

**Neera K. Badhwar.** *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life*. Oxford University Press 2014. 264 pp. \$69.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780195323276).

M. Scott Peck, in his classic *The Road Less Travelled* (1978), defined mental health as ‘an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs’ (Peck 50). One of the strengths of Neera Badhwar’s *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life*, is the convincing extent to which she defends the thesis that ‘reality-orientation’ is a fundamental condition of objective moral worth and, thereby, of well-being. In our present world, which places so much emphasis on the individual subject’s power to carve her own happiness in whatever way she sees fit, ‘to do what you feel like,’ the Aristotelian reality-check argued in this volume is a welcome censure to a zeitgeist of unbridled subjectivism.

Badhwar states her thesis explicitly: ‘My main aim in this book is to vindicate the idea that when well-being is understood as the individual’s highest prudential good (HPG), it entails not only a sense of fulfillment but also objective worth, and that objective worth entails, at its best, a life of the central moral virtues ...’ (4). Throughout her argument, Badhwar consciously avoids two extremes: one that simply identifies well-being with virtue, regardless and at the expense of one’s happiness or joy, and another that lowers the standard of virtue so that it never comes into conflict with what we might think happiness should look like. Badhwar’s goal is to show that morality is necessary for well-being, while using ‘conceptions of mortality and of well-being that are descriptively and normatively adequate’ (16).

Having defined her terms in the introduction, Badhwar delves into more detail about what she understands as the Highest Prudential Good (as in the text, henceforth abbreviated as HPG) in chapter 2. She argues that her Neo-Aristotelian interpretation ‘satisfies both the descriptive and the normative requirements of an adequate conception of well-being’ (29). Badhwar highlights three features of Aristotle’s understanding, each of which entails the others: the HPG is the most final goal of human beings, the most self-sufficient, and the most choice-worthy. Against some of the subjectivist positions described in the book, realism, Badhwar argues, is also conditionally constitutive of well-being, since one cannot attain the HPG if one is deluded about the objective worth of one’s life or about the nature of humanity in general. Objective worth requires that one be reality-oriented, autonomous, and possess a degree of self-knowledge and be informed about general facts concerning oneself and the world. Without these, one cannot have objective worth, and without objective worth, one fails to attain the HPG. The happy pig is not to be envied here.

In the third chapter, the Badhwar discusses what she identifies as the main subjectivist conceptions of well-being: ‘hedonism, desire-satisfaction, authentic life-satisfaction, individual nature-fulfillment, and value-based life-satisfaction’ (24). All of these, to her mind, are both descriptively and normatively inadequate to an everyday conception of well-being, and in the attempt to correct these deficiencies, she argues, their defenders adopt positions that are at odds with the positions generally. Further, they also tend to smuggle in features of positions like Badhwar’s towards which they are explicitly hostile. Badhwar revives and defends here an important, and often forgotten claim regarding happiness: for Aristotle and the Medievals generally, happiness is not simply some subjective feeling, but rather, it is a feeling tied to an objective condition.

In chapter 5, Badhwar addresses certain scientific studies that argue against reality-orientation as a requirement for happiness, and it is here that her philosophical approach to empirical scientific evidence really shines. This section of the book focuses almost entirely on two articles by

Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown that argue that the empirical evidence in social and cognitive psychology shows that for ‘most people who harbour certain mild positive illusions about themselves...these illusions are not only not opposed to mental health and happiness, they tend to promote them’ (124). They pose, therefore, a potentially serious blow, grounded in empirical science, against Badhwar’s defence of reality-orientation as requisite for happiness. While the rest of the chapter focuses on this study in particular and its problems to the point of feeling a little imbalanced, she teaches an important lesson by demonstrating how one needs to be careful with one’s philosophical distinctions when drawing conclusions in empirical science. Badhwar completely dismantles the claims, not by an appeal to other, opposed, empirical research, but rather, through an in-depth philosophical analysis of the research, its terms, method, and conclusions. The philosopher reveals the importance of clear distinctions, the need for sophistication concerning one’s terms, the awareness of the kinds of causality at play, and the transition from evidence to conclusions. For example, the connection between the illusions of happiness and the reports of happiness might be conceptual rather than causal: ‘In other words, people who are deluded about their abilities, achievements, degree of control, and future prospects *must* be deluded about their happiness. Taylor and Brown fail to see this because they fail to see that happiness is not merely a sense of contentment’ (132). Throughout the argument, Badhwar lays bare the ramifications of not being armed with a robust and reflective philosophical analysis of terms when conducting psychological experimentation and drawing conclusions from them, providing both a warning to those who tread carelessly on philosophical territory and a reminder that philosophers loosely wax scientific at their own peril.

