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RESEARCH PAPER

Well-Being Contextualism and Capabilities

Sebastian Östlund[1]

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Abstract
Typically, philosophers analysing well-being's nature maintain three claims. First, that well-being has essential properties. Second, that the concept of well-being circumscribes those properties. Third, that well-being theories should capture them exhaustively and exclusively. This predominant position is called *well-being monism*. In opposition, contextualists argue that no overarching concept of well-being referring to a universally applicable well-being standard exists. Such a standard would describe what is good, bad, and neutral, for us without qualification. Instead, well-being research is putatively about several central phenomena. If several phenomena are central, a proliferation of concurrently acceptable well-being theories and operationalisations is expected. However, contextualists are challenged to explain how those analysing well-being are not systematically talking past each other. In this paper, I address that challenge. The upshot is that contextualist well-being theories can be justifiably context-sensitive and applied to tailor-made policy-making efforts. I illustrate the benefits by connecting contextualism to the capability approach.

Keywords Well-being · Contextualism · Monism · Pluralism · Capability approach

1 Introduction

There is significant disagreement about what well-being is, and even disagreement about whether that is an issue that needs to be resolved. This paper focuses on the second disagreement, in which well-being monists maintain – whereas contextualists reject – that well-being has a specific essence cutting across each context. In support of contextualism, I rebut a prominent counterargument levelled against it which states that if well-being contextualism is true, then those theorising about and measuring well-being systematically talk past each other.

✉ Sebastian Östlund
sebastian.ostlund@umu.se

[1] Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

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The paper's structure is as follows. In Sect. 2, I describe well-being monism and contextualism as competing alternatives and parry a challenge to contextualism indicating that one and only one *well-being concept* is used in our various well-being ascriptions. In Sect. 3, I uncover a related challenge to contextualism which pressures contextualists to explain why we appear to have a shared *well-being standard*. This is arguably an even more pressing point in the debate between well-being monists and contextualists since a well-being standard details what is good for us, bad for us, and (at least indirectly) what is neutral for us. The challenge indicates that some things are context-independently bad for us. I then provide a contextualist explanation that does not depend on any shared well-being standard, thereby meeting the challenge. Next, I show the upshot of my results for well-being theorising. Section 4 concludes.

2 The Main Aim of Well-Being Theorising

In this section, I first argue that well-being theorising is standardly considered to be about settling on the single best way to exhaustively and exclusively capture well-being. I then present contextualism which holds that there is no such context-independently best way to settle on. Next, I present a prominent counterargument to contextualism. I show that despite a recent attempt to address it in the literature, the counterargument remains intact and is awaiting a separate response. I consequently provide such a response at the end of this section.

2.1 Well-Being Monism and Contextualism

Well-being theories typically aim to capture the essence of well-being. We may call this *the main aim* of well-being theorising. The putative essence of well-being is whatever makes up the good *for* a person (cf. Sumner, 1996, pp. 20–21). Competing philosophical theories propose different essential constituents of well-being such as happiness (Sumner, 1996, pp. 81–112; Gregory, 2015), desire-satisfaction (Griffin, 1986, pp. 10–15; van der Deijl & Brouwer, 2021, p. 769), or objective, perfectionist, goods (Bradford, 2015, p. 127; O'Keefe, 2015, p. 29). In sum, the main aim is to figure out which (if any) proposed philosophical theory is correct.

Despite the significant disagreement of what well-being is at a general and abstract level of analysis, philosophers predominantly subscribe to a view called *well-being monism*. The view encompasses three claims (Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2021, pp. 2416–2417). First, that well-being has essential properties. Second, that the concept of well-being circumscribes those properties. Third, that well-being theories should capture all, and only, the relevant properties. Well-being monism implies that at most one well-being theory is true. Furthermore, some philosophers working on well-being tend to, as Hersch (2022, pp. 1045–1046, 1048) argues, make philosophy the foundation for related social-scientific measures. On such a foundationalist view, only operationalisations of the phenomenon that the true philosophical well-being theory describes would be valid (cf. Alexandrova and Haybron, 2016, p. 1106). Any other ones would fail to coordinate properly with the intended target property, which is known as well-being *all-things-considered* or well-being *simpliciter* (Hersch, 2022, p. 1046).

However, it has been argued that the meaning of words such as 'well' and 'well-being' seem to shift from context to context. Such contexts vary both in and between utterances made in everyday life, in philosophical theorising, and in empirical investigations (Kagan, 1994; Scanlon, 1998, Chap. 3; Griffin, 2007; Alexandrova, 2013; Campbell, 2015). To capture the (alleged) shifts in meaning, contextualism is offered as an alternative view that rejects the three well-being monist claims (Alexandrova, 2017, pp. 5–6; Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2021).

By rejecting the three well-being monist claims, contextualism maintains (1) that there is no essence of well-being to identify, (2) that there is more than one applicable concept of well-being, and (3) that there is more than one well-being standard that the concepts can map to. Here, a *mapping* should be understood as a referential relationship between some *linguistic description* of well-being to some *prudential phenomenon* in the world. On contextualism, the various well-being concepts are determined by and indexed to contexts of utterance. Any determined concept then refers to some (non-empty) set of properties – making up a well-being standard – that does not need to apply in other contexts of utterance (Fletcher, 2019, p. 703). Consequently, contextualists maintain that well-being is neither nothing, nor any single thing. Instead, different notions of well-being putatively arise and have uses in different settings (Alexandrova, 2013, pp. 326–328). In sum, the key difference between well-being monism and contextualism concerns whether or not all well-being ascriptions are about the very same thing.

