

I am Anna Alexandrova, philosopher of science working on well-being and economics, and author of ‘A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being’. AMA!

annaalexandrova¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

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Abstract

I am Anna Alexandrova, currently a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Science at University of Cambridge and a Fellow of King’s College. Born and bred in Russia (a city of Krasnodar in the northern Caucasus) I came of age with the collapse of USSR, a time of hope and excitement but also fear, confusion, and anxiety. The teenage uncertainty of not knowing what it means to be kind, cool, feminine, coincided with genuine social and cultural upheavals – none of the adults around me had answers to these questions either. I spent the 1990s testing different ways to be in different places but the pull of intellectual life was always there even though it was not valued in my environment. I finally tasted that world at the London School of Economics where I did a master’s in Philosophy of Social Science. Although I had no idea what this field was initially, I fell for it almost immediately – the idea of asking whether there could be a genuine science of people and their communities fitted right into the very questions that made the 1990s so painful and so fascinating for me. I learned a lot from the course but the best part was meeting (my now husband) Robert Northcott. Among other good things together we concocted a fateful application for funding at the Open Society Institute and this is what enabled me to start PhD program in Philosophy and Science Studies at the University of California San Diego. At UCSD I got the thorough and deep education that I longed for and from some wonderful teachers. Perhaps the most influential among them was Nancy Cartwright who encouraged me to stick to my guns (the guns being philosophy of social science) even as I felt professional pressure to do ‘core’ philosophy. Nancy taught me to immerse myself into a science so deeply as to be able to see philosophical problems from the inside. I remember spending a lot of time in the departments of economics and political science and overhearing condescending jokes about sociologists. This was a crucial moment that gave me a better understanding of why rational choice models were so important to economists and political scientists. They justified their feelings of superiority. My dissertation argued that although game theorists got the credit for successes in mechanism design, it was in fact the experimental economists that deserve this credit at least equally. Out of a case study on design of spectrum auctions arose a general philosophical account of the nature and role of formal models in empirical research. I believe that for too long philosophers of science have gone out of their way to show that despite their very many weaknesses idealized deductive models are nevertheless very powerful in such and such ways. It’s high time to recognise that these models play only a limited heuristic role when it comes to real epistemic goods such as explanation and stop spending our smarts on trying to justify practices that scientists often hold on to largely for reasons of power and so that they could poke fun of sociologists who don’t build models. Towards the end of my dissertation time Nancy pointed me toward a fascinating debate about measurement of happiness and well-being. Although after graduating from UCSD I was mostly publishing on economic models, the former quickly took over as my main research interest. My first teaching job was in University of Missouri St Louis, where I had generous and brilliant colleagues all around the city and where I learned most of what I know about the science of well-being. Dan Haybron of SLU, whose work on happiness I admire the most, was a big influence. I brought my philosophy of science temperament to this topic and in my recent book A Philosophy for the Science of Well-being (which I wrote after moving to Cambridge England in 2011) is not about what well-being or happiness really are, but rather about what sort of scientific knowledge it is possible to have about them. This book has both optimistic and pessimistic streaks. It is optimistic against the critics for whom well-being is too personal, too mysterious, and too complex

to be an object of science. Such arguments are common throughout history of science and should be treated with suspicion. But equally – and that’s the pessimistic bit – when well-being becomes an object of science it is redefined and this redefinition makes scientific claims about it far less applicable to individual deliberation about how to live than positive psychologists would have us believe. Some of my work: My book *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*. Thanks to OUP can purchase it 30% off from their site with promocode AAFLYG6. Series of posts on the science of well-being at Brains Blog “Does anyone know what mental health is?” OUP Blog “The Meaning of It All (with Anna Alexandrova)” Black Goat podcast Quick review note of *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-being* “Who is the expert on your well-being?” OUP Blog “Towards a Theory of Child Well-being: Podcast Interview with Anna Alexandrova” “Value-Added Science: Anna Alexandrova on value judgments and measurement of well-being”

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ANNAALEXANDROVA [R/SCIENCE](#)

