Published: *Res Philosophica* 96: 4 (2019): 529-35.

Diversity of Meaning and the Value of a Concept: Comments on Anna Alexandrova's *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*.

Jennifer Hawkins

Anna Alexandrova has written a very important book about the philosophy and science of well-being. Many parts are illuminating, but I shall concentrate on what she has to say about philosophy. Alexandrova is highly critical of philosophy of well-being. Yet perhaps surprisingly (because I am a philosopher of well-being), I am generally sympathetic to her concerns. My qualms are with some of the stronger conclusions she draws from philosophy's failings, conclusions that seem insufficiently motivated. I shall focus exclusively on her discussion of language and concepts in Chapter 1, where she argues that the language of well-being is not nearly as unified or coherent as philosophers assume, and where she ultimately defends what she calls a contextualist account of the meaning of well-being terms.

The language used to discuss well-being is admittedly complex, and it can be difficult to make sense of all the things that are said in the field of well-being studies. Consider first the specific term "well-being." I know of (at least) three ways the term is used. First, among non-academics, "well-being" is often synonymous with a notion of wholistic health (i.e., a concept of health that encompasses both body and mind). Thus in my local bookstore, books on nutrition, stress management, and yoga can all be found in a section labeled "well-being." Since this is not the meaning philosophers and social scientists generally have in mind, I shall set it aside. More commonly in academia, "well-being" refers to a state that is prudentially good *for* the person who is in it. It is a state that can last for a short or long time, but we typically reserve the term for positive evaluations of periods of time that are less than a full lifetime. Third, and finally, it has become common to use the term "well-being" as a general label for a whole domain of inquiry—inquiry into prudential value. This is how it is used when books announce their topic as "the philosophy of well-being." Confusion can certainly arise from the fact that we have taken to using a term—a term that ordinarily refers to a specific aspect of prudential value—as a

name for the whole domain. Moreover, the domain of prudential value is itself more complex than suggested by a single term.

There are (at least) three important aspects of prudential value that philosophers (and others) discuss. First, there are prudentially good (or bad) things—that is, things that are intrinsically good or bad *for* a particular person. I intend "thing" in the broadest possible sense here. A good (or bad) thing (depending on one's theory) might be a mental state or an event, a person or an object, a relationship or an accomplishment. Second, there are prudentially good (or bad) *periods of time within a life*, some short, some long, but all significantly less than the length of a life. "Well-being" is one of several terms or phrases we use to talk about this. Finally, there are also prudentially good (or bad) lives. Here we must be careful to distinguish between a life that is good *for* the person who lives it (a prudentially good life) and other modes of evaluating lives (aesthetic, moral, etc.). There are interesting questions about how the value of a life is related to the value of periods of time within it, as well as interesting questions about how both are related to the value of the prudential goods contained within.

Often it is left somewhat obscure which aspect of prudential value is under discussion or what assumptions are being made about the relationship between, say, the value of periods within a life and the value of a whole life. When we add the fact that there are different competing theories of well-being according to which the bearers of intrinsic value are quite different; we can see why confusion might arise in this area. However, these complexities do not seem to be the ones that worry Alexandrova. She opens her chapter with the observation that, "Books on well-being normally start by clarifying the concept of well-being. This one, on the other hand, starts by raising doubts about the existence of a stable and unified such concept. Instead its meaning is to some extent changeable and fragmented" (2017, 3)

Already, I find myself somewhat confused, because I am not sure whether the primary topic here is *language* or *concepts*. On the one hand, it is words and phrases that have meanings, and so only words or phrases can have *fragmented* meanings. On the other hand, she tells us emphatically that what she doubts is whether a *unified concept exists*.