2.2 Systematic Misunderstandings

In objection to contextualism, Fletcher (2019, 2021, pp. 92–119) argues that if contextualism is true, well-being theorists systematically talk past each other. Worse yet, social-scientific measures will involve characterisations that, themselves, do not necessarily aim to track the purportedly true philosophical theory's target property. This is worrisome since a proliferation of well-being accounts is found in empirical sciences, where different measures are used to analyse people's well-being (VanderWeele et al., 2020). Examples include experience sampling, satisfaction with life scales, measures of capabilities, proxies such as GDP and GNP, and the Human Development Index (Gasper, 2005, p. 187; Angner, 2010, p. 361; Alexandrova, 2017, p. XXXVI; Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2021, p. 2413). They variably concern people's affect, satisfaction, or valuable opportunities. There exist some relations between such accounts and philosophical theories, but they do not line up with each other perfectly. In brief, theoretical philosophical findings and social-scientific practices include distinct notions of well-being that create a divide between the two fields (Hersch, 2022, p. 1048). This is worrisome, since well-being theories and political practices often aim to capture or promote well-being *simpliciter* as an end (Angner, 2010, p. 362). However, these aims appear unattainable if contextualism is true.

To illustrate, consider someone recommending policies for a governmental body to enact. Promoting pleasant addictive substances by referencing their hedonic effects may be one way of pursuing what is, contextually, good for people. Furthermore, prohibiting such substances because doing so promotes health is also a way of pursuing what would be, contextually, good for people. Yet, the well-being standards are distinct from each other rather than shared in the contexts of utterance. In one of them, we focus on positive feelings whereas in the other we focus on health. A *shared* standard is required for us to make

comparative assessments of arrangements in terms of betterness, worseness, and equality (Chang, 1997, pp. 4–7). Hence, no real contradiction regarding what is good for us has arisen. Two incompatible policy proposals are merely offered with reference to two different, context-dependent, well-being standards.

Despite his counterargument, Fletcher (2019, p. 701) agrees that we focus on different things in some ascriptions of well-being, such as when we speak about someone's level of (dis-) comfort, or her satisfaction with life, or even her standard of living. Fletcher disagrees with the claim that such differences underpin the contextualist view, however. On Fletcher's view, we instead focus on *different aspects* of the *same phenomenon* and by extension all well-being talk is about that single phenomenon. Hence, the view that Fletcher formulates is called *aspectualism*. On aspectualism, the aspects jointly make up an exhaustive well-being standard.

In response, Mitchell and Alexandrova (2021) argue that the distance between contextualism and an account such as Fletcher's aspectualism is negligible. They argue that the extent to which an overarching concept of well-being exists, "it is conceptually thin and needs substantive specification in order for it to be used to make well-being ascriptions in practice" and that there is little space between contextualism and "sufficiently nuanced objective list theories" (Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2021, p. 2427). Aspectualism and contextualism alike meet this condition.

Nevertheless, I will show that some distance to aspectualism remains due to contextualism's denial that well-being involves a single concept that maps to a universal well-being standard. By further analysing this *multiple-mappings claim*, I will show that the difference between contextualism and aspectualism is more significant than the response above suggests. As a result, Fletcher's counterargument is shown to be intact and awaiting a separate response.

If well-being has one concept and one standard, we can combine all aspects of well-being into an exhaustive well-being theory. Such combining works as follows. If well-being is some phenomenon W that has the essential properties A, B, and C, aspectualism affirms that A, B, and C exhaust what has prudential value. Aspectualism also affirms that A, B, and C can each be realised differently, such as when a candidate well-being constituent, or 'dimension', such as securing nutrition can be attained in part by eating rice, potatoes, or bread, or another candidate dimension such as being sheltered can be attained by living in an apartment or in a house. However, through this, essential properties are fixed even if their means of realisation differ.

By contrast, on contextualism, not only can the properties be realised differently (say, depending on what food or housing is available), the properties can also differ. Hence, contextualism maintains that we cannot provide an exhaustive list of some W's properties such that A, B, and C provides an exhaustive account. Instead, we will have several versions of W indexed to some context $C1$, $C2$, $C3$, …, Cn such that W^{C1} involves properties that only partially overlap with other accounts of well-being, or W^{C1} is disjoint with some of them. Contextualism and aspectualism thus commit themselves to different degrees of openness, as I illustrate below.

Well-being theories that only partially overlap with each other can arise in two ways. One is when theories are developed by adding further dimensions of well-being. In such cases, the earlier standard is a proper subset, i.e., a smaller part, of a more comprehensive standard. Those cases are captured within aspectualism, which maintains that there is one

maximally exhaustive theory that well-being research aims to formulate. This partial overlap may be called *inclusive overlap*. Another way of partially overlapping, and only supported by contextualism, is through *exclusive properties*. Exclusivity here entails that there are some properties unique to different contexts such as W^{C1} and W^{C2} where, e.g., properties A and B are relevant for one, whereas properties B and C are relevant for the other. In this example, the properties A and C are exclusive to their respective contexts. Contextualist well-being standards can thus partially overlap without some well-being standard including all relevant well-being properties.