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My dissertation argued that although game theorists got the credit for successes in mechanism design, it was in fact the experimental economists that deserve this credit at least equally. Out of a [case study](#) on design of spectrum auctions arose a general philosophical [account](#) of the nature and role of formal models in empirical research. I believe that for too long philosophers of science have gone out of their way to show that despite their very many weaknesses idealized deductive models are nevertheless very powerful in such and such ways. It's high time to recognise that these models play only a [limited heuristic role](#) when it comes to real epistemic goods such as explanation and stop spending our smarts on trying to justify practices that scientists often hold on to largely for reasons of power and so that they could poke fun of sociologists who don't build models.

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bit – when well-being becomes an object of science it is redefined and this redefinition makes scientific claims about it far less applicable to individual deliberation about how to live than positive psychologists would have us believe

Some of my work:

My book [A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being](#) Thanks to OUP can purchase it 30% off from their site with promocode **AAFYLG6**.

[Series of posts on the science of well-being at Brains Blog](#)

["Does anyone know what mental health is?" OUP Blog](#)

["The Meaning of It All \(with Anna Alexandrova\)" Black Goat podcast](#)

[Quick review note of A Philosophy for the Science of Well-being](#)

["Who is the expert on your well-being?" OUP Blog](#)

["Towards a Theory of Child Well-being: Podcast Interview with Anna Alexandrova"](#)

["Value-Added Science: Anna Alexandrova on value judgments and measurement of well-being"](#)

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Dear Dr Alexandrova

Thank you for taking the time to do an AMA here. You mention that you have a worry about how there is a subtle but important change of subject when we get to the scientific study of well-being, since in order to get an operational definition of the subject-matter, we often move away from more intuitive, everyday conceptions of well-being. With this in mind, what do you think are the prospects of a systematic study of vernacular reasoning about well-being? So, not trying to find a technical analogue of what people refer to when they talk about well-being, but looking at the kind of things people say and cite as reasons which concern well-being in all its disparate and messy strands. There is something like this kind of systematic study of vernacular reasoning in terms of virtues and vices, so it seems that a similar study of vernacular reasoning around well-being should be possible as well.

[irontide](#)

This is wonderful, thank you. Can you give me a reference to such studies?

Yes indeed this would be very valuable to study and I can imagine it has to be studied with qualitative methods. Here's an exciting new handbook on well-being research: <http://nobascholar.com/books/1>

I am excited to see that it has quite a few chapters trying to do something like that.

As a philosopher of science, 1. What do you make of the general demise of logical positivism? 2. And what do you make of the general lack of communication between social sciences (like psychology) and the so-called "hard sciences" (like physics)?

[Mysterium-fidei](#)

On the first question, like many other philosophers I find logical positivism irresistibly charismatic. The ambition, the verve, the stylishness, the idealism to resist bullshit in the world... What's not to like?

So I love teaching it and love making students think about what was so admirable about the attempt and what is so instructive about its failures. I also like juxtaposing in my lectures the sort of environment that inspired the Vienna Circle and the sort of challenges that science faces today in the age of Brexit, Trump, and other painful irrationalities...

Hi Dr Alexandrova - thanks for joining us! Very excited to have you here.

I'd like to ask a question about your work and how it relates to traditional ethical debates in normative

ethics and metaethics. It seems clear to me that whatever position one takes in the philosophy of science with regards to the science of well-being that will have some import on debates elsewhere in philosophy. Do you ever think about those debates and dabble in a bit of ethics? Do ethicists ever come to you and ask for help making their theories scientifically or naturalistically respectable?

I'm a big fan of philosophers being empirically minded, and it seems that ethics is a prime spot for some really good empirically-informed work to be done. But everyone - especially philosophers! - is slow to change, and I'm wondering if you've thought about how people like you can change the future of academic philosophy.

Thanks again for stopping by!