I shall start by trying to understand her concerns as linguistic concerns, because ultimately that is what I think they turn out to be. On one very simple interpretation, she might just mean that the term "well-being" has multiple meanings. That is clearly true, as I explained above, although it is usually fairly obvious which meaning is being employed. But it is evident from the rest of her discussion that this is not really her point. Even setting aside the kinds of different meanings I described, such as the wholistic health meaning, she thinks there is a broader diversity that has not yet been acknowledged (2107, 4). Although she doesn't say as much, it seems to me fair to frame her concern as a worry not so much about a single term "well-being," but as a worry about the different ways the language of prudential value is employed.

According to Alexandrova, most of the time when philosophers employ the language of prudential value they are concerned with a kind of all-things-considered assessment of a life or of a period within a life (2017, 4). These are the kinds of value judgments at stake when friends ask each other how they are doing in that "special tone of voice" that invites general reflection and sharing of confidences (2017, 4). But Alexandrova wants to insist that prudential value language can be and often is used (by social scientists and lay people both) to talk about and make assessments of something less all-encompassing. In many contexts, the language of prudential value is used when it is clear that the assessment being made is only a *some*-things-considered assessment (2017, 10). For example, in the context of a medical study of quality of life for older people, the end point of assessment and that which is labeled "well-being" may simply be adequate comfort and physical safety.

Thus interpreted, the claim is that prudential language has more meanings than typically recognized. I want to make two points in response. First, the linguistic evidence for this—at least as she presents it—is hardly compelling. Different explanations seem appropriate depending on whether we are studying the claims of social scientists or the claims of ordinary people. The problem (in the case of ordinary people and their claims) is that English possesses many evaluative terms that are multipurpose. These terms can be employed in all sorts of contexts, in discussions of all sorts of value. They are sometimes used to discuss prudential

value, and sometimes used to discuss aesthetic or moral value. In other cases they are just used to signal how good some thing is relative to a particular standard or how well some behavior or activity satisfies a norm. This fact, however, just shows that these terms—terms such as "good," "well," "okay," "fine"—are extremely flexible. It is true that to understand what such terms are doing in any given case, we usually have to look to context to help us clarify what kind of value is at stake, or what sort of assessment is being made. But this hardly establishes by itself that *the specific language of prudential value* is used to make very different kinds of assessments and that therefore we must look to context to understand what a term like "well-being" means. Yet one of the prime examples Alexandrova offers us in support of this claim—the first of her three examples involving Masha—is one that involves such multi-use language.

Masha is a pregnant woman who falls on ice while walking in the city and hurts her knee. A stranger who sees her fall stops to see if she is okay. He asks, "How are you doing?" Masha replies that she can't walk and asks for help reaching a nearby bench. The stranger helps her to the bench, and Masha thanks him, and assures him that she is okay. She calls her partner to come pick her up, and the stranger leaves (2017, 6).

When Masha claims she is "okay," is she making and communicating an all-things-considered assessment of this period of her life? When the stranger asks how she is, is he asking for such information?[1] Clearly not. On that point, Alexandrova would agree with me (2017, 8). But she also assumes that the language in use here ("how are you doing?", "okay") is the language of prudential value. So she sees this example as supporting the idea that the meaning of prudential value terms changes dramatically from one context to another. In this context, Masha can be said to have well-being as long as she is not seriously injured (2017, 8).

Although I grant that this particular exchange depends on background understandings about the importance of welfare, I don't think it is a discussion of

[1] Alexandrova doesn't report Masha's exact words of response, but "okay" seems like the kind of thing she would say. I treat the question "How are you doing" and the reply, "okay," in the same manner.

well-being directly. Of course, that would be harder to defend if the words "welfare" or "well-being" actually appeared, but significantly they don't. Instead, very general phrases and terms are used ("how are you doing," "okay") which are multi-use. When she says she is okay, this merely signifies that *some sort of normative standard* has been met, while leaving open what that standard is.

It seems to me that here the communication is about the moral obligations strangers have to one another. Most people appear to agree that such obligations are rather minimal. Thus, at least in our roles as individuals, we are not obligated to help unknown others reach particular levels of well-being. Instead our obligations are framed in terms of helping one another *maintain the current level of welfare (whatever that level is).* In other words, whenever it is not too costly to oneself, one morally ought to help others avoid significant harms—that is, events that (for most people) would either lower welfare or run a high risk of lowering welfare.

