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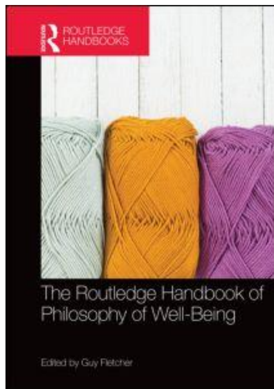

The Routledge Handbook Of Philosophy Of Well-Being

Guy Fletcher

Plato on well-being

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PART I

Well-being in the history of moral philosophy

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1
PLATO ON WELL-BEING

Eric Brown

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Plato's uses of well-being

To speak of well-being, as they frequently do, the characters in Plato's dialogues use several expressions interchangeably, including the infinitive phrases "to live well" (*eu zēn*), "to be successful" (*eudaimonein*), and "to do well" (*eu prattein*), as well as the related abstract nouns "success" and "doing well" (*eudaimonia*, *eupragia*). The concept invoked by these expressions plays two central roles in their discussions, as some characters propose that well-being is, or at least should be, the ultimate goal for both individual human action and political decision making.

The second, political role for well-being prompts disagreement. Socrates (in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*, especially), the Eleatic stranger (in the *Statesman*), and the Athenian (in the *Laws*) assert that political action—law making, judging, educating, war making, and the rest—should promote the well-being of the political community's citizens. But other characters, including Callicles (in the *Gorgias*) and Thrasymachus (in the *Republic*) maintain that politics should serve the well-being of politicians. The ensuing debates in large part concern competing conceptions of well-being. Socrates and his allies emphasize cooperative goods as opposed to the competitive trophies favored by Callicles, Thrasymachus, and their kind. Team Socrates suggests that if politicians would take the correct view of well-being, they would not see a deep conflict between their own and that of the citizens. Team Callicles and Thrasymachus suggests that if politicians took the Socratic view of well-being they would display weakness and forego some of life's greatest advantages.

The first, ethical role for well-being, by contrast, prompts no controversy. Plato's characters agree that everyone wants his or her life to go well and that, on reflection, at least, all our other goals are subordinate to this (*Euthd*. 278e, *Symp*. 204e–205a). So, Socrates regularly assumes that one should act for the sake of one's own well-being, and this "eudaimonist axiom" is readily accepted, even by those interlocutors such as Callicles and Thrasymachus who disagree sharply with Socrates about how we should live.

In contrast to Plato's characters, modern readers often take the ethical role to be more problematic than the political one. Modern political liberalism wants states to provide the conditions for the individual pursuit of well-being more than well-being itself, but many modern moral philosophers reject the eudaimonist axiom still more thoroughly. They read Socratic ethics as an objectionable egoism, incompatible with the quite reasonable thought

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that other beings' ends should matter to us. But these critics are insufficiently attuned to the varieties of well-being in Plato's dialogues. Unlike many of his interlocutors, and unlike his modern critics, Socrates clings to the platitudinous identification of well-being and doing well, and he insists that doing well is the same as acting virtuously (*Charm*. 171e–172a, *Cr*. 48b, *Euthd*. 278e–282d, *Gorg*. 507c, *Rep*. 353e–354a). But if well-being is simply virtuous activity, then acting for the sake of one's own well-being is simply acting so as to act virtuously, which is not objectionably egoistic at all.

This is the Socratic view of well-being that Plato favors, and the dialogues advance this view in part by rejecting several other views, sometimes because they conflict with ordinary thoughts about what makes a human life go well, sometimes because they lead to civil strife as political ends, and often because they cannot play the role that the eudaimonist axiom sets for them, to be the ultimate end that explains and justifies human action.

Naïve conceptions

In the *Euthydemus*, after they agree that everyone obviously wants to do well (*eu prattein*), Socrates and Cleinias take it to be even more obvious that we do well by possessing many things that are good for us (278e–279a). They then list the goods that apparently cause our lives to go well: material goods (riches), goods of the body (health, good looks, bodily needs), social goods (noble birth, power, honor), goods of character (temperance, justice, bravery), and goods of intellect (wisdom) (279a–c).