[A Definite Description](#)

Thank you, a great set of questions. I do see myself as contributing to ethics by contributing to the philosophy of the science of well-being. In a couple of different ways:

- if it is the case that the general all-things-considered concept of well-being is not the relevant concept in many contexts in science and policy, then it would imply that ethicists should attend to the more contextual notions and build what I call mid-level theories, such as the one I propose for children.
- if it is the case that well-being as it enters science must be a measurable property, then it'd be nice if ethicists articulated what gets lost and what gets acquired when well-being becomes a quantity.
- when well-being becomes an object of science and policy, all sorts of big ethical issues arise: surveillance, governmentality, personalisation of social problems. Does this mean well-being should be rejected as a relevant category in political theory?

I tried answering or even just raising some of these questions and it seems to me they are all perfectly ethicy.

In the announcement thread [/u/answerbrah](#) asked:

What is wrong with evaluating general indicators of health and value aptness as an objective means of gauging well-being. Or more precisely, what aspect of well-being is most difficult to evaluate that requires some new paradigm in order to observe.

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Well the first problem is that there is more to well-being than health, and the value that good health contributes to well-being depends on context (Dan Hausman argues that in his most recent book *Valuing Health*, I recommend it highly).

You might generalise this point to everything: many goods are relevant to well-being (health, relationships, fulfillment of talents), but the precise contribution they make to overall well-being varies depending on our history and identity. (Let me plug in the good work of Guy Fletcher of Edinburgh here, see his papers on what he calls 'variabilism'). If so the problem is not that there is a special aspect of well-being that's hard to measure - though that may also be true (I'll get back to this shortly) - but rather the problem is figuring out how to combine all these goods in a way that respects the individuality of each. Do you see what I mean?

In the announcement thread [/u/bitcoins](#) asked:

What are simple things you do to live a more fulfilled and/or happy life?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thank you for asking. But I am not a sage or a guru and don't see myself as having the authority to offer people advice on well-being or happiness. And frankly I urge people to be suspicious of positive psychology with its generic and rather insultingly vague advice ('five pathways to happiness', and so on...). But I do believe that there is genuine knowledge about how to live well and for individuals it's knowledge that's obtained both by cultivating one's own good sense and by taking advice from people who know you best.

As for myself I am getting by thanks to a loving family, good food, comforts of living in a relatively well-run country, respectful colleagues, and friends willing to listen to my problems. That and calling out bullshit whenever I come across it. But that's not much of an advice is it? :-)

In the announcement thread [/u/drrocket8775](#) asked:

Hi Dr. Alexandrova!

I'm in a class about well-being right now, and the syllabus is still pretty open. Honestly, I'm not that attracted to issues of measuring well-being, and what scientific knowledge we can have about well-being (and the class feels roughly the same way), but I can totally see it's importance. What pitch would you give to my class to convince us that we should do at least one reading of issues like the kind you work on? (It'd probably be your stuff anyway).

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Cool, thanks! It's perfectly possible to have a good class on well-being just reading various classic philosophy sources. There is no shortage! But it would be a shame if you missed out completely on contemporary writings and those will often be informed by alleged scientific findings about well-being. Positive psychology very much sees itself as a science and appeals to authority of measurement to justify its various exercises and interventions. And here's my advice: as soon as you hear anyone justifying something with 'science shows', look closely to the science they cite and don't take it at face value. Depending on how a given study measures well-being or happiness, its results will be more or less applicable to the problem at hand. For example, check out this important paper that shows the different correlates of different measures of well-being: "High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being" Daniel Kahneman, Angus Deaton Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Sep 2010, 107 (38) 16489-16493; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1011492107 . This really shows how important philosophy of well-being is for social science and policy. Hope it's a fun class!

In the announcement thread [/u/nemporisso](#) asked:

Dear Dr Alexandrova,

I'm reading through your value-added science piece. Really enjoyed seeing how you built on Anderson's ideas! (For anyone that might be curious, [here's a link to the paper that's mentioned](#) it's a bit long but really good, ctrl+f to 'trauma' for the most pertinent section)

How else does feminist epistemology inform your work/viewpoints in general, if at all?

Regarding the third rule (deliberative test of scientific claims) could you give more detail about exactly what or who this would involve, and what it would take for a claim to 'pass this test' as it were, and similarly what it would take for it to fail?

