

# **Well-Being and the Good: Our Classical Heritage**

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Even granting that well-being is a set of factual conditions, that provide an empirical foundation for determining what is ethically good, it is a complex issue regarding what these factual conditions are, and throughout history there have been numerous and varied theories of what are the most important factors that make up well-being. For one thing, theories of well-being emphasize different dimensions of human life, from the psychological and spiritual to the economic and materialistic; moreover, theories of well-being are framed within different theories of reality. Well-being may be connected with mental health, physical health, freedom and self-expression, communion with nature, financial prosperity, environmental health, or spiritual awakening, all considered as ideal conditions within a particular framework of reality.

It is important to look at ancient theories, within philosophy, spirituality, and religion, since these theories set the stage for and influenced more modern ethical views; moreover, many people today still believe in and live according to such ancient views. Going back to early theories, well-being meant, among other things, an inner peace or harmony within the soul or mind; well-being also meant enlightenment or a sense of understanding of the whole (the cosmos or being); and further, well-being was also connected with a harmony with nature, or a sense of resonance and communion with God (Basic general references for this essay are Armstrong, 1994, 2000; Noss, 1999; Lombardo, 2006a, Chapter Three; Solomon and Higgins, 2010; Wright, 2009.)

Hinduism, like Platonism, has viewed time and the phenomenal material world as an illusion—a veil of appearance—behind which exists an eternal realm. The fluctuating material world isn't as important or real as the eternal realm. Within this theory of reality, realizing well-being focuses on consciousness (spiritual or psychological) whereby the individual mind (soul) connects with the cosmic mind (soul), achieving cosmic consciousness. Enlightenment is realizing (intuiting) oneness of the soul (self) with the cosmos. These transcendent states of awareness are the highest (ideal) states of the human condition, in essence, a heightened sense of cosmic consciousness in resonance with what is most real or true.

Also, within Hinduism, individual actions in the world of time generate karma, good and bad, depending upon the ethics of such actions (such as kindness versus cruelty and truthfulness versus deceit). The realization of cosmic consciousness (and transcending the wheel and world of time) comes through wiping out all bad karma through ethical actions. Our ethical behavior determines whether the soul rises or descends on the journey to enlightenment. Hinduism emphasizes the importance of meditation, ritual, and inner mental development as key factors on the road to well-being. Within the diverse forms of Hinduism—a religion that a significant percentage of contemporary humans believe and practice—we find eternalism, universalism, elements of theism,

and intuitionism, as key themes and ideals within this ethical vision of life (See my website article “Theories of Ethics”).

Buddhism views the world of time as necessarily involving suffering. The self is the source of all suffering. The goal of life—that is well being—is the elimination of suffering. Suffering occurs because the self desires, and desire—grounded in the sense of what the self is not—arises because we create a separated self, distinguished from the world (This hypothesis is a theory of psychological reality). Through mindful (or attentive) observation of the self within consciousness one can stand back from the conscious self and transcend identification with the self and our sense of separation of our self and the world.

For the Buddhist, all phenomenal experience (of both the self and the world) is ephemeral and transforming. Nothing is permanent. This hypothesis is another component in the Buddhist theory of reality. Part of enlightenment is realizing this ephemeral quality of reality, which leads to a letting go of attachment to both things and our ego. Realizing this heightened (ideal) state of knowledge is critical to well being. Well being comes through knowledge (Valero, Thompson, and Rosch, 1993).

Moreover, through “right living” and “right thinking” we can realize an end to suffering and achieve liberation and self-awakening, the Buddhist sense of well being. There is an eightfold path—an ethical system—for achieving this state: Right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. As with Hinduism, the Buddhist approach to well being is highly psychological and “inner directed,” involving the training and discipline of the mind, and moreover, well being involves moving beyond the egocentric and our conscious separation of the self and the world/cosmos (which are illusions). It is also noteworthy that Buddhism is a “caring” ethics, since the enlightened mind identifies with all that exists, hence empathizes with “other” persons and beings. Buddhism attempts to transcend all types of dualism, ethical or ontological. All told, the pathway to well being in Buddhism is grounded in a theory of the conscious mind and the experienced world and is decidedly psychological in its approach.