Furthermore, because there is no allegedly *necessary* or *essential* property referred to by the different well-being concepts on contextualism as a matter of conceptual truth, even disjoint standards are accommodated. That is, contextualism does not require that a common core is shared between different well-being standards. The standard W^{C1} may contain the properties A and B whereas the standard W^{C3} contains the properties C and D. Partially overlapping standards with at least one shared property have a common core. This kind of partial overlap is compatible with both aspectualism and contextualism. Moreover, other partially overlapping standards have a family resemblance when each standard includes some property of at least one other standard. But standards may, as indicated, also be wholly distinct. These are two unique features of contextualism, showing that contextualism is more open to variation than aspectualism is.

Contextualism's multiple-mappings claim implies that there is an open-ended set of contexts that determines an open-ended set of meanings attributable to 'well-being'. These meanings then refer to an open-ended set of well-being standards. We may consequently call this *the open-endedness of contextualism*. Whatever words such as 'well-being' mean, Mitchell and Alexandrova (2021, p. 2426) argue that they will not allow us to make well-being ascriptions in practice since those require a concept that "sets out the conditions under which someone can be understood to be doing well or badly". Words such as 'well-being' may serve to refer to those conditions, but do not spell them out. Contextualism steps down a level of abstraction to provide relevant conditions for well-being ascriptions, but not context-independently.

Fletcher's counterargument to contextualism concludes that it falsely implies that we lack a shared subject matter. If we lack a shared subject matter, then despite researchers using similar *terms*, they express different meanings. On Fletcher's aspectualist view, we do not systematically talk past each other even if we sometimes have different prudential aspects in mind. On contextualism, by contrast, Fletcher maintains that theoreticians and practitioners proposing different theories or measures of well-being would systematically speak past each other insofar as they use distinct well-being concepts. This contrast echoes a point from Griffin (2007, p. 147) to the effect that "some of us are not disagreeing with one another over the nature of a 'happy' life but speaking of quite different things". If this is so, then those involved in well-being research may not even realise that they are speaking past each other fairly frequently.

On Fletcher's (2019, p. 709) aspectualism, the tension arising from *merely seemingly* speaking of different things can be relieved. The relief can come from clarifying which aspect (say, level of comfort) of the same phenomenon (well-being) is being considered. Aspectualism makes one exhaustive well-being standard the shared subject matter that people in different contexts track different parts of with their well-being speech and assessments. On aspectualism, any misunderstandings could in principle be resolved and the sub-

ject matter would remain the same. Hence, people would not be irreconcilably talking past each other on aspectualism.

Such an exhaustive standard is not similarly available to contextualists. Mitchell and Alexandrova's response to Fletcher's counterargument would suffice if contextualism only involved inclusive overlaps. If only inclusive overlaps were involved, then contextualists could point to some exhaustive standard and respond that *it* is the shared subject matter in all (legitimate) prudential talk, much like on aspectualism. However, as shown, contextualism has further implications than aspectualism does by allowing for exclusive properties that make up different prudential phenomena rather than a universal one. Hence, I will offer an alternative response to this – still intact – counterargument to contextualism that Fletcher has formulated.

2.3 Alleviating Contextual Misunderstandings

Despite the greater gap between contextualism and aspectualism than the one Mitchell and Alexandrova identify, contextualists can successfully respond to Fletcher's counterargument. One such sufficient response involves arguing that well-being monists and contextualists share the same subject matter because of formal commitments rather than substantive well-being properties. In this setting, I propose that the distinction between formal commitments and well-being properties should be understood as follows. First, consider that Sumner (1996, p. 16) argues that a well-being theory "must offer us, not (merely) a list of sources, but an account of what qualifies something (anything) to appear on that list". We may call this *the grounding criterion*. The grounding criterion states that a constituent, or again 'dimension', of well-being is essential only if it instantiates some good-for-making property *G*. The counterargument stating that contextualism implies that those who investigate well-being lack a shared subject matter implicitly assumes that *the good-for-making property* grounds the subject matter.

Briefly put, whatever the good-for-making property is said to be, it would exhaustively describe what well-being is. The idea is that the good-for-making property determines what the shared subject matter is. But, as I shall now argue, this gets the relationship between the shared subject matter of well-being and the substantive constituents of well-being the wrong way around. I begin with an illustration.

When hedonists, desire-theorists, and objective list theorists argue in favour of their respective theories, or against some other one(s), they are taken to be concerned with well-being *all-things-considered* or *simpliciter*. The disagreements concern which theory best describes the target property. However, beyond agreeing that their aim is to find the best description, they do not appear to share a concept of well-being *simpliciter*. The reason they do not is because the overarching description of well-being *simpliciter* depends for its meaning more specifically on how the good-for-making property *G* is described by the respective theories (e.g., as happiness, desire-fulfilment, or attained objective perfectionist goods on a list). If hedonists, desire-theorists, and perfectionists, are speaking about the same thing, it is not in virtue of having a shared understanding of how the good-for-making property should be described.

Though the debates between different camps of theorising continue without appearing to approach a resolution any time soon, suggesting that it is a merely superficial disagreement because they use distinct concepts would not be accurate. If it were, then once it is clari-

fied which good-for-making property different theoreticians mean by G, they can simply agree to disagree. But it matters to the theoreticians seeking to meet the main aim that the essence of well-being is identified, not the essence of whatever it is that they happen to have described. Hence, it is not in virtue of a shared concept expressing what well-being consists in that they share the same subject matter. To unpack this, it is not a shared conceptual understanding of some good-for-making property that allows for genuine disagreements between hedonists, desire-theorists, and perfectionists when they theorise. They instantiate G differently, much as contextualists could do across different domains of prudential inquiry (e.g., about what is good for young children, the elderly, or people with cognitive challenges, etc.). Hence, *even if* theoreticians use different well-being concepts, this does not impact the (shared) subject matter.