Thanks so much

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thank you for pushing me to clarify the deliberative test! It's a tricky one but I am far from alone in using it, so it's worth attending to. It is now commonplace in environmental and medical research to advocate and practice public participation in science. There are different ways to do that and they are well described by Heather Douglas in her article "Inserting Public into Science". For the cases that I know the deliberative test takes the form of consultation. For example, medical researchers who develop various well-being measures for people living with a particular disease or disability would normally build these measures by running versions of it past the focus groups of relevant patients, basically asking them "Does this represent what life is like for you?". Of course it's possible for researchers to still end up settling on a poor measure (for example, because the focus group was unrepresentative, or the patient voices were ignored, etc). So it's really hard to specify exactly what counts as a successful deliberative test. Do we want to say that just a bona fide attempt is enough? Or specify a success criterion? I don't have a well worked out view beyond just the general idea that value judgments have to gain legitimacy by being defended in a well functioning public sphere. This will strike some as not enough, but I am not sure what the alternative is... I don't believe in philosopher-kings after all. What would it take to fail? Well if a substantial portion of the people whose well-being you are trying to measure reject the value judgments made in this measure I'd say you failed. Does that answer your question?

In the announcement thread [/u/Can_i_be_certain](#) asked:

What do you think about the view that human beings are a mixing desk of the the same drives (albeit stonger or weaker) and well being can be tied to the view that entails how much these drives (behaviours/scripts) are allowed to be played out? EG the artist with a warehouse of paints and time to do whatever has much more wellbeing than the soccer player whom only has 2 hours perweek to play the artist might find the idea of football a breif novelty likewise with the footballer because thier drives are comparitevely low on those things. The motiation behind these scripts is to bring about positive emotions to reinforce these drives(reinforcement learning) Doesnt this just strike you as very similar to Maslows Hieirachy?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Cool analogy, I haven't heard it before. But how does Maslow's Hierarchy help with your example of two people with vastly different needs? It's the same hierarchy for all, isn't it?

Can you (or have you elsewhere) comment(ed) on nonhuman animal welfare as a science/discipline?

[goiken](#)

No, but I'd love to and it's tremendously important, thank you for asking. Jonathan Birch of LSE has done really exciting work along these lines recently:

<http://animalstudiesrepository.org/animsent/vol2/iss16/1/>

I have only skimmed a little of your work, but I am interested in the notion you develop with your child well-being example - i.e. that we need more "mid-level" theories of well-being that are more closely adapted to sub-populations of interest. Certainly, to the extent that we think of scientists of well-being as offering evidence to individuals as to how to "maximize" their own well-beings, the more of this the better.

But at the highest (social) level, where policy-makers must make trade-offs between different groups (how much to allocate to schools vs health, how much to tax the rich vs. the poor), we still seem to be in need of a common language of values - one that I sense we still lack, given the poverty of public

debate over these issues. We especially lack a language for talking meaningfully about the well-being of future generations.

Social scientists certainly play a role here, thinking about (say) social discount rates, or optimal tax rates, but despite how enormously these numbers matter, I see little engagement with the fundamental measurement issues: political posturing about the future costs of current debt or environmental degradation (e.g.) is not the same thing as debating how much current consumption we are willing to forego for our children or grandchildren's sake.

I'm not sure there is a question here - but I guess it's something like: "How should the public engage one another and with technocrats over fundamental questions of well-being and trade-offs at the highest levels?"

[kommandarskye](#)

Your reflections are spot on, thank you. You are completely right that if a community decides that well-being is important they need to settle on a set of common values that make up well-being. And this is very hard indeed because such fundamental conflicts and disagreements come up. One recent example of how these disagreements can be navigated is from the UK's Office of National Statistics. When the Cameron government tasked them with measuring 'national well-being' they conducted many public and expert consultations on what should be included in this measure. In the end they just included everything (life satisfaction, happiness, freedom from mental illness, and every conceivable objective indicator). I find this an instructive and fascinating case... (I discuss it a bit in my chapter 4)

Here's the official information:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing#methodology>

Dr Alexandrova, You wrote "when well-being becomes an object of science it is redefined", and that this makes it less relevant to "individual deliberation about how to live". I am curious about how you think the science redefines well-being. Also, what is to stop the scientists from *not* redefining well-being: that is, is it *necessary* that the science redefine the target? And if they didn't redefine it, would they be doing better science?