Socrates and Cleinias do not explicitly say what well-being *is*. They say only what role it plays for us—everyone wants to get it—and what causes it—possessing the things that are good for us. One might produce a sophisticated account of what well-being is, to explain how the things that are good for us cause our well-being. But Socrates and Cleinias do not. Still, their naïve account can suggest that well-being is simply a state caused by, and perhaps constituted by, the possession of things that are good for us. So understood, Socrates and Cleinias offer something like an "objective list" conception of well-being.[1] But their particular list leaves important questions unanswered. Is it really comprehensive? Where are pleasure and friendship? Is each of the listed goods necessary for well-being? And do they all contribute equally to well-being? Could, say, sufficiently massive wealth and power compensate for a deficit of justice? Perhaps, then, it is better to think of this *Euthydemus* passage as an introduction to a *family* of views of well-being, a family whose members differ on which goods belong on the list, how the listed goods are ranked, and so on.

Other Platonic characters also appeal to some member of this family, and, like Socrates and Cleinias in the *Euthydemus*, they insist that they are appealing to an ordinary understanding of well-being. In the *Gorgias*, Polus insists that even a child would know that someone can be unjust and successful (*eudaimōn*) by amassing great wealth and power (470c–471d). Thrasymachus makes the same claim in the *Republic*: everyone would agree that the complete tyrant, whose injustice leads to complete power and great resources, enjoys a successful life (344a–c). When Glaucon and Adeimantus worry that it might be better to be unjust than just, they are relying on what they take to be common-sense thoughts about the importance of competitive goods to well-being (364a), and when Adeimantus objects that the guardians of Socrates' ideal city would not enjoy good lives, he takes it for granted that wealth is necessary for living well (419a–420a). All these characters assume that wealth and power are necessary for well-being, and they all claim that this assumption is widespread.

But Socrates clearly rejects the assumption. He calls the conception of *eudaimonia* that drives Adeimantus' objection to the guardians' situation "foolish and adolescent" (466b). In

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fact, Socrates objects not merely to conceptions of well-being according to which wealth and power are necessary. He offers reasons to doubt a broad range of "objective list" views of well-being.

He advances one reason in the *Euthydemus*. After Socrates and Cleinias complete their list of the goods that are supposed to make life go well, Socrates argues first that the possession of a good would not make one's life go well unless that good benefited one, and that a good would not benefit one unless it were used (280b–e). He then argues that using a good would not benefit one unless it were used rightly, and that using a good rightly requires using it wisely (280e–281b). A large part of Socrates' reasoning here is immediately accessible to Cleinias. If we have advantages such as wealth, power, or honor, we have a greater capacity to act than if we lack these things, and it is better for us to have a greater capacity to act only if we act wisely. Wielding great power foolishly does us no good.

But Socrates pushes this reasoning beyond common sense. Because the things ordinarily thought to be good for us seem to depend in large measure on luck, the proponent of the initial "objective list" view can sum up his view by saying that good fortune makes our lives go well. Socrates insists, instead, that wisdom plays the role of good fortune (279d), that it makes our lives go well (281b). His point seems to be that the causal power to benefit, to make a life go well, cannot belong to all the initially listed goods, because most of them sometimes benefit us and sometimes harm us, depending on whether they are used wisely or foolishly (281d–e). On his view, only wisdom possesses that causal power, because only it has the power to cause wise, beneficial use, without ever causing foolish, harmful use.[2]

Socrates might have insisted that wisdom no more possesses the power to effect well-being than wealth does, because one needs both wisdom to guide the use and another set of goods to be wisely used. But he does not say this. He says that only wisdom causes well-being (281b), and that only wisdom is good for us (281e, 292b). This outstrips common sense, but it is not unintelligible. Socrates might distinguish between necessary conditions and causes (cf. *Phdo* 99a–b) and identify wealth and the other initially listed assets as mere necessary conditions of wisdom causing well-being. Just as the cobbler makes a shoe but could not do so without leather, so wisdom makes well-being but could not do so without certain advantages being present. This leaves questions about what one needs, beyond wisdom, to live well, but in the *Euthydemus*, Socrates is content to leave such questions unanswered, so long as he has convinced Cleinias that only wisdom *causes* well-being.[3]