Masha fell on the ice. She could have broken her knee, or she might have gone into labor early. Of course, the fall has already occurred when the stranger comes up to Masha. But it is still true that how bad the consequences of the fall ultimately are for Masha may depend on how quickly she can get medical attention should she need it. The stranger's inquiry is about whether she is facing imminent but preventable harm of the sort that could be easily averted (e.g., by calling an ambulance).

Harm matters, of course, *because it lowers well-being*. So concerns about well-being are in the background. Yet the stranger is not asking directly about her well-being when he asks, "How are you doing?" And he doesn't learn about Masha's well-being from her response. When Masha says she is "okay," she conveys that no further harm prevention is required. She thus makes it clear that the stranger is released from further obligation. None of this supports the claim that prudential value terms have multiple meanings or uses, since Masha is neither talking about prudential value nor using such terms.

For these reasons, I do not find the Masha case to be compelling evidence of the kind of meaning diversity Alexandrova claims to find. But really, there is a more important point to consider here. Perhaps the Masha case doesn't prove that

prudential value terms are used in multiple ways. But the failure of one example is not decisive. It still might be true that such terms are used in these diverse ways. The thing I find really puzzling is *that so little is said about why this should matter, and what our response to the situation ought to be.* Suppose for the moment that Alexandrova were correct that certain terms philosophers reserve for discussion of all-things assessment of prudential value are also used in many non-philosophical contexts when less encompassing assessments are made. If that were true, and if such uses were not mistakes, but accepted as proper uses of the terms, it would mean that the very same term (or terms) can be used in different contexts to express *quite different ideas, or concepts*, but then surely, what this would show is that we need to find a way *to distinguish our concepts better*. Since the philosophical concept of all-things-considered prudential value is important (notice, I did not say it is the only important concept, just that it is important), we need a way to establish when that is the concept in use. Presumably there are at least some contexts in which that is the concept that *ought* to be in use.

What seems significant from my perspective is that Alexandrova does not seem bothered at all by the way in which terminological confusions could engender conceptual ones. She embraces what she calls contextualism about the meaning of "well-being" and related terms (2017, 6). This is the idea that prudential value terms gain at least part of their semantic content from the context of utterance. So a sentence with the term "well-being" in it may mean something quite different depending on the case. She appears to be confident both that the different uses she observes are not mistakes, and that context allows us to make all the conceptual distinctions we need to make. Still, I find this puzzling for a couple of reasons.

First, it is worth remembering her claim from earlier, that her goal is to call into question "the existence of a stable and unified such concept [concept of prudential value]" (2017, 3). But surely whatever one thinks about the state of well-being terminology, one would want to acknowledge that we have a concept of all-things-considered prudential value. There is nothing incoherent about that. Of course, we might wish to debate how important that particular concept is in the

scheme of things, but nothing suggests either that we lack such a concept or that it is confused or unstable.

But then, if we have such a concept, should we really assume that context reliably tells us when it is being employed? Or might we still wonder whether there are important confusions that need clarification? I take it that someone who adopts her view is someone who sees no problems to be fixed in this domain. Once we have an *explanation* (which contextualism provides) for the diversity of uses of prudential value terms, we have all we need. But if one instead sees mistakes, *or at least unresolved problems that may lead to concrete problems in well-being science*, one may not be happy to settle for that.