[cortical_iv](#)

Thank you, a great set of questions. Redefinition happens when well-being is reduced to subjective well-being, then to just life satisfaction, then to just answers to a brief questionnaire. In a way this is inevitable, there is no perfect method of gauging well-being that's both practical for scientific use and true to the concept. So yes, I guess I see redefinition as inherent in the very project and unavoidable... But it's possible to get it better or worse and the real issue is what practical measures do the least damage. Life satisfaction measures do quite a bit of it (see Haybron's critique). I hope this begins to answer your excellent questions...

Dr. Alexandrova, thanks for taking the time for some public dissemination and outreach!

My question is how do you think we (individually) know what is good in our lives? What is worth pursuing?

A number of different frameworks come to mind. One might try to conceptualize life based on Bishop's Network Theory of Wellbeing and consider all of the various theoretical underpinnings of personal striving and values, which interact and constitute our appraisal of being well. These strivings may be concrete goods; an objective list theory that if one successfully attains certain good he/she will consider life to be going well. One may also try to understand life as a sort of narrative arc in which he/she will

try to hit certain culturally defined Eriksonian benchmarks. In another approach, one might see life as a balancing act of drives; be it through a lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, balancing "working and loving," or PERMA.

I'm a big fan of longitudinal studies. A criticism of these studies is that they are often studying a specific group with their own norms and practices. That what it might constitute to be well in one framework might not apply to another. However, even though much of the findings of something like the Harvard Grand Study may be culturally bound, it also adds to the humanity of who these people really "are."

How do you think individuals in society give context to their folksy sense of what it means to be well? Does your framework, as an academic differ? What role does a sense of identity and personal character play in the understanding of well-being?

[ericxfresh](#)

These are beautiful questions, thank you. I don't think my work answers them but they are great nevertheless. I really admire Bishop's network theory, but I don't know how much action guidance it gives to me as a person, other than 'maintain all nodes in your network'.

To be honest for sheer action guidance I'd go not to a theorist or a scientist of well-being but rather to a wise friend or a mentor who knows me best. When it comes to individual cases knowing the person is more important than knowing the best and the latest of theories of well-being. Do you see what I mean?

In the announcement thread [/u/IWBN](#) asked:

What do you think about Sam Harris's hypotheses that we can ground morality on the principle of maximising human well-being? Critics argue that well-being is so vague and subjective concept that basing morality on this notion is risky and susceptible to mistakes. Do you think we are able to talk objectively about human well-being? As Harris rhetorically asks, "how do we convince (objectively) a person with terminal smallpox that he is not as healthy as we are?". And how can we be sure that we grasp the objective measures of what counts as human well-being?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

I have not kept up with Sam Harris I am afraid, but I'll try to answer the best I can from what you've said. I am very skeptical that all human values ultimately reduce to well-being unless we make well-being an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink category that encompasses truth, beauty, authenticity, justice, etc. But each of these has a specific importance in a given practical context (I can't think of these things without relativising them to context), so we likely need to preserve them as distinct. As for well-being by itself, as you say, it can sound really vague and hard to define, but no more so than other big topics. Traditionally philosophers define well-being as that which is good for the agent all things considered independently of morality, beauty and other values, the benefit, the good-for. Then they build a theory of those goods that realise this concept. I found that in most practical contexts well-being is best defined contextually, rather than in the all things considered sense. Once you specify whose well-being is in question and for what purposes it becomes a more tractable notion. For example, parents and caregivers can be pretty good at judging well-being of the children they look after, teachers of their students, doctors of their patients, etc. Hope I got what you had in mind...