So understood, Socrates' argument turns on some curious and contentious thoughts about causation, but his central point can be expressed in other terms. Of the goods that the "objective list" conception takes to constitute well-being, most are only conditionally good—beneficial in some circumstances (when wisely used) but not in others (when foolishly used)—whereas wisdom is unconditionally good (it never uses itself foolishly). Now, nothing in the very idea of well-being requires that it or its constituents be unconditionally good. But the idea of a goal for the sake of which one should do everything one does is different. This is the idea of an ultimate end that could fully explain and justify action, and a merely conditional good is not up to that task. When one acts with a conditional good as one's end, we can always ask, "What makes that a good end to pursue here and now?" This open question renders the justification of the action incomplete.

Socrates does not fully develop this line of thought in the *Euthydemus*, but it returns elsewhere, along with an additional set of reasons to doubt the "objective list" family of conceptions of well-being. These fuller objections are launched not directly against the naïve suggestion that Socrates and Cleinias introduce in the *Euthydemus*, but against some more sophisticated theories about what well-being is.

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The Protagorean conception

One sophisticated way to develop the ordinary thought that a life goes well by the possession of good things vindicates every member of that family of views (and then some). Protagoras says that a human being is the measure of the things that are and are not, and Plato's *Theaetetus* construes this as the thought, for instance, that if the wind appears cold to Peter and warm to Paul, then the wind *is* cold for Peter and it *is* warm for Paul (151d–160e). (Actually, Socrates seems to imply that Protagoras is committed to thinking that if the wind appears cold to Peter, then the wind-for-Peter is-for-Peter cold-for-Peter,[4] but I will proceed with a slightly simplified picture in view.)

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates addresses more than one Protagoreanism. He sometimes worries about a perfectly general version of the "measure doctrine," so that *whatever* kind of appearance we are talking about, if X *appears* F to A, then X *is* F for A. On this view, for instance, if the measure doctrine appears false to Socrates, then the measure doctrine is false for Socrates. Socrates sometimes worries about a narrow Protagoreanism that applies not to all appearances but only to sense perceptions. This would exclude the measure doctrine's appearing false, but include the wind's appearing chilly. Last, Socrates acknowledges still other ways of restricting Protagoreanism, such as applying it only to certain evaluative appearances. This suggests how someone might understand well-being in a pure subjectivist way. On such a view, what appears to me to be well-being is well-being for me.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates responds to Protagoreanism with a barrage of objections, some of which (such as the claim that it refutes itself: 170a-171d) target the perfectly general version and some of which (such as the distinction between sense perception and knowledge: 183b-186e) target the narrow version that concerns sense perceptions only.[5] But at least two of his objections would tell against Protagoreanism about well-being (cf. *Crat.* 385e–386e).

First, what we take to be good for us belongs to the class of our concerns about the future. Even if everyone is the measure of what *is* for him or her, we can ask whether every person is also the measure of what *will be* for him or her (178a–179b). If a layman thinks that drinking this particular concoction will make his bodily condition appear good to him and thus be good for him, his future experience might convict his thought of error. Moreover, a doctor might be the better measure of how the man's body would appear to him after he drank the concoction. In response, it will not do for the Protagorean to raise doubts about personal identity through time (cf. 166b). When I predict that X will appear F to A tomorrow, it does not matter whether I am identical with A. If X does not appear F to A tomorrow, my prediction has been shown false. The Protagorean would do better to characterize my prediction more carefully. She should say that it appears to me now that X will appear F to A tomorrow, for X's not appearing F to A tomorrow does not contradict how things appear to me now. But if I am the measure only of how tomorrow seems to me here and now, I am not the measure of how things will be tomorrow. I cannot make a genuine prediction, and this is a serious cost to the theory, given the practical importance of predictions, which Socrates' discussion makes plain. A person could, conceivably, muddle through life with nothing more than appearances of what will appear to be the case tomorrow. But if he or she *never* thinks that later appearances make a difference to the value of earlier predictions and if his or her judgments of what will appear to be the case in the future never change accordingly, then he or she will be incapable of learning by trial and error, which requires recognizing *error*. Such a creature's life will be very short or very lucky. Others could perhaps help him or her by making apparent things that will keep him or her safe. But the creature could not say that these helpers are *wise*, for the creature could not say that the helpers make the appearances better than they were before.[6]