Either well-being monists have different subject matters if we focus on good-for-making properties, or they share one if we focus on their formal commitment to meeting the main aim. Consider that the meaning of the concept of well-being as well-being monists respectively understand it either: (i) differs between them when they instantiate G differently, or (ii) is schematically the same by leaving the description of G undetermined in their respective versions of the grounding criterion. Hence, if well-being monists share the same subject matter when they talk about well-being, then it is in virtue of something other than a single concept of well-being that exclusively and exhaustively describes well-being's essence in some way. Instead, as indicated, they would only share the same subject matter because of the common commitment to meeting the main aim that well-being monists are wedded to. Following this line of reasoning, the subject matter of well-being is grounded by a shared aim to provide a grounding criterion with *some* instantiation of G where, e.g., 'hedonic tone', 'desire-satisfaction', or, say, 'rationality', takes its place. What they respectively focus on with regard to well-being's *substance* is orthogonal to what the shared subject matter is. It is in virtue of a *formal commitment* to finding an accurate description of the target property that we should understand them when they speak about well-being consisting in some property or another.

Contextualists rely on a corresponding formal commitment to achieve the same goal. The formal commitment for contextualists is to provide suitable mappings of well-being concepts and standards. Amongst each other, contextualists can disagree on which mappings between concepts and phenomena are suitable for which contexts. Consider, for instance, the idea that what is good for a very young child may be to learn and play, and so forth. Someone may think that instead of play, discipline is (non-instrumentally) prudentially good, and include it in her analysis. Two contextualists may disagree with each other on this point and provide arguments for their respective mappings of well-being concepts and standards. Similarly, a contextualist may contend that one description of well-being suits one specific domain of inquiry, such as what is good for a person who endures addiction, whereas a hedonist may propose that pleasure is thoroughly good even when stemming from addictive substance use. What differs between contextualists and well-being monists is that the former do not agree that a one-to-one relationship between one concept and one standard suffices to account for well-being in all its forms and in all domains of inquiry. The well-being monistic main aim is thus a unique and theoretically parsimonious, but not the only, answer to the contextualist formal commitment of providing suitable mappings of well-being concepts and well-being standards. Well-being monists will not need to view themselves as contextualists since they reject anything but that one-to-one-mapping. How-

ever, they would nevertheless need to assent to the claim that a one-to-one mapping is *the* suitable mapping between the concept of well-being and its standard. Contextualists, by contrast, are wedded to the multiple-mappings claim which maintains that the meaning of ‘well-being’ is indexed to contexts of utterance (and hence the references, too).

On this contextualist analysis of what grounds the shared subject matter with regard to well-being theories and social-scientific well-being measures or accounts, there is not a shared concept of well-being in play that determines the subject matter. Such a concept would have to rely on the same grounding criterion being filled in with the same instantiation of the good-for-making property *G*. Rather, it is a kind of formal commitment to finding the correct description of that good-for-making property that the grounding criterion involves. The correct description, well-being monists will argue, is *singular* and *universal*. Contextualists, however, deny both the singularity and universality. Hence, what grounds the subject matter *is one formal commitment* that is shared by the respective parties in trying to describe what well-being is essentially – or – contextually.

In Fletcher’s counterargument to contextualism, significant attention is paid to contextualism’s rejection of there being one and only one well-being concept. The motivation for this is clear, as there being a difference in meaning between utterances of ‘well-being’ allows for there being different references of them. Yet, such differences in meaning risks leading to a mess of prudential talk, where different meanings will often be opaque to speakers and listeners, and once clarified, simply not agreed upon to be what well-being is. Aspectualism’s solution to focusing on aspects of well-being can explain why we (according to aspectualists merely) seem to speak past each other, but with further care can clarify why we do not. That said, it should be noted that different theoreticians and practitioners do not universally agree that there is a common core that they share. For instance, happiness is not inherently valuable according to desire-theorists, nor are fulfilled desires according to hedonists. Hence, if they share the same subject matter when theorising about well-being, it is not in virtue of having specified the good-for-making property similarly enough.

My response to the counterargument Fletcher provides shows that we may have more than one concept, and more than one standard, in use, but still share the same subject matter. Nevertheless, contextualism still requires a further argument to defend its comparatively radical open-endedness that stems from the multiple-mappings claim. Even if there are more than one concept of well-being in use, why would they not converge on the same thing in the world? We often take words such as ‘well-being’, ‘quality of life’, and ‘prudential value’ to be about the same thing in prudential discourse. They may have slightly different connotations but are standardly taken to refer to the same thing, namely well-being *simpliciter*. Why should the case be any different for separate utterances of ‘well-being’ alone? Similarly, even if we take the idea seriously that different utterances of ‘well-being’ express different meanings, why would it not be the case that they refer to the same thing, much like, e.g., the expressions ‘the evening star’ and ‘Hesperus’ do? Focusing on whether the *concept* of well-being is the same across all contexts is comparatively less important than whether well-being *itself* is the same thing despite our opaquely varied ways of speaking about it. I turn to addressing this related issue next.