Taoism sees well being as living in harmony with nature and the Tao, which in essence is realizing a balance of Yin and Yang, both within the mind and within life in the world. Hence, as with Hinduism and Buddhism, the theory of well being in Taoism clearly depends upon a vision of the nature of reality (Reality is the Tao.) The “Golden Mean” (balance is virtue) is a central principle of Taoist ethics, as well as a sense of being attuned to the rhythm of change or flow (Reality is a balance, and virtue is aligning with the balance.) We can describe Taoism as an accepting and “passive” approach to life. Don’t force nature; don’t force oneself; allow the Tao to flow—this is well being and the good. Through understanding what is real (the Tao) comes the good (going with the Tao). Taoism is decidedly anti-dualistic and pro-intuitionist.

Confucianism begins with the concepts of the Tao and the Golden Mean—existence is balance and well being and the good life is becoming attuned to this balance. Both Confucianism and Taoism emphasize order (the order within reality revealed through

the Tao and the Yin-Yang) and harmony within human life. The principles of reciprocity and the Golden Rule are pivotal ethical concepts in Confucianism as well; do unto others as we would want others to treat us.

Confucianism is also a universalist ethical approach—an approach that brings harmony and order to human society. Confucianism places particular emphasis on social well being. Although Confucius argues for a “virtue theory” of ethics, emphasizing individual exemplars who are role models of virtue in following the Tao, his virtue theory highlights social virtues: What qualities in each of us when cultivated and developed through both ritual (practice) and education produce a good society—a harmonious social whole?

For Taoism and Confucianism, reality possesses order and harmony, and well being is realized through living (emulating) this order and achieving harmony within, as well as in relationship with nature and with others.

As a few general points regarding all of these Eastern philosophies, there is an ultimate or cosmic reality that humans need to resonate with (intuit and understand), and realizing well being, the good, and cosmic connection requires both mental and behavioral practice and discipline—including the idea that one needs to let go of attachments, desires, the self, and efforts to control or fix things. Well being is a psychological or spiritual state, clearly involving an ethical dimension, and the material world is often seen as irrelevant, or even an interference with the realization of these ideals. Even if well being is a set of factual conditions tied to a theory of reality, in these Eastern philosophies, well being involves an irreducible ethical dimension. Humans are seen as inherently ethical beings, and it is essential to human well being that the appropriate (or correct) ethics be embraced and practiced. Although ethics may derive from well being, part of well being involves being ethical.

Turning to the Ancient Greeks, the fountainhead of Western civilization, we find a growing importance placed on self-determination, in opposition to the gods, chance, and fate. This emerging conceptualization of human reality as self-determined provides a key foundational component in Greek ideas on well being and ethics. Whereas Confucius highlighted social virtues, Aristotle, for example, highlighted (though not exclusively) individual virtues in his theory of ethics. This difference in philosophical emphasis (society versus the individual) aligns with the modern difference in emphasis we find in Eastern versus Western thinking and modes of understanding (Nisbett, 2003). Do we see reality as a collection of distinct individuals (the West), or do we see reality as a holistic community (the East)? This difference in emphasis regarding human reality influences visions of well being and the good.

But, as noted above, Eastern philosophies of well being, including Confucianism, unquestionably saw the need for individual effort, discipline, and practice. Enlightenment entails a sustained individual search. Perhaps we are tuning into the whole—mental, cosmic, natural, or social—but it requires individual initiative and effort to realize this transcendent resonance.

Conversely it would be a gross oversimplification to say that the Greeks did not seriously consider the importance of community and society. Aristotle, for one, believed that humans were political animals, and it would make no sense to talk about human nature independent of society. Hence, part of well being and the good life necessarily involves a connection with the human community.

Still, in Aristotle we find an emphasis on both individual effort and practice, and individual self-actualization; the good is realized through intentional practice (rather than being a gift of the gods) and the good entails a development of our individual character and capacities. As critical to his theory of psychological reality, Aristotle saw humans as individuals who become in character what they do in practice.

In line with this point, the virtue theory of the good was a key idea in ancient Greek philosophy, with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all presenting versions of this ethical theory. The good is realized in life through the individual development and expression of character virtues. Furthermore, it seemed evident to all of them that leading the virtuous life and pursuing the good would result in well being. For Aristotle, virtue was the key to happiness (the ultimate criteria of well being and the good). Moreover, virtue for Aristotle, was connected in meaning with the principle of excellence; the good life was something that could be pursued for better or worse, with greater or lesser skill and ability. The idea of virtue entailed (indeed meant) standards of excellence. But then the same could be said for almost any theory of the good thus far reviewed—assuredly Buddhism and Confucianism advocated for and aspired toward standards of excellence.