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This argument from predictions grounds a general concern that Socrates repeatedly raises, that Protagoreanism undermines the distinction between the wise and unwise. The measure doctrine takes everyone to be equally good at determining how things are, but Socrates thinks that this is a special achievement. Of course, the measure doctrine does this by collapsing the distinction between how things appear to be and how they are, and Socrates rejects this conflation. This would be Socrates' second response to Protagoreanism about well-being: it gets the ontology wrong, construing well-being as a relation between the world and the passive receptions of a human being when it is a matter of stance-independent fact for a human being to discover by active effort. Socrates maintains that we cannot even coherently represent things as being the way Protagoreans have to take them to be, because our language attributes more independence and stability to features of the world than the collapse of appearance and reality can allow (cf. 179c–183b).

Socrates encounters Protagoreanism in the *Protagoras*, too, though readers usually miss it.[7] Here Protagoras initially fails to identify courage and wisdom because he assumes that something beyond knowledge, some natural spiritedness, is required to motivate right action in the face of fear (351a–b). But Socrates gets Protagoras to identify courage and wisdom (360d–e). He argues that any motivation represents a course of action under the guise of some apparent value. To be moved by pleasure is to pursue something pleasant that one takes to be good for one. To be moved by fear is to avoid something fearsome that one takes to be bad for one (358d). So one cannot act without representing one's action as good for one, without believing that it is the thing to do. Socrates also argues that one cannot act against one's knowledge of what to do. Most people deny this, because they construe knowledge as just another mental state, just like pleasure or pain, fear or love. But Socrates argues that knowledge is a special achievement that contrasts with these other motivations. They represent what appears to be good or bad for one, whereas knowledge depends upon taking the measure of appearances and determining what is good or bad for one. Knowledge exists where how things appear to one have been fully settled in favor of how things are, and such a condition does not admit of contrary appearances that could motivate action counter to knowledge.

Much of Socrates' argument in these pages is pitched explicitly against the many, and not Protagoras, and much of it invokes a narrow hedonism about value. But Socrates' aim is to convert Protagoras from seeing knowledge as just one motivation, like fear, to seeing knowledge as something very different from other motivating mental states. He introduces pleasure and pain as two among many motivating passions, alongside fear, love, and others (352b–e). He needs to establish that all these motivating passions share a defect that knowledge lacks, and he does so by contrasting their reliance on how things appear to be good or bad with the knower's art of taking the measure of appearances and determining how things are. Thus, after Socrates has induced Protagoras to agree that courage, like the other virtues, is identical to wisdom, he summarizes his conclusion that all virtues are forms of knowledge oddly, saying "*all things* are knowledge [πάντα χρήματά ἐστιν ἐπιστήμη]" (361b1–2, emphasis mine). He is pointedly echoing Protagoras' measure doctrine, "that of *all things* a human being is the measure [πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπον εἶναι]" (*Tht.* 152a2–3). On Socrates' view, in the *Protagoras* no less than in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoreanism misconstrues measure, conflating appearance with reality, when there is a measuring art that makes its possessors wise and virtuous.

Hedonist conceptions

Protagoreanism about well-being flatters the democratically inclined, because it makes every person equally an authority over what makes her own life go well,[8] but it is not a thought

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that Plato's dialogues attribute to most Athenians. Yet Socrates does regularly attribute to them another sophisticated development of the naïve thought that well-being is constituted by possessing things that are good for us. This is the view that well-being consists in pleasure (or good feelings) and the absence of pain (or bad feelings), where pleasure either is or strongly correlates with the satisfaction of desire. One might again think that this is a family of views, as one might want to distinguish hedonism about well-being from a desire satisfaction view of it, and one might want to distinguish both of those from emotional well-being. But the dialogues do not sharply distinguish here. The unifying thoughts, which also tie these views to Protagoreanism, are thus: people desire just what they take to be good for them and they take to be good for them just what feels good to them. In any view animated by these thoughts, possessing what is good for us causes well-being by bringing us the pleasure of satisfied desire that *is* well-being.