In the announcement thread [/u/fail-whale](#) asked:

You say that the criticism that well-being is "too complex to be an object of science" should be treated

with suspicion. Why is that? Suspicion is certainly my first impression when I hear about a new science of <insert profound human experience here>. If anything, it seems like the pessimistic part of your account just supports that suspicion.

I have a second question that's more personal, and I'm sorry if you get asked this question a lot. What has your experience been as a woman in philosophy and a mother in a high-powered academic career? Do you have any advice for female grad students/juniors?

Thank you so much!

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thanks for pushing me on that. Is memory a 'profound human experience'? Is learning? Is using language? Each of these are undeniably objects of knowledge in psychology and cognitive sciences. Scientific research may not capture all that there is about memory, learning, and using language but that's generally true even about physical phenomena. Science always redefines its objects to make them more amenable to the methods it has, and well-being is no different. Well-being encompasses so many human capacities for judgment, feeling, choice, behaviour. Surely there are things science can say about some of these capacities.

I appreciate your second question too, and will try to be brief though it's hard. I came to academia from a brutal environment where sexism, harassment and assault were regular and normal (I was a conventionally pretty young woman in the 1990s in Russia and Cyprus, need I say more?). Academia was a huge contrast, men actually listened to me and for the most part kept their hands off me. Partly because of this contrast and partly from sheer luck, I felt safe and strong during my graduate studies. The downside is that it took me a while to start noticing the more subtle and hidden costs of being a woman in philosophy. My radar took some tuning if you know what I mean, and indeed it still needs tuning. So I am grateful to the colleagues who are outspoken and explicit about these costs and I work hard to educate myself in this regard. I had two babies while on tenure track and though it was hard for the most part it was doable (I do have my parents to thank for being devoted and available grandparents to my sons, without them I wouldn't have this book).

As for advice, not really, there is no advice that's both informative and applicable to all women in the profession... But I do go out of my way to help and advise vulnerable junior philosophers who come my way. I was lucky to be taken good care of by my teachers and try to return the favour. So maybe ask me privately?

What was life like living in such a dangerous part of Russia? How did the USSR's collapse affect your day to day life?

[therealBoomboy](#)

It was not really dangerous. I am from the safer bits of northern Caucasus, which is comfortable, plentiful, and gave me a wonderful childhood. When the USSR collapsed it was mostly exciting rather than scary because my family embraced it. At school I got to play the self-righteous teenager who tormented the teachers with claims of indignation about their outdated Soviet textbooks... You can imagine how satisfying this is when you are a smart ass twelve year old and how hard this was on my poor teachers.

Thank you for doing this IAMA. Your 2007 paper on models as open formulae opened my eyes quite a bit. I wanted to ask whether you think it's possible to some day have a "general account" of (economic) models or whether we will be left documenting different uses of models in different contexts?

[as-well](#)

Thank you for reading my earlier work! You see, I think that the open formulae account of formal models is rather good and perfectly general. I picked the case of mechanism design because i thought it illustrates quite well what models can and cannot do, but I am quite happy to defend it for other contexts (for example, historical explanation, that's in my paper on analytic narratives). Is there a reason why this wouldn't work in your view?

I took a class with your husband at UMSL. He was fantastic. That is all, for now. Thanks for the AMA.

[rojowro86](#)

Greetings! I agree he is fantastic. Thank you for saying this :=)

Do you think basic universal income schemes can contribute to personal well-being? Should there be controls on how the allowance is spent so recipients don't use it for alcohol, drugs, tobacco, gambling, etc. ?

[cerwic](#)

These are truly fascinating and complex questions and I don't think anyone has answers to them. It'll be great to see some good careful studies on the Finnish experiment. Do you know of any? I would be skeptical of any a priori predictions about the effect of UBI on well-being, but of course UBI might be important for reasons of justice which are distinct from well-being.

Здравствуйте, Анна!

Спасибо вам за ваши замечательные материалы, думаю стоит обязательно ознакомиться с ними поближе, так как тема позитивной философии сама по себе очень интересная и актуальная.

Не могли бы вы, пожалуйста, рассказать вкратце о ваших взглядах на происхождение самого понятия well-being в пределах теории моральности и как сильно вы связываете его с термином ill-being, если связываете вообще? Спасибо!