One finds other key themes in Greek thinking on well being and the good. There is a clear mixture of the mythic and the theoretic in the ancient Greeks (a personified versus abstract vision of reality), and a polarity in views of well being between the Dionysian and the Apollonian (the emotional/romantic versus the rational). Can well being be totally encapsulated under the umbrella of rationality? Within a Dionysian mindset, the sensual and the emotional need to be included in any comprehensive theory of well being, for these dimensions of human nature are essential to our psychological make-up and our lives. Both sides need to be cultivated and developed; both sides need to be engaged as means toward realizing the good.

But the Greeks, like the Chinese, valued order and balance, and well being for the Greeks meant a balance and mutual development of body and mind, as well as reason and emotion/sensuality. Furthermore, Aristotle saw virtues as mid-points between extremes, where each extreme of either excess or deprivation was a vice.

Plato also saw well being and virtue realized through balance within the soul, but for Plato, it was reason (rationality) that needed to control the diverse dimensions of the soul, in order to achieve balance and order. (Plato was Apollonian.) This psychological theory follows from Plato's theory of reality. What is most real is the eternal and the eternal is found and understood through reason (rationality). The body (and bodily appetites) are less real—a lower level of reality. Well being is realized by the appetites of the body being controlled and superseded by reason and its ideals. This emphasis on

reason as the pathway to well being and the good would become a central theme in modern Western Enlightenment philosophy of progress.

As a theme which unites the Greeks and the Chinese, and which also can be found in both ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the pursuit of the good and well being entails the realization of order in the soul (mind), in society, and in the relationship between individuals and nature. Underneath this general ethical vision, we find the idea that reality can be described as a composite of order and chaos, where the former is deemed desirable and good, and the latter is deemed as negative and to be combated and avoided. This theory of reality sets the overall conditions and the conceptual polarity within these conditions in which the good is defined and realized.

I should mention though that the Dionysian strain in ancient Greece pursued chaos—as if too much order was not conducive to well being, and a balance needed to be achieved between the polarity of order and chaos in life. Confucianism, like the Apollonian (Platonic) strain in Greek philosophy, has often been criticized as excessively emphasizing order over disorder. As a popular argument goes, elevating order above chaos can generate stasis and stagnation in both society as a whole and in our individual lives. Perhaps a degree of chaos is necessary for well being within a reality—a human reality—that is dynamic, unsettled, and transformative.

With Judaism (and equally so, later with Christianity and Islam) we find a different mindset on reality from that of the Greek vision of humans struggling to realize autonomy and self-determination relative to the gods, fate, and chance. Starting with Judaism, the key concept is the keeping of a covenant with God based on faith, commitment, and obedience to a higher authority. Moreover, well being becomes more of a promissory note to be realized in the future through the following of God's commandments in the present. Instead of reason and self-determination we find faith and obedience as key ethical character traits. God is the source of directives of what is good and it is through God that ultimate well being will be delivered. Judaism (and to significant degrees, also Christianity and Islam) is a theistic, dualistic, absolutist, universalist, eternalistic, and consequentialist ethical mindset. (See my website article "Theories of Ethics.")

Christianity, keeping the ethical ideals of faith, obedience, and commitment, brings to the forefront the central importance of love and forgiveness in realizing the good life. Love thy neighbor as thyself, forgive even one's enemies, and follow the Golden Rule. A life of love, charity, and serving others brings happiness; a life of hatred and vengeance leads to misery. Paul brings together these various virtues in the famous triad of "faith, hope, and love" as critical to the good life, with love being the most important of all.

Positive emotionality is a central criterion of well being and the good in Christian thought. Well being must go beyond a life of reason and the intellect. Metaphorically—symbolically—the heart becomes the center of ethics and the good. Yet also, the prescriptions of love and forgiveness emphasize the importance of social concerns in

formulating a theory of the good. In the dictum that it is more blessed to give than to receive, it is implied that happiness and well being come to those who are concerned about others and live their lives showing such concern. Christianity is a caring ethics. Helping others feels good and is (in God's eyes) good.