The *Gorgias* dramatizes how this broad hedonism about well-being can stand behind the naïve "objective list" approach to well-being. After Socrates makes trouble for Polus' claim that a wealthy tyrant enjoys a good life despite being unjust, Callicles emerges to defend Polus. Callicles rejects Socrates' "conventional" understanding of justice in favor of a "natural" justice according to which the stronger deserve more than the weaker (483a–484c). In his view, life goes well not when one restrains one's desires with temperance and conventional justice, but when one allows one's appetites to grow as large as possible and one has the courage and shrewd judgment to satisfy those appetites and continually fill oneself with pleasures (491e–492c, 494a–b).

Socrates puts pressure on Callicles' conception of well-being in two ways. First, he suggests that the pursuit of this well-being undermines itself (492e–494a). Pleasure demands the satisfaction of one's appetites, but their satisfaction merely prompts the growth of more appetites. Second, he tries a series of maneuvers to get Callicles to concede that there is a difference between what is good for us and our pleasure (494b–499b). One maneuver is to appeal to shameful pleasures, to suggest that some pleasures are intrinsically bad for us (494b–495c). Another is to argue that, because a momentary pleasure can be felt at the same time as a momentary pain, pleasure and pain are not genuine opposites, and that because what is good for us and what is bad for us are genuine opposites, pleasure cannot be what is good for us (494e–497e). Third, Socrates argues that the presence of good things in us should make us better, but pleasure evidently does not make us better, since pleasure occurs in foolish people just as readily as it occurs in intelligent people, though it is better to be intelligent than foolish.

These maneuvers are a mixed bag, but there is something to them. If well-being is identified with pleasure and serves as the ultimate end for the sake of which a person should do everything she does, pleasure needs to be unconditionally good. It needs to fulfill what goodness fulfills without any deficit. But pleasure does not seem able to do that. Some pleasures, in some circumstances, are not good. At least, our shame prevents us from taking them to be good, and our thoughts about what something good for us does for us prevents us from taking them to be good.

Socrates assumes throughout his response to Callicles that the best account of well-being will have to be coherent (cf. 481c–482c). He takes pride in the consistency of philosophy, and derides Callicles for his inconsistencies. So it matters that Callicles' sense of shame does not cohere with his explicit theory of well-being, and it matters that Callicles' understanding of goodness and badness does not match his understanding of how pleasure and pain work in us. Socrates does not think that the evaluation of a theory of well-being can be assessed by a few isolated commitments.

Nor, it seems, does Callicles. At least, after Socrates' maneuvers, Callicles says that he never meant to deny that some pleasures are better than others (499b). But if one pleasure is better than another, not because it is more of a pleasure and not because it gives rise to more pleasure,

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then there must be something good for us that is intelligible apart from pleasure, some non-hedonic standard of goodness by which to adjudicate pleasures as better and worse. Socrates runs with this, and argues that the wise pursuit of the best pleasures will require a craft to pick out the better and the worse (499c–505b).

Despite Socrates' forthright rejection of Callicles' hedonism, many readers think that Plato's dialogues endorse a hedonic conception of well-being. There are three principal grounds for such suspicion.

First, Socrates seems to endorse hedonism toward the end of the *Protagoras*.[9] Readers are struck by the way Socrates introduces hedonism, abruptly and without any hint of dissent (351b–e). They are struck, too, by the way Socrates presents himself and Protagoras together as teachers of the many, drawing out of them a commitment to hedonism (353c–354e). But Socrates must shift abruptly after his first attempt to show that courage is identical to wisdom has failed (349e–351b). Protagoras has insisted that courage requires spiritedness in addition to knowledge, to overcome fear. Socrates needs a fresh start to establish that knowledge is not something that can be overcome by fear. Moreover, Protagoras has already indicated some affinity for hedonism (317c, 320c), and, as I have explained, Socrates associates Protagoreanism with hedonism. When Protagoras balks at endorsing hedonism (351b–e), Socrates offers him the chance to consider what the many would say instead of answering for himself, just as he did earlier when Protagoras balked at admitting that unjust action can be temperate (333c). This gives Socrates the chance to continue to examine Protagoras' own views, without Protagoras having to admit openly to holding those views. The delicacy of his situation is enough to explain the elaborate pretense that Socrates and Protagoras would together elicit hedonism from the many. The articulation of hedonism and the assignment of this view to the many merely enable Socrates to show what is wrong with the assumption that knowledge can be overcome by a passion. This larger purpose does not, as we have seen, require hedonism. We need not suppose that Socrates endorses hedonism in the *Protagoras*; he can use it dialectically, in an ad hominem argument.[10]