[Danat_shepard](#)

Привествую! Спасибо вам за хорошие слова. I'll reply in English because embarrassingly enough talking philosophy is rather hard for me in Russian, and so is typing fast. Apologies for this.

Where does the concept of well-being come from in modern philosophy? I can't think of a better source on this question than Alasdair Macintyre's *After Virtue*. That book really opened my eyes at what a huge transformation it was to define good for an individual as distinct from the good more generally. I hope it's translated into Russian!

Doesn't everybody, including sociologists, build models? In what language they are expressed should be of secondary importance.

[argmax](#)

Thank you, fair question! Yes, everybody builds models in the sense that everybody formulates what is

inside and what is outside the immediate sphere of inquiry. But I would disagree with you that the language of modelling does not matter. Rational choice modeling comes with very specific rules (the conclusion has to follow deductively, the agent has to be defined by their preference ranking etc), and these rules mean that certain phenomena become invisible or uninteresting. When a given method of modelling becomes influential and powerful, as economics is, this invisibility can be very dangerous indeed.

I am really enjoying this new book on this very question: <https://www.kateraworth.com/>)

I really appreciate your contribution to philosophy. Thanks

[sebastiaankas](#)

Hand on heart, thank you

Dear Dr Alexandrova,

I have two questions for you, if you have the time to answer them!

First, your philosophical works seem to focus most on the well being of individuals, but I am interested if you believe that similar work can be done on societies of varying scales. For example, is there such a thing as Well-being for a small company, large corporation, extended family, or even a military unit? If you think that there is, what metrics do you think one could look to in order to make such a judgement, and if you think that Well-being as you define it is confined to only represent individuals, what sort of cultural habits can groups of individuals do to best promote the well-being of their associates?

Second, your work is fascinating to me, but a paradox that I experienced in my own life was that becoming more conscious of my own Well-being led to me becoming anxious about not living as well as I could, which negatively affected my well being, i.e. the state of blissful ignorance was in some respects better for my well-being than being aware of what well-being is. Have you observed anything similar in your experiences?

Thanks so much for your time, and if you at any point are interested in taking on new grad students let me know!

[2degrees2far](#)

Thank you for these astute questions.

On the first one, I would say that my defense of the sciences of well-being very much depends on re-orienting the focus of it from individuals to *kinds* of individuals (that's my chapter 5). And that's close enough to what you are talking about. Most of the well-being measures in medicine, for example, are of well-being of people with a specific condition. Of course measures of national well-being are for groups. But you are right I haven't come across many self-conscious attempts to think of well-being at the level of groups. I believe this young philosopher is trying to do something like that (<https://shprs.asu.edu/content/tyler-desroches>), maybe you can ask him.

On the second question, I know what you mean! When I first learned Dan Haybron's theory of happiness as emotional state, I found it so compelling that I then started judging myself by the standard of the happy person Dan articulated and feeling sad at how far I was from it. Growing older helped, now I realize that this is a ridiculously high standard and I am happier having accepted that.

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[2degrees2far](#)

I always welcome new graduate students: <https://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/study/graduate>

What does being a Philosopher mean to you personally?

And what do you think one needs to be able to consider themselves a Philosopher?

[onlyq](#)

Thank you for making me think about these questions I normally avoid. For me philosophy (no capital P) is a job with certain responsibilities that I work hard to fulfill. The main responsibilities being to be good to my students and to write good work on topics that strike the right balance between being socially important and fitting my talents. Nothing more highfalutin.

Hello Dr. Alexandrova. Thank you for your time and your research!

I am wondering about the pessimistic implications of the scientific study of well-being: that the science's guidance will not be as useful for personal deliberation as positive psychologists claim. I have two specific questions.

1. Since I am not sure which positive psychologists you have in mind, could you say something about *how* useful the guidance from the science of well-being *can* be to individuals (of at all). If you have an example of such useful guidance, that might be helpful.
2. You seemed to leave open to the possibility that positive psychology (and perhaps other social sciences) could provide *non-personal* guidance — e.g., institutional policy guidance. I wonder if you could say what the science of wellbeing (on your view) can offer us in that regard. Again, an example would be helpful.