Yet also, in following the metaphysical and psychological dualism of Plato, with St. Augustine as a prime example, we find a pronounced elevation of spirit above the body, whereby ultimate well being comes through spiritual development, rather than bodily pleasures. What is ultimately real is the spirit (which is eternal) and not the body (which is ephemeral). In this regard, West resonates with East (at least up to this point in human history).

Within the whole Abrahamic line, from Judaism to Christianity and Islam, we find a clear emphasis on the future, in the belief that through obedience to God in the present (following the ethics prescribed in these religions) well being is promised as the ultimate reward. Life may involve challenge and suffering, but those who keep the faith and are obedient to God are rewarded in the future. All these religions are consequentialist in their ethics.

The trials and tribulations of life are invariably conceptualized as a struggle of good against evil—with the historical foundation for this belief to be found in Zoroastrianism—with the promise of victory at the end. This is ethical dualism, where the good is achieved in a ongoing struggle with evil.

With Christianity and Islam the promise of ultimate happiness takes the form of eternal happiness in heaven. Only then, is true well being realized in a eternal and spiritual (non-material) realm. This belief reflects a dualist theory of reality. Based on the idea of two realms, the mental and the physical—the eternal and the temporal—where the mental or spiritual is of a higher, eternal realm than the physical and temporal, well being in the most important and elevated sense is connected with the former, rather than the latter.

Coupled with this ancient focus on transcending the physical and the temporal, early human history was filled with unhappiness and misery because of material deprivation and physical suffering (lack of sufficient food and shelter, disease and ill health, violence and war, and drudgery and danger). As Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century philosopher noted, early humans lived in "... continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man [was], solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Ridley, 2010). We can argue that the aspiration toward and elevation of the spiritual, the inner psychological, and the eternal over the bodily, the physical, and the temporal was a way to cope with, transcend, or counter-balance material misery within the physical world. Since the good and well being could not be found within the physical world it was looked for elsewhere.

As a theme which provides a transitional bridge between classical and modern times, going back at least as far as Plato's *The Republic* and St. Augustine's *City of God* in the West and Confucius's *Analects* in the East, influential writers and thinkers in human

history have attempted to describe ideal human societies, embodying the highest virtues and ethical principles of the good life realized at a social level. These visions of ideal or perfect societies in modern times came to be referred to as “utopias,” after Sir Thomas More’s early modern text *Utopia* (1516). Considerations of social well being and the good have already been included in the above review of classical ethical thinking, but the historical trajectory and line of thinking, referred to as “utopianism,” should be highlighted at this point, since as a literary and philosophical tradition and social movement, the vast body of utopian writings, from classical through modern times, has significantly contributed into the historical evolution of thinking about well being and the good. Since the social dimension of humanity is an essential feature of human reality, understanding human well being and the good necessarily needs to include this dimension in any realistically viable and holistic ethical vision. Yet, although the emphasis in utopian writings is predominately on social well being and the good realized through collective ideals and practices, in so far as individuals and social norms and practices are intimately tied together, utopian writings invariably have included considerable discussion on the type of ideal humans who lived within the hypothesized ideal or perfect societies (Lombardo, 2006a, Chapters Three and Four).

A simple way to summarize utopian thinking is to identify those central values that various utopian thinkers identified as key elements within an ideal or perfect society:

- For Plato, the key values were unity and harmony within a relatively rigid class-structured society, ruled by reason and wisdom through “philosopher kings,” and operating in terms of the overarching principle of justice. Such an ideal society, modeled on eternal standards, was essentially static and unchanging.
- For St. Augustine, who was Platonic in his thinking, elevating spirit above matter and eternity above time, the ideal society or “city of God,” revolved around love and especially love of God (above self-love). The “city of God” transcended earthly pleasures in favor of spiritual ideals, and could only be approximated and never fully realized on earth.
- And for Confucius, inspired and informed by Taoist principles, the ideal society was grounded in respect for elders and parents, a corresponding strong social hierarchy, reason and written laws, the practice and development of social virtues and proper social conduct within the individual, balance (moderation) and order in society, and the principles of reciprocity and justice, including a version of the Golden Rule: “ Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself,” as well as an “Eye for an Eye” principle, whereby an evil act should be repaid in kind (retributive justice) (Lombardo, 2006a, Chapter Three).

