

Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science

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Well-Being is Measurable After All: A Case for the Differential Realization View

The measurement of well-being stays to be a controversial issue driven by debates on the feasibility of developing policy-relevant metrics that are able to capture the heterogeneity which naturally occurs in well-being across different circumstances. Critics like Hausman (2006) express skepticism and display heterogeneity as a barrier to its measurability. Due to this diverse nature of well-being, Hausman concludes with his intuition, that there cannot be any valid measurement instruments. In contrast, Alexandrova (2016) presents a counterargument by advocating for the potential measurability of well-being.

This essay endorses Alexandrova's optimistic perspective on the measurability of well-being but reopens the debate between Contextualism and the Differential Realization View (DR). Alexandrova (2013) discussed which approach she prefers and presents two premises for the argument that Contextualism is superior. I will argue in favor of the DR and demonstrate a false assumption in her first premise and a bias in the validity of her argument. To reopen this discussion, I will first explain Alexandrova's view on the measurability of well-being, followed by an outline of Contextualism and the DR. I will then first reconstruct Alexandrova's argument for choosing Contextualism over the DR, and conclude with reasons for choosing the DR.

The central challenge to measuring well-being lies in its heterogeneity which leads to skepticism about the existence of psychometric instruments that are capable of accurately capturing this complexity. Alexandrova addresses this issue by arguing that the heterogeneity in well-being is dependent on our understanding of well-being itself, rather than an unconquerable obstacle. She posits that by defining well-being regarding specific kinds of people with specific circumstances, we can significantly reduce the heterogeneity through modest generalization and adopt a more manageable conception of well-being. Through modest generalization, the measurement of well-being becomes less about capturing the experiences of individuals in isolation and more about understanding well-being of members within a specific group and circumstance. This shift makes well-being more tangible.

This displays the potential measurability in Alexandrova's argument, she, however, presents a second premise and condition to argue for measurability, which is construct validity. Construct validity can be explained by that our measurement of well-being behaves like it should be if we reason by theory. Alexandrova argues that if we assume or prove this psychometric validity, the

mere intuition of Hausman, that our instruments are not capable to capture the heterogenic nature of well-being, is just an intuition. While she admits that even construct validation does not provide a panacea for all measurement errors, measurability could be possible if we rely on such psychometric validations.

Although I agree with Alexandrova on the measurability of well-being based on modest generalization and psychometric validated scales, I believe choosing Contextualism is not the most effective approach and based on a wrong assumption made in Alexandrova 2013.

Contextualism, suggests that the semantic content of well-being varies depending on the context that is defined “by the objective features of the practical environment of the speaker at the time when the judgment is made”. Thereby, it does not provide a given theory for a given context, nor does it provide or deny a general theory of well-being, but only requires the abandonment of the assumption that well-being has a stable semantic content. In other words, the notion of well-being changes with context, while context changes by the objective features. Those features can include a variety of personal and situational factors about the speaker and the subject.

The Differential Realization view presents a contrasting approach to Contextualism. This perspective argues for an invariant semantic content of well-being, asserting that its essential meaning remains constant across varying situations. However, it still recognizes contextual changes through truth conditions. While the semantic content of well-being remains stable, the conditions confirming well-being are influenced by the specific circumstance.

Alexandrova argues for Contextualism over Differential Realization View by presenting two key premises. First, she argues that Contextualism avoids the counterintuitive outcome where mere changes in context would lead to changes in well-being by asserting that what counts as well-being varies by context. Second, she contends that the strength of Contextualism lies in its rejection of a uniform semantic definition of well-being, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation that captures the varied and complex judgments of well-being in different contexts.

In advocating for the Differential Realization View over Contextualism, I put forth two premises regarding Alexandrova’s argument. The first challenges the notion that variations in

well-being due to changes in context are inherently counterintuitive and proposes instead that such variations are both expected and logical. My second premise promotes the idea that a uniform concept of well-being is not only beneficial but essential for the formulation of coherent policy, arguing that a variable concept of well-being, as suggested by Contextualism, would give rise to issues in cross-contextual comparison and evaluation.

Alexandrova's first premise states that well-being, stable, should not change with shifting contexts. She compares this to Epistemic Contextualism, where knowing remains constant despite differing criteria for what constitutes knowledge in various contexts. Thus, she suggests that it is a similar case in well-being Contextualism; "particular well-being phenomenon picked out by a context does not itself depend on context". This stance forms her *prima facie* case for Contextualism over the Differential Realization view as the DR view implies otherwise.

Contrasting with Alexandrova, I assert that well-being is inherently sensitive to situational factors and that her comparison to Epistemic Contextualism is therefore not valid. Unlike knowledge, well-being's nature is to be influenced by changes in one's circumstances. Situational shifts, such as job loss, an increase in income, or personal interactions, have a direct and immediate impact on one's well-being. Particular well-being phenomenon depend itself on the context.

Alexandrova might argue that this would imply one should strategically position herself in less challenging contexts to enhance well-being (Alexandrova 2013, Page 324). However, this is too simple. The appropriateness of a context for well-being should not be reduced to its level of demand but rather tailored to what best suits the individuals concerned. Thereby, I argue for a view that displays well-being as a stable concept which can be composed by different contextual factors. This does not imply that the least demanding environment maximizes well-being but rather states that we can use contextual factors in promoting well-being by tailoring to what best suits the individual concerned.

Alexandrova's second premise contends that the DR view's requirement of an invariant semantic content for well-being is not feasible. She argues that while we can identify a common core in well-being assertions, their full semantic content is unidentifiable and tied to the changes in context.

In response, I assert that adhering to this core meaning is both sufficient and more advantageous for crafting effective policies. By adopting a unified standard, like Darwall's concept where well-being is what a rational carer would desire for the individual, policy-making can benefit from consistent well-being evaluation criteria across different contexts.

While Alexandrova sees the flexible semantic content as beneficial in navigating well-being's diversity, it may, in fact, lead to inconsistencies and diminish the efficiency and clarity needed for effective policy-making and communication. Additionally, as stated above, we are assuming construct validity for the measurement instruments. This becomes challenging when different contexts require different well-being concepts. The work involved in developing and validating a variety of scales tailored to every unique context and different concepts of well-being is not only impractical but may also complicate the comparison of policy-relevant measures.

I assume that Alexandrova would reply that an invariant semantic concept might not adequately capture the heterogeneity of well-being. Nevertheless, one could argue that the DR approach is sufficiently comprehensive. While the core meaning is about recognizing fundamental aspects of well-being that are broadly applicable, context variability is still implemented through the truth conditions that determine when a statement about well-being is accurate in a specific situation.

In conclusion, this essay has advanced the position that well-being is a measurable construct, supporting Alexandrova's optimism, and confronts Hausman's critical stance. It has argued that, by leveraging modest generalizations and construct-valid scales, well-being can be effectively quantified. I reopened the discussion between Contextualism and the Differential Realization (DR) view and presented a reasoned preference for the DR. I argued that well-being is directly affected by context and that the consistent semantic core permits meaningful comparisons and informed policy-making across various contexts. By upholding a concept of well-being that is both conceptually coherent and sensitive to situational factors, the DR view emerges as the superior approach in the philosophical measurement of well-being.

References

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