3 Shared or Separate Standards

In this section, I first show that contextualism can account for the intuition that well-being theorising, even if labouring with different concepts, are about the same thing because all such theorising shares the same subject matter. I then present the upshots of these results for contextualist well-being theorising and measurements. The subsequent section concludes.

3.1 The Shared Standard Challenge

As argued, contextualism can avoid the conclusion that those investigating well-being's nature systematically speak past each other when making well-being ascriptions. They can do so by relying on the formal commitment of providing suitable mappings of well-being concepts and standards. Since *suitability* is involved, however, contextualism's open-endedness is restricted in one way or another. As evidence that not any- and everything goes on contextualism, consider that some well-being assessments cut across all contexts. If those well-being assessments are accurate, Fletcher's counterargument can be bolstered from a substantive perspective on top of the primarily semantic one. This strategy does not try to establish that we could not have a shared understanding of well-being without having the same concept. Rather, this strategy involves stating that we *have* a shared standard regardless of which concepts are used to refer to it. If that is so, then all legitimate well-being speech/theorising will be about that shared standard of well-being. One way of capturing such a shared standard is to focus less on what makes lives good for us who live them, and more on conditions that make lives bad for those living them. In brief, we can distinguish being disadvantaged, i.e., not being well (in any context-sensitive sense) from suffering from ill-being, i.e., being unwell *simpliciter* (Kagan, 2014; Sumner, 2020; Östlund, 2021). As I will now show, ill-being assessments present a worry for contextualists who reject that a universal and shared well-being standard exists.

To illustrate, consider things such as torturous suffering, homelessness, discrimination, domination, and unending addiction. They appear worse for us than the positive items on plausible hedonistic, desire-based, or perfectionist, theories do. Regarding people's ill-being, there is a substantive difference between not doing well in some given sense and being badly off without reference to any deprivation of context-dependent goodness. Even if the concept of well-being is thin, as contextualists maintain, the concept still suffices for some stable assessments of betterness or worseness. Hence, contextualists face a challenge to explain why some states of affairs stably strike us as context-independently prudentially worse than other ones. Those stable assessments *prima facie* indicate that there is a shared well-being standard being used in our assessments. Thus, we may call this *the shared standard challenge*.

To illustrate, there is no context in which it would be good for us to be, say, tortured. One driving reason is because torture often, if perhaps not universally, involves a severe degree of humiliation (van der Rijt, 2016), but the suffering alone might suffice if humiliation happens to be absent from the tortured person's experience. That said, the challenge may be objected to by the contextualist camp on the grounds that the alleged prudential badness of, as in this case, torture, is not something that always ought to be avoided. For instance, it *may* be better to be tortured than to be killed in some scenarios. That claim, I gauge, is true. But it still appears to *always* be *bad for* a person to be tortured. The fact that comparative

assessments of there being even worse things does not defuse the charge that certain things, such as torture, are unequivocally bad prudentially. In no way is *being* tortured (or homeless, or discriminated, or dominated, or addicted, etc.) better than to *not be* tortured (or have the other states absent rather than present), everything else remaining equal. The presences of such life-experiences strike us as stably, and inescapably, bad for us to endure. Hence, though we can speak of *degrees* of prudential badness regarding the examples of ill-being above, they are universally bad for us.

A well-being monistic intuition can thus be generated which states that we have the same thing in mind when we analyse, talk about, or operationalise, well-being by looking at instances of ill-being. Hence, the well-being monist can grant the contextualist claim that different concepts are expressed by different theoreticians, but nevertheless deny that those concepts will refer to different things in different settings, which is arguably the main point of having several well-being concepts in use for the contextualist. If all well-being concepts refer to the same thing, i.e., the same standard of well-being at some level of description, then we may still construct an overarching and exhaustive theory of that thing, which would be a significant concession to well-being monism. Hence, for contextualists, addressing the semantic part of Fletcher's counterargument is insufficient. The shared standard challenge must also be met if the contextualist position is to support its multiple-mappings claim.

In principle, contextualists could respond to the shared standard challenge by trying to debunk the intuitions underlying our stable assessments that the challenge involves. Those intuitions about context-independent prudential worseness could, e.g., allegedly stem from us having internalised the main well-being theories with disregard to well-being's inescapable context-dependence. Such a response denies that the open-endedness of contextualism should be curtailed. However, it could analogously be argued that anything we consider prudentially *valuable* is questionable for the same reason. Such a debunking strategy will lead to a thoroughgoing scepticism about well-being's properties. Hence, if contextualists are to offer a response that supports a proliferation of theories and measures, which separates the contextualist from the well-being monist and those who would argue that well-being does not exist (eliminativists), a non-debunking response to the shared standard challenge is needed.

As a first attempt, consider that another contextualist response regarding the stableness of our intuitions regarding ill-being is that they may be *coincidental* findings. This response suggests that the items (torture, etc.) do not have to share the same basis for being considered bad. For instance, they may be parts of an objective list of prudential badness. However, it should be noted that such a coincidental set of findings still indicates that contextualism might not ever allow for disjoint standards of well-being. The main reason is that such standards would always need to involve the relevant dimensions of ill-being, including that of being tortured. Hence, a more systematic response should be given for the contextualist position to benefit.

Consequently, I will proffer a contextualist response to the shared standard challenge and, more precisely, one that accepts the intuitions that underlie it. Lives can go badly beyond merely not attaining some prudentially positive dimension. Fletcher's response to the contextualist argument is that the intuitions it generates are accurate, namely that we have different things in mind in different contexts. The divergence between contextualism and Fletcher's view is that contextualists maintain that those intuitions are about different

types of well-being whereas Fletcher maintains that they are about different aspects of the same type of well-being.