Second, in the *Republic*, Socrates offers three "proofs" that it is always better to be just than unjust, and each of these proofs seems to appeal to a broadly hedonic conception of well-being. According to the first (culminating at 577c–580c), the tyrannically constituted soul, ruled by lawless appetitive desires, is least able to do what it wants, and suffers regret about past failures to satisfy desire, neediness about present failures, and fear about future ones, whereas the justly ordered, aristocratically constituted soul, ruled by rational desire, is most able to do what it wants, and suffers least from regret, neediness, and fear. As a result, Socrates and Glaucon agree that the tyrannical soul enjoys the least well-being (*eudaimonia*) and the aristocratic soul the most. This inference seems to identify well-being with good feelings and the absence of bad feelings. The second and third proofs are even clearer. Though they are supposed to establish the same conclusion as the first concerning well-being (*eudaimonia*) (583b), they explicitly show that the just person's aristocratically constituted soul enjoys the most pleasure, more than any unjust person's soul (580c–588a). Because Socrates advances these as proofs of the thesis he plainly endorses, it is natural to suppose that he endorses the broadly hedonist conception of well-being they invoke.[11]

But this cannot be right. Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Republic* agree that well-being (*eudaimonia*) is the ultimate end "which every soul pursues and for the sake of which every soul does everything it does" (505e1–2).[12] But, in the *Republic*, Socrates explicitly rejects pleasure and good feelings as this end. In fact, he appeals to both considerations that he offers against Calliclean hedonism in the *Gorgias*.

First, he insists that pleasure is not unconditionally good, because there are intrinsically bad pleasures (505c; cf. 509a). This makes pleasure a bad fit to be what fully justifies action.

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Socrates underscores this point with reflection on the Protagorean side of the broadly hedonist approach to well-being. What feels or appears good to one is not the same as what is good for one, and the ultimate end is what *is* good for one (505d).[13]

Second, Socrates argues that the pursuit of pleasure and good feelings undermines itself. This emerges as a corollary to his critique of spirited and especially appetitive desire. The critique rests on three observations. First, because good feelings arrive with the satisfaction of desire, they can come cheaply. All three parts of the human soul have their own pleasures (581c), and agents of many different kinds achieve good feelings. Next, if spirited and appetitive desires are indulged and are not held in check by countervailing commitments to what is genuinely good for one, they will grow stronger and more numerous (589a–b with 571b–572b, 416e–417a, 549a–b; cf. 602c–606d). Third, as spirited and appetitive desires grow, they increasingly conflict with each other and in other ways increasingly outstrip our ability to satisfy them, leading to the regret, neediness, and fear that characterize the tyrannical soul. This empirical critique, like the "paradox of hedonism," suggests that there is something self-defeating about pursuing pleasure directly. But because well-being, as the ultimate end, is supposed to *explain* as well as justify action, one must be able to successfully pursue it directly. So the empirical critique impugns hedonist conceptions of well-being.

Socrates' rejection of hedonist theories of well-being in the *Republic* further explains why he also rejects Adeimantus' appeal to a naïve "objective list" approach (466b, with 419a–420a). Many of the goods on the "objective list" are only conditionally valuable, and are the objects of spirited and appetitive desire. So they are problematic as ultimate ends, and, as we will see below, as constituents of the ultimate end.