Here is what I mean. Suppose that when social workers talk about the "well-being" of expectant mothers they are merely asking whether the woman in question has (1) enough money to support herself and her child and (2) social supports should she require them. A woman with these things has well-being as they use the term. Like many philosophers I would tend to assume that such claims are a kind of shorthand (2017, 5), or a kind of loose talk that has been adopted in this particular field. No doubt, this kind of talk became common place because research revealed that absence of sufficient monetary resources and social support were both highly correlated with bad outcomes for mothers and children *and* because these are the kinds of problems that social workers can help with. One could go further and view this shorthand use of "well-being" as mistaken. But it is not clear that this way of speaking is mistaken. If this way of talking has been in place long enough it may now be legitimate, and if so it simply represents one of many ways the word "well-being" is used. We don't need to decide that. But mistake or not, I do think it is problematic to simply leave things as they are. We should be wary of allowing people to fall into thinking that money and social support, in and of themselves, constitute well-being. Furthermore, I remain suspicious of the claim that context usually makes it perfectly clear what is meant. If Alexandrova is right about the diversity of uses for well-being terms, then I think we need a clearer way of distinguishing concepts. And, I would add, we need such a way because it is only by retaining the all-things-considered concept that we retain a way of criticizing and changing various standards (e.g. the

social work one) that are only helpful to the extent that they correlate closely with genuine well-being.

This leaves me uncertain about where I fit in her schema. She outlines three major positions one might adopt in response to the diversity of meanings she presents (2017, 5). I shall consider here only two of the three. Circumscriptionists, she tells us, are those who maintain that terms like "well-being" always invoke a general evaluation, and who insist that other uses are mistaken uses (2017, 5). In one sense, I seem to fit here. For one thing, I don't accept that the Masha example is really about well-being, and Alexandrova predicts that this is what a circumscriptionist will say (2017, 8). On the other hand, I don't insist that prudential value terms are always used in the sense of all-things-considered judgments, nor do I claim that social scientists who use the terms differently are necessarily *mistaken*. I do, however, claim that it would be a problem if we were to lose sight of the philosopher's all-things-considered concept. And Alexandrova doesn't speak to this.

She herself embraces contextualism about the meaning of terms like "well-being." In one sense I agree with her that such terms have an indeterminate meaning that is often (but not always) filled in by context. But what I have in mind is not the kind of variability she is focused upon (the kind illustrated by the contrast between philosophers and social workers). And I have doubts about how reliably context helps us to make the distinctions we need to make. Here is the sense in which I accept contextualism about meaning: A term like "well-being" is used to describe a positive state of being—something that is neither neutral nor bad. But by itself, the term leaves unspecified exactly how good a state of well-being is. To have well-being might mean that one is doing slightly better than neutral, or it might mean that one is doing much, much better than neutral. However, while context sometimes resolves this ambiguity, it doesn't always do so.

Ultimately, I accept that prudential value terms are used in a variety of ways by different groups, although I deny that the Masha case is one of them. Yet I can't seem to place myself in Alexandrova's scheme, and I am left with the sense that something very important has been set aside. Alexandrova sets out to present different possible *explanations* of this diversity. In all honesty, I would probably

describe the same diversity somewhat differently. But more importantly, I wish she would go beyond explanation. What I want to know is not how we currently talk, but how we *ought* to talk, and that is really at bottom a question about the value of concepts and conceptual clarity, not so much a question about words (which can always be used differently if we decide to do so). I can only surmise that Alexandrova doesn't think it is terribly important to preserve as a distinct concept the philosopher's all-things-considered notion of prudential value. But even if one is frustrated with the ways philosophers have gone about developing theories of well-being, it seems quite extreme to discard this concept. It is often an important tool for moving forward with specific projects.

Like Alexandrova, I too am highly critical of many aspects of traditional philosophical theorizing about well-being. In addition, I want to see more collaborations, and more fruitful exchange between philosophers and social scientists. But I think such collaborations require holding onto the all-things-considered concept, even if it is not the concept we work with most frequently on a daily basis.

In closing, let me reiterate that my focus has been on a point of disagreement, but there is much that I admire in her book and much that we agree on. So my emphasis here should not be taken as representing my entire view of her work. It is simply a plea for retaining as useful a particular concept combined with the view that we will not retain it simply by relying on context. Retention requires active intervention.