Analogously to Fletcher's response to the contextualist arguments, I will begin by agreeing with the intuitions generated, i.e., the 'data' used in the arguments, but reject that they support *well-being monism*. To offer an example, consider that someone may have an unfulfilling career, perhaps working at a job that requires her to spend most of her waking hours on menial, tiring, tasks. That scenario is importantly different from lacking a context-dependently positive dimension of well-being such as enjoying a meaningful, valued career. Merely not doing well by having a career one neither cares for nor dislikes falls somewhere in-between these two things by being prudentially neutral. How can contextualists account for these stable intuitions?

Contextualists can account for these intuitions by maintaining that some states of affairs are substantively bad for us in a way that bars them from being (even) contextually good for us. Concepts and measures can then proliferate only on the condition that they avoid counting what is bad for us as being good for us. The well-being monist approach of avoiding this is to use the grounding criterion to determine which properties are incontrovertibly good for us (and hence will not include what would be bad for us, as the properties cannot be both at the same time).

Contextualists cannot rely on the grounding criterion, since the scope of the good-for-making property G has to cover each well-being dimension, but somehow not in each context. However, contextualists can use *disqualification criteria* to bar properties from inclusion in lists of prudentially good properties. That said, each context-dependent theory or application do not need to include all (or even any) ill-being dimensions. In a setting where we consider, say, rehabilitation from substance addictions, it does not strike us as salient to consider torture as something we should actively keep in mind. For settings where we evaluate the well-being of prisoners of war, however, torture and lack thereof would certainly be significant. Hence, contextualists can maintain its multiple-mappings claim, and though they are pressed to affirm that some things are inescapably bad for us, they are only salient for some well-being analyses.

Through this move, contextualists can maintain that all well-being concepts and standards must satisfy the condition of not counting what is incontrovertibly bad for us as being (even) contextually good for us. Even if some profoundly negative experiences may eventually give a person insight into what matters in life, the negative experiences are not to be counted as constitutively good for that person. Someone who endures, say, homelessness and comes to see empathy and generosity as worthwhile to foster in oneself and others may reach insight that they then take to be of prudential value to them. Nevertheless, that benefit would be gained as a *consequence* of her plights, her plights are not constitutive of any benefit she may receive.

At this stage, well-being monists may raise an objection. Does the response not implicitly affirm that ill-being has an essence, that the concept of ill-being circumscribes that essence, and that any theory of ill-being should capture all and only those properties? Briefly put, my proffered response may seem to introduce a significant asymmetry into well-being theorising.

However, such a significant asymmetry can be avoided. Consider that contextualism rejects each of well-being monism's three claims: (i) that there are essential properties to well-being, (ii) that the concept of well-being circumscribes those properties, and (iii) that

any well-being theory ought to capture all, and only, those properties. One can more modestly deny that there is any essence to ill-being or concept circumscribing it but maintain that we should capture all and only the relevant properties. This imposes a restriction to contextualism's open-endedness but is not a concession to well-being monism. For instance, my response is compatible with *hybrid theories* of ill-being. On hybrid theories, subjective attitudes and objectivist determinations are both individually sufficient to determine prudential dimensions (cf. Wall and Sobel, 2021). Instead of privileging subjective or objective properties, both kinds can play decisive roles when determining prudential dimensions (Griffin, 2007, p. 142). The dimensions of ill-being therefore offer a substantive limitation on contextualist well-being theories. But they do not thereby amount to an exhaustive shared standard of what well-being consists in.

In objection, a well-being monist may argue that if ill-being dimensions should never be counted as good for us – even contextually – then can we not similarly argue that plausible positive dimensions should never be counted as bad for us? The argument could, for instance, suggest that it is the case that euphoria or bliss (or some other example) is incontrovertibly positive, and hence that well-being monism can be maintained with an analogue argument.

In response, I note two things. First, incontrovertibly positive dimensions may exist. If some incontrovertibly positive dimension exists, then context-sensitive theories ought to not count it as bad for us. However, that alone does not entail that well-being monism is true. It is possible that all suitable well-being concepts and standards have a common core but differ regarding other, context-sensitive, dimensions. Additionally, those incontrovertibly positive dimensions may not be salient in each context. To illustrate, if we consider someone's lack of lodging, for instance, as something to alleviate, then compensating her homelessness with some bliss (or what have you) may not be a reasonable enough compensation. Analogously, this is similar to how giving a starving child a toy to play with does little to alleviate her starvation – which may be more pressing to do. This point, it should be noted, could be assented to by aspectualists as well. This is not a *win* for contextualists in the sense that only contextualism explains how we may look at different things in different contexts. Aspectualists can also allow for this. However, the difference between contextualism and aspectualism is that there does not need to be an exhaustive theory that each more context-sensitive application is a (proper) subset of.

Furthermore, with regard to unequivocally positive dimensions, some asymmetries seem to remain between ill-being and well-being, in that well-being monists will have their respective reasons to agree that certain states of affairs are bad for us even if they disagree as to what those reasons are. Perhaps homelessness is bad for us because of painful experiences, or frustrated desires, or by involving unhealthy relationships. Euphoria or bliss, however, is not incontrovertibly positive even on well-being monist views. Hence, the onus is on well-being monists to not only show that such incontrovertibly positive dimensions exist but also that they exhaust what (positive) well-being consists in and, furthermore, that they are salient in each context. In sum, the ill-being intuitions can be addressed without relying on a shared standard.