We might still wonder about *Republic*'s stance on well-being. Why would Socrates invoke broadly hedonist conceptions of well-being that he rejects in order to argue for his thesis that it is always better to be just than unjust? Because he needs to. He cannot show that it is better to be just than unjust on the "objective list" conception of well-being that Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus have assumed. Nor can he simply invoke his own conception of well-being if, as I will suggest below, his opponents are apt to see it as question begging. The broadly hedonist conception of well-being comports with his interlocutors' views nearly enough, and it gives Socrates just enough room to argue for his conclusion. So it serves his dialectical purposes. He might even think that the hedonist conceptions are extensionally adequate representations of well-being—that well-being does in fact correlate perfectly with the presence of good feelings and the absence of bad feelings. What is clear is that he rejects these conceptions as intensionally inadequate: they do not capture the ultimate end of our rational pursuits.[14]

The third principal source for those who would attribute a hedonist conception of well-being to Plato is the *Laws*. When the Athenian argues that someone who suffers no conventional evil but is unjust does not enjoy well-being, he faces special resistance from the fact that such a person seems to live pleasantly (661d–662a). The Athenian concedes that the best life is most pleasant (662a–664c; cf. 732e–734d), and he concedes that people are motivated by pleasure to the extent that they will not be motivated to do anything that does not bring more pleasure than pain (663b). These concessions might suggest hedonism about well-being, but they should not. The Athenian says that what is good for a person and what is pleasant for her are inseparable, but not identical (663a–b; cf. 662a and 734d–e). This comports with Socrates' arguments in the *Republic*: the most just life is best and most pleasant, but well-being is not identical with pleasure.

The Socratic conception

Against Protagoras, Socrates maintains that well-being is a matter of objective fact, discoverable by the wise. Against hedonists, he maintains that well-being must be an unconditional good

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that one can successfully pursue directly. These arguments make trouble for many of the goods on the naïve list of what causes our lives to go well. But they make no trouble for wisdom and, especially, if we recall the *Euthydemus*' insistence on use or activity, wise activity. And in fact Socrates frequently insists that well-being—doing well, being successful—is identical to virtuous activity (*Charm*. 171e–172a, *Cr*. 48b, *Euthd*. 278e–282d, *Gorg*. 507c, *Rep*. 353e–354a), and since he also frequently insists that virtue is or at least requires wisdom,[15] he can also be taken to say that well-being is virtuous activity.

Although Socrates suggests this view in Book One of the *Republic* (353e–354a), he cannot *assume* it in the rest of the dialogue, since Glaucon and Adeimantus issue a challenge that rests on a competing conception of well-being. This helps to explain why Socrates' arguments in the *Republic* appeal, as we have seen, to a conception of well-being that he rejects and why so few readers of Plato attribute to him this clear, Socratic conception of well-being as virtuous activity.[16]

But there are also other reasons why readers miss this. First, the Socratic view seems to fit poorly with Socrates' broader understanding of value. At least apart from the *Euthydemus*, he identifies things other than wisdom as good for us, and he even insists that some such things are non-instrumentally good for us (e.g., *Rep*. 357b–358a). But Socrates can consider something to be non-instrumentally good—good regardless of what follows from it—without thinking that it is unconditionally good—good in all circumstances. A pleasantly amusing activity might be finally valuable, but not unconditionally so, because it would not be good when, say, virtue required helping someone.[17] The recognition of final goods other than virtuous activity does not entail the recognition of unconditional goods other than wise virtuous activity, and as the ultimate goal to explain and justify action, well-being must be an unconditional good.

Nevertheless, even if Socrates does not *have* to identify final goods as constituents of well-being and parts of the ultimate end, he still might do so. Even if goods other than virtue and virtuous activity are only conditionally valuable, still they might be conditionally valuable parts of an unconditionally valuable whole, and Socrates might be thought to develop this possibility in the *Philebus*.[18] But the *Philebus* addresses three questions that are not easily kept distinct: (1) What is the successful life like? (2) What things are good for a human being, by causally promoting a successful life? and (3) What is the good for a human being, the ultimate goal of action, which is the success of a successful life? Socrates plainly suggests that a successful life is a mixed life, including various pleasures and knowledge (60c–61a, cf. 22a–23a), and he plainly thinks that some pleasures and knowledge are good for a human being. But does he conclude that these various goods constitute a single unconditional good that is the success of a successful life? It seems, rather, that he means to isolate the best part of a mixed life, and to assign a special role to it (64c–d). He says that what makes a mixture of goods a successful life is what puts this mixture into a kind of unity, manifesting beauty, measure, and truth (64d–65a). This seems to locate the success of a successful life not in the various goods mixed into it, but in the wise way in which they are mixed. If this is what Socrates means, then he is not taking back his thought that the unconditional good, the ultimate goal of action, is virtuous or wise activity.

