility to self-create a meaningful life with no secure recipe, no single path or telos. This means that the contemporary preoccupation with happiness is an escapist one (Ang).
- The Jain tradition questions whether bodily health and well-being matter as much as they do in standard accounts of well-being (Phillips and Schaefer).
- Indigenous traditions in the Americas as well as certain strands in classical Chinese philosophy -- Daoism and Neo-Confucianism – reliably display an epistemic virtue of “ecological self-understanding” that aligns with the ontological orientation that emphasizes the necessity of harmonious relations with nature. Such relations are horizontal, not vertical, not ones of dominion and resource extraction (Allen, Butler, Burkhardt, Yang).
- Neo-Confucian culture makes an epistemic and moral virtue of learning to sensitively read others and to skillfully negotiate and keep harmonious social relations. In Korea, the skill is called *nunchi*, and is especially valuable in a culture in which decorous social practices often involve indirect discourse, as well as expectations that everyone is similarly adept at reading the grammar of the face and the body in the situation (Butler, Robertson, Yang).
- Many classical traditions (e.g., Stoicism, Buddhism, Daoism) emphasize staying in the moment, and not getting too far ahead of oneself. One hypothesis is that this was a sensible accommodation to times when lives were very precarious (as they still are in many parts of the world). There are findings however that among contemporary peoples in WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries, whether the culture be individualistic or collectivist, future oriented thought is reliably connected to standard measures of well-being such as the Gallup World Poll (Shepard and Turner).
- Given the diverse ways that “true happiness” -- the right socially certified kind of happiness -- is described across traditions – from the serene kind of happiness prized by the Stoic, the Epicurean, and Buddhist to the frenzied happiness of the aesthete or hedonist, one might think that the variation goes all the way down and makes traditions incommensurable. But there is reason to think that the same psychological needs for belonging and relatedness are the basis upon which the specific conception and tone of happiness favored in a locale is built, and there is some evidence that all the diverse conceptions are subserved by the same neural substrate. In addition, there is evidence that all the varieties of happiness are comprehended and differentiated across cultures, even if not ranked identically. Finally, *ataxaria* a state of imperturbability and equanimity, endorsed by Epicurus, is recognized across cultures as a highly valued kind of happiness (Euler).
- There is one universal and philosophically significant finding worth highlighting. In every tradition studied, being moral, by the lights of the tradition, is conceived as a necessary condition of a life well lived. This is the good news; the bad news is that there is significant variation in the views about the scope of morality (e.g., whether care of the earth is a moral responsibility or merely a prudential one),

and about what morality demands, e.g., gender equality, freedom of speech, social security.

We are grateful to Gregg Caruso for allowing us to host this special issue on **Cross-Cultural Studies in Well-Being**. We are grateful to the authors for providing such an interesting and varied group of papers. Our hope is that collectively these papers contribute to the project of hearing and listening to the multiplicity of conceptions of happiness and well-being that persist across the earth and that are not entirely on board with the dominant secular and high modernist conception of a good human life.