3.2 Applications and Upshots

In what follows, I illustrate the upshots of context-sensitive well-being theories, operationalisations, and policy-applications. I do so by drawing on *the capability approach* because it offers a way of analysing values that explicitly lends itself to context-sensitive work. Capabilitarian well-being theories and applications can diverge. Divergent theories and applications focusing on different things would be problematic if well-being monism were unavoidable. However, contextualism can support such divergent theories and applications. Furthermore, while I use the capability approach as an illustration, it should be noted that contextualism can also be applied to other context-sensitive theories and practical uses.

According to the capability approach, well-being consists in multiple dimensions. The capability approach provides two core concepts to describe the relevant dimensions (Sen, 1993, p. 38). First, the concept of *functionings* refers to people's beings and doings, such as satisfying nutritional needs. Second, the concept of *capabilities* refers to genuine opportunities to realise functionings. Schematically, an opportunity to *X* is genuine when internal conditions and external conditions are jointly sufficient for a person to be or do *X*. For instance, a person has a genuine opportunity to secure nutritional needs when her digestive system is healthy, and she has access to food. Capabilitarians consequently tend to speak of people's well-being achievements – functionings – and well-being freedom – capabilities (Crocker, 2006, p. 156; Qizilbash, 2022, p. 166). The distinction between capabilities and functionings is notable in that capabilities can be beneficial even when they are not converted into functionings. For instance, fasting and starving are prudentially different in that a person who could eat appears to be better off than someone who cannot (Sen, 1985, pp. 200–201, 1992, p. 52, 1999, p. 76). Capabilitarian well-being theories thus consist in lists of functionings and/or capabilities that purportedly constitute dimensions of well-being. However, there are disagreements over which dimensions matter, why they do so, and to what extent they can be aggregated (Sen, 1999, pp. 76–81).

Dimensions may be exemplified by allegedly necessary items such as Nussbaum's central human capabilities (1990, p. 225, 1992, p. 222, 2011, pp. 33–34). They are genuine opportunities to be and do those things that facilitate a flourishing human life according to Aristotelian philosophical views of human nature. Nussbaum's proposal can be seen as a foundational theory of well-being (or 'flourishing'), which would have primacy over alternative accounts. Such alternative accounts stem, in part, from theoreticians who use procedurally made lists grounded in public reasoning (Sen, 2004a, b, p. 333; Qizilbash, 2007, pp. 170,176–177). Yet others combine both these perspectives to provide philosophical and political proposals for formulating capability lists (Claassen, 2011; Byskov, 2017, 2018; Östlund, 2023). Thus, the capability approach is not *one well-being theory* but *a framework* that among other things can be used to formulate well-being theories (Robeyns, 2016, p. 403, 2017, pp. 125–126).

The capability approach offers more than theoretical developments, in that its use is often motivated by aims of conceptualising, measuring, and alleviating, e.g., severe poverty. Hence, there are both different theories of well-being captured in capabilitarian terms, and different characterisations of phenomena that are measured. Among the operationalisations, the Human Development Index as well as the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index capture certain proposed capabilitarian dimensions that some, albeit not all, capability theories list (UNDP, 2010, pp. 15–16; Alkire et al., 2018, p. 5). The proliferations of theories and

operationalisations are considered core strengths of the capability approach. A significant reason is that the proliferations allow for tailor-made specifications of what matters well-being wise, in a given context, and differently wide-ranging policy-applications. Consequently, however, different capabilitarian well-being theories and empirical accounts can differ substantially from others.

To illustrate how such differences can occur, we may have different capability lists being salient for different social groups. The relevant functionings or capabilities in a sector designed to help those who are homeless may be best achieved by one list, *L1*, in a certain setting. And while we may expect some overlap, with a list, *L2*, for helping those who are addicted, the overlap will be imperfect. The list-items, moreover, can be more fine-grained than what would count as good for all people. Hence, capabilitarians do not always consider some particular "master list", *ML*, as something that *L1* or *L2* need to be proper subsets (i.e., smaller segments) of. The relevance of a particular list will depend on its relation to its area of implementation and what matters to people in that context, not on how well it coheres with the master list *ML*.

Note that on the well-being monist view, there should be some master list of capabilities and functionings roughly equivalent to some version of Fletcher's aspectualism. As compatible with that end, notable developments such as Wolff and de-Shalit's (2007, p. 38, 2013) work on disadvantage expand on Nussbaum's central human capabilities. They would, on this view, be committed to providing *the true* theory. All subsequent operationalisations or measurements of well-being, then, would only be valid insofar as they capture that target prudential property.

There are two aims in play here that should be separated, namely (1) that of providing a context-sensitive well-being theory, and (2) that of providing a context-sensitive measurement that maps to a suitable well-being theory. Capabilitarians typically allow for context-sensitivity with regard to theorising *and* with regard to which measurement(s) best map to a relevant well-being theory. By supporting contextualism, as done above, the first of these aims is lent support.