In all these three classic cases, social well being and the ethical good life were strongly connected together, and happiness was ideally realized within such envisioned ideal societies. Yet, to a great degree all these three models saw social perfection and the good life as static realities, intentionally in opposition to the perceived threat of the flux and chaos of (temporal) life.

Transitioning into more modern times, within Thomas More's ideal society we find "Christian Humanism" and values, with God as the ultimate source of all values (a theistic, absolutist ethics). More's utopia though embraces some level of religious tolerance. The focus is on good works and concern for others (a caring ethics), good and healthy pleasures (as More defined them), tranquility and moderation, good health, happiness and freedom from anxiety and fear, and faith in progress toward a rational construction of society. Although having a more modern ring than classical utopias, More's vision is still fundamentally static; the ideal society is unchanging.

Moving a hundred years further ahead, Francis Bacon, in his utopian *New Atlantis* (1627), as one of the earliest advocates of modern science and a new scientific philosophy of knowledge, introduced a number of key innovative elements into his vision of an ideal society. Although he still keeps the Christian God in the center stage, as the source of creation and fundamental ethical principles, Bacon argued that all past beliefs which are ungrounded in reason or empirical observation of fact should be rejected. He referred to all unsubstantiated beliefs as "idols of knowledge," proposing instead a "new method" that would liberate humanity from these idols, a method that was rational and based upon fact. Hence, as key to well being and the good life, ungrounded and superstitious beliefs need to be abandoned. Interestingly, he does not include the Christian belief system among those unsubstantiated beliefs that need to be jettisoned. Aside from the scientific-technological dimensions of his utopian vision, Bacon described the inhabitants of his utopian realm as being of amazingly high levels of character and moral excellence, as a result of their Christian philosophy and values.

But as an advocate of the power of this new method of science, Bacon also described in his utopian *New Atlantis* a host of beneficial inventions and new technologies deriving from science that would contribute to the well being of humanity, which include agricultural, medical, biological, chemical, engineering, nutritional, and even intellectual advancements or improvements in the human condition. Bacon's conception of well being, as articulated in the *New Atlantis*, is decidedly holistic, encompassing the spiritual, ethical, psychological, social, biological, and physical, and moreover, well being is something within the power of humanity to pursue and enhance through the methods of science, as well as devote Christian faith and practices.

Although Bacon's *New Atlantis* is not explicitly set in the future, rather being set on a hypothetical remote and unknown island, Bacon's argument that modern science and technology can be harnessed to improve the human conditions of life clearly implied that we can realize future progress in human well being through such methods. Whereas in the past, utopias were static and perfect societies, beginning with Bacon we find the idea that the quality and level of well being of a society is a dynamic reality open to ongoing improvement through self-empowerment, the methods of science, and the advancement of knowledge. Bacon's ideal human society is a journey of ongoing improvement pointing toward ever increasing heights in the future.

With the rise in the modern West of the philosophy of Enlightenment and secular progress, of which Bacon was one its most significant early spokespersons, utopian

visions of ideal societies became more dynamic and explicitly future focused, rather than static and timeless. The new ontology of existence, that reality was dynamic and evolutionary, informed and transformed visions of social visionary ideals. Theories of reality inform ethics. Social well being and the good became an aspirational and progressive trajectory into the future. The visionary idea became increasingly dominant in popular consciousness that the future could be different and better than the present. Utopias in modern times were often set in hypothetical futures (as in science fiction), or were presented as prescriptive calls to action to transform human society in the future in accordance with various ethical-social ideals (Lombardo, 2006a, Chapter Four; Lombardo, 2006b, Chapter Four; Lombardo and Lombardo, 2008b; Lombardo, Jeanne, 2010).

But as two caveats on this last point, although the ideas of dynamism, progress, and evolution only come to the forefront in Western thought in modern times, as Nisbet (1994) demonstrates, the idea of progress, including ethical progress, can be found in the West at least as far back as the ancient Greeks. Moreover, in any formulation of individual or social theories of well being and the good, even if what is presented is a static and timeless ideal, the ideals are proposed as models and prescriptive practices to aspire toward in life. In articulating an ethics to be followed in thought and behavior, there is a fundamental future-focused and purposeful quality to the ethics, in so far as the ethics informs us about what is the good life and what is well being and prescribes to us to follow and practice the ideals in our lives ahead of us. The ethics tells us what we *should* do, a purposeful, future focused imperative.

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