Chapter 6 discusses Aristotelian virtue and its elements and requirements, and then proceeds to address various counter-arguments, particularly those of Christine Swanton (2003). Swanton provides three examples of virtuous, yet unhappy characters, to argue that virtue and virtuous activity alone can be the cause of ill-being. Badhwar’s counter-examples are all very helpful and solid, but here the arguments (or really just counter-examples) hinge either on tweaking Swanton’s own hypothetical examples, or on providing just another hypothetical. For example, maybe Swanton’s self-sacrificing jungle aid-worker is miserable because she ‘has either sadly neglected to find out what is suited to her nature or failed to act on her self-knowledge’ (155); and how could the prescient environmentalist who, unable to convince anyone of a coming disaster, dies from a heart attack brought on by the stress, have reached his scientific conclusion ‘without the cooperation and agreement of other scientists’ (155)? In any case, Badhwar concludes, he ‘should have been a stronger person’ (155). Sure, she is addressing someone who is already playing the hypothetical, thought-experiment game, but we are not always presented with arguments on principle in this mode of debate. While the tweaking and counter-examples certainly are cause for pause here before hastily agreeing with Swanton, they sometimes fall flat.

While Aristotelian ethics is in one sense all about practical action here and now, and thus concrete examples might thereby be necessary for illustrating an Aristotelian ethics, to debate universal principles focusing on the concrete realm comes with its problems. Any situation has infinitely more particularities than one could possibly imagine—but to what end? As Aristotle points out, one cannot legislate in the particular; fixity in ethics is difficult to pin down to begin with, ‘the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion’ (*NE* 2.2, 1104a). The hypothetical examples and thought experiments twisted this way and that tend to get tedious, as one can always respond with another tweak to illustrate the counter-point. ‘The lonely genius,’ (58) ‘the manic-depressive artist,’ (154) and ‘Angela,’ the brilliant diplomat who longs to

retire (207 ff.), can always be moulded further with new particularities to suit a position contrary to the original. Granted, this is commonplace in certain kinds of philosophizing, but in comparison with other of Badhwar's strong arguments, which use examples to illustrate principles, the counter-example retorts often fail to convince.

In summary, Badhwar provides a very strong case for her neo-Aristotelian thesis that *eudaimonia* consists of happiness in a virtuous life. She addresses recent literature both in support of and in opposition to her claims, but while Badhwar provides summaries of the counter-positions to help the reader along, some of the detailed focus on certain of these objections can bog down those not in the know, who might thereby find themselves getting lost in the details and losing the forest at times. The sharp focus on the particular arguments and particular works of certain particular figures sometimes feels a little unbalanced for the uninitiated reader, but Badhwar covers all of her bases. The thesis is all the more strengthened by her addressing the counter-arguments and rival positions at every turn—and she is well-aware from where all the attacks are coming: the reader feels that she must have eyes on the back of her head. When the assailants are not disarmed by her counters, they are at least held at bay for the reader to make her own decision.

In addition to her incorporation of the philosophical literature, Badhwar shows how her thesis is complementary with ongoing research into experimental psychology. Her informed and nuanced treatment of the empirical evidence throughout the text is not simply philosophy playing 'catch-up' with science, or related to it in any superficial way. Rather, a great strength of the work is its ability to show how philosophy and empirical psychology can inform and support (and deeply criticize) one another.

In the end, the view defended is a common-sense, down-to-earth position (as Aristotle's philosophy, for all its distinctions and difficulties fundamentally is) to the point of often sounding trite. But that's only because most things that are trite seem so because they are also true.

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