Charity might generate a third reason to doubt that Plato fully endorses a Socratic conception of well-being as virtuous activity. After all, this conception is indeterminate to the point of being uninformative. For what is virtuous activity? It certainly will not do to say that it is the sort of activity that is done for the sake of being virtuous activity. But Plato's dialogues offer two ways of identifying virtuous activity. The first is psychology. Virtue is the disposition that makes its possessor do what it essentially does well (*Rep*. 352d–354d). To give an account of the virtues of the soul, then, one must first give an account of how the soul works. An account of healthy and unhealthy psychological functioning will identify the virtues as the dispositions of healthy functioning.[19]

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The second way of identifying virtue is wisdom. For Plato, virtue is or requires wisdom, and wisdom is or requires a coherent grasp of how things are. So virtue is determined not merely from the "scientific" point of view, working out an explanatory account of how, say, anger works, or love, or lust, but also from the agent's point of view, working out how these feelings, and the values they implicate, do and do not hang together with each other and with all our other attitudes. Only if we can survive Socratic examination can we begin to think that we might be wise and virtuous, and this constrains what wise and virtuous activity could be.

Of course, these methods are hard, and reasonable people can disagree about where they lead. The many followers of Socrates and Plato who embraced the Socratic conception of well-being as virtuous activity disagreed sharply about what virtuous activity is. Some, including Cynics and Stoics, took a more ascetic, but also more democratic and psychologized, view: they think that virtuous activity is available to anyone, just by the achievement of psychological coherence, and not requiring good fortune in one's external circumstances. Others, such as Aristotle, believe that virtuous activity, as the best realization of the best condition a human being can be in, is what a powerful, beautiful, wealthy, and in other ways fortunate member of a ruling elite does. On this view, humans naturally desire certain aristocratic ends, and virtuous activity is hampered, even if only slightly, by the frustration of these desires. Psychological coherence itself requires some good fortune. These debates between Peripatetics and Stoics play out possibilities left open by Plato's dialogues, as Greek philosophers tried to determine what well-being is by determining what virtuous activity is.[20]

Related topics

Aristotle, hedonistic theories of well-being in antiquity, objective list theories, perfectionism, subjectivism, hedonism.

Further reading

Plato, especially the *Euthydemus, Protagoras, Gorgias, Republic,* and *Philebus*. For alternatives to the interpretations mooted here, start with Irwin (1995) and Annas (1999).

Notes

1 On such views, see Fletcher (Chapter 12, this volume).
2 Cf. Dimas (2002); McCabe (2002).
3 Cf. Jones (2013).
4 Waterlow (1977: 33–34); Lee (2005: 44–47).
5 For the first of these, see especially Burnyeat (1976). For the second, see Cooper (1970).
6 Chappell (2004: 132).
7 Vlastos (1956) is an exception.
8 Farrar (1989) and Shaw (2015).
9 Taylor (1991) and Irwin (1995).
10 Zeyl (1980) and Shaw (2015).
11 Butler (1999).
12 Notice the terms of the challenge put to Socrates and of his answer: 347e with 352d, 358a, 361c–d, 365c–d, 545a–b, 580b–c.
13 See Kamtekar (2006).
14 Cf. *Eu.* 11a–b with Evans (2012).
15 For the identity claim, the "unity of virtues" thesis, see Penner (1973).
16 Compare, for instance, the characterizations of Socrates' conception(s) of well-being in the *Republic* by Annas (1981: 314–334) and Reeve (1988: 153–159).

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17 Cf. Korsgaard (1983).
18 Cooper (1977).
19 Cf. Bradford on perfectionism (Chapter 10, this volume).
20 This chapter condenses interpretations I develop at greater length elsewhere, and I thank those who have helped with those forthcoming essays, including especially Emily Austin, Scott Berman, Erik Curiel, Matt Evans, Verity Harte, Rusty Jones, Rachana Kamtekar, Richard Kraut, Casey Perin, David Reeve, Clerk Shaw, Rachel Singpurwalla, Iakovos Vasiliou, Matt Walker, and Eric Wiland.

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