To illustrate, on a comparatively general level, the capability approach framework can be used to formulate well-being theories that take the form of an informed desire-theory or an objective list (Qizilbash, 2013, p. 37; Robeyns, 2017, p. 126). A reason for adopting certain restrictions on what matters well-being wise is that unconstrained feelings and attitudes appear to steer us wrong. For instance, feelings and attitudes are sensitive to problematic adaptations, like when a hopeless homeless beggar expects less than she ought to and is pleased or satisfied by that inadequate amount (Sen, 1987, pp. 45–46; Terlazzo, 2014, 2017; van der Deijl, 2017). Whilst these restrictions establish that not any- and everything goes, well-being dimensions can vary considerably depending on whether an objective list is chosen, among other examples of objective lists, or an informed desire-theory is chosen, among others. Though some take their work to be geared to producing (parts of) a master list, others have a more open-ended view, even combining the grounds of selection from both informed desires and objective lists.

For instance, some proposals in the literature use a strategy in which purpose-dependence of theorising plays a large role. That purpose may come apart, for instance, from being representative of some purportedly privileged philosophical theory (cf. Parker, 2020, pp. 459–460). Applying this kind of view, the proposals on offer may still have a use in determining the circumstances that facilitate *some* salient notion of well-being, dependent

on, e.g., methodological constraints, and background conditions for enacting well-being policies. Some capabilitarians who work in this tradition therefore aim to balance theoretical accuracy against practical efficacy or political legitimacy (Byskov, 2017, 2018; Östlund, 2023). Such balancing of determinations of well-being's constituents, however, merits justification since collections of capability lists are prone to involve exclusive properties. If such lists are to co-exist rather than compete, as they would on the well-being monist view, some justification is needed.

To that end, contextualism shows how purpose-dependent well-being theories can co-exist without there being a master list that each purpose-dependent theory is a smaller segment of. They may partially overlap, have a family resemblance, or be disjoint. What matters is whether the theories are suitable to their purposes, not whether the theories converge on the same targeted good-for-making property. By *suitability to a purpose*, I do not merely have epistemic goals in mind, though those are useful to consider as well. Rather, the purposes in question are *practical*, and more specifically to promote the ends that let people achieve well-being or avoid ill-being. As exemplified earlier, different capability lists apply differently well in different contexts. Even though the purposes are practical, however, it should be noted that they require meeting epistemic goals, too, since to know what promotes some end will involve meeting certain epistemic preconditions (cf. Parker, 2020, pp. 460–461). Hence, determining suitability will involve both identifying contexts and what constitutively improves outcomes in them.

My argument tries to merge theoretical and practical concerns, and hence a counterargument is available to well-being monists since contextualist theories will not determine which policies to enact. Though Haybron and Tiberius (2015, p. 713) are detractors to the idea that policy-work should be grounded in *the correct well-being theory*, this idea is typically endorsed. Yet, it cannot be with reference to *the correct well-being theory* that we enact well-being policies, if contextualism is true. Hence, Haybron and Tiberius are right that we should not ground our decisions in some putatively correct theory. I suggest that the reasons for this are not only pragmatic but – if contextualism is true – also motivated on separate grounds.

The objection therefore cannot be that *contextualists* cannot provide judgments about what is best to do well-being wise without qualification. If contextualism is true, the best anyone can do is to offer provisional justification for policy-recommendations by making the conditions for suitability between concepts, standards, and contexts, explicit. This response relies on the idea that there may be incommensurable or incomparable values in the sense that they cannot be ranked as better than, worse than, or equal to, each other (cf. Griffin, 2007, p. 145).

The upshot that contextualism offers is that conditions for doing well or poorly enters the analytical process without requiring a consensus on well-being's essence. On an abstract, general, level of description, it may be true that societies should aim to do good by promoting the well-being of their members. However, what doing well by them entails can differ and it is not a foregone conclusion that each dimension is similarly relevant for every person in each setting. Contextualism accommodates room for malleable well-being ascriptions without us speaking past each other. Recall, the formal commitment to provide suitable mappings of well-being concepts and standards grounds the subject matter. Nor do we need to rely on a shared well-being standard that stable intuitions about betterness and worseness

stem from. Nor, finally, does any- and everything go, since ill-being dimensions provide substantive boundaries.

In sum, contextualism differs from well-being monism concerning the mappings between well-being concepts and standards. Contrary to appearances, contextualist well-being researchers need not consider that which is incontrovertibly bad for us as being – even contextually – good for us, nor do they need to make concessions to the well-being monist. Other restrictions may be specified in the future by identifying further conditions of suitability. For now, the well-being monistic challenge to contextualism has been rebutted, showing that the contextualist position is in a better position to vindicate the claim that theories and measures can proliferate without us speaking past each other, nor relying on a shared standard of well-being. The upshots of this are not only theoretical, but also practical in supporting real-world well-being work that, if well-being monism were true, would otherwise be on shakier grounds.

4 Conclusion

Philosophical well-being research is predominantly about identifying well-being's alleged essence. Nevertheless, an alternative view called *contextualism* has recently gained traction. Contextualism maintains that there are several well-being concepts and standards, but not a privileged concept referring to a uniquely applicable standard. If there is no privileged concept, however, then people risk systematically talking past each other. Yet, we do not speak past each other systematically. And we typically think some things are context-independently bad for us. In this paper, I argued that contextualism can account for why. Well-being monism and contextualism differ regarding whether there is some exhaustive well-being theory. Both positions, however, are concerned with what the suitable well-being concepts and standards are. Contextualism provides room for tailor-made specifications and practical applications without requiring conformity with an exhaustive account. Hence, contextualism affords well-being theoreticians and practitioners a focus on different things while keeping what matters in sight.

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