[byrd_nick](#)

Thank you, very pertinent questions.

On the first one, I am sure there are therapists and life coaches who see themselves as positive

psychologists and who are very helpful to their individual clients. I myself was an intrigued consumer of earlier work by Seligman on key strengths, I find the concept of the 'flow' very useful, and mindfulness meditation is a lifesaver for many people.

As for your second question, I would venture that it's not positive psychologists but specialists working with specific groups (vulnerable children, refugees, postpartum mothers, diabetes patients, etc) who have the best chance of making informed judgments about well-being of kinds.

Hi Anna, Hope I haven't missed you. Your research sounds fascinating. I'll be checking it out as I think it's an important subject.

I've two philosophical questions relevant to ethics that I hope you have time to answer along with some explanation for why you think the way you do.

1. Is "happiness" a good thing for the individual; i.e. is it something individuals have reason to ("should") value?
2. Is there reason to concern ourselves with the "happiness" of others in those situations where, as far as we can tell, their happiness in no way impacts our own? (I'm thinking, for example, of people on the other side of the world we don't know about, other than in general terms, who are suffering extreme poverty or, similarly, animals in factory farms whose suffering also has no material impact on our own personal "happiness"?)

[johnghthomas](#)

Yes to both questions. But for more details on the first question I recommend the work of Dan Haybron on the relation between self and happiness (especially this paper <https://sites.google.com/site/danhaybron/happiness-and-well-being/HappinesstheselfandWBv7single.pdf?attredirects=0>)

As for the second question, yes also but mainly for moral reasons I would think. I don't feel particularly qualified to answer this, so would myself first head for a reliable source such as this one: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/altruism/>

In the announcement thread [/u/SamuelTXKhoo](#) asked:

- What counts as a life well lived, and how should we live it?
- Do you think economic models have become overly mathematical and detached from the real world?
- What advice would you give to graduate students, or those applying to graduate school?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

I am sorry I didn't get to these specific questions but I hope I have answered something like them all in some way in other threads. Thank you for posing them!

In the announcement thread [/u/etno12](#) asked:

Hello! And thank you for this AMA!

I have a question about rational choice and economics.

To a layman person like me, it seems that in the social sciences and economics, some theorists are too focused on optimal choice rather than actual choice. This leads to theories which make powerful

predictions, but fails at doing so, due to a too rational view of humans. In this sense, they become more normative rather than descriptive. What's your thoughts on this matter?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thank you, it sounds right. Many economic theorists would also agree that their work is either basically mathematics or else articulates a normative ideal. But there clearly are contexts in which these models are descriptive. The real question is how common these contexts are and whether the attention dedicated to developing models of greater and greater sophistication is a good use of economists' time. Here's a recent paper on this (full disclosure - the author is my husband and hence wonderful <https://philpapers.org/rec/NORTEQ>)

Do you feel all Social Science undergrads should do a course in the Philosophy relating to their course?

If so, what do you think the main benefits would be?

Am curious as a third year Economics student and have not had the opportunity to even consider a module in the Philosophy relating to the subject.

[Chelsea9774](#)

They should, of course! Thank you for the opportunity to jump on my favourite hobby horse. One of my most satisfying experience at Cambridge has been teaching this paper on History and Philosophy of Economics to second year economists: http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/ba/outlines/Part_IIA_Paper_8.pdf

Making students think about what the preferred methods of a science can and cannot accomplish and what assumptions it makes about the world and how these assumptions could be different makes a genuine difference to my students, and I love working through these ideas with them.

Maybe you and other like minded students could lobby for such a module in your university?

When did you know you wanted to study in philosophy, and how did you react to others saying it was pointless? And if nobody told you that then where do you live i want to move there

[ludoblanc](#)

Thank you for asking! Funnily enough for me philosophy was the ticket to a good life in the West. I stuck with my studies precisely because otherwise I wouldn't have a visa and would have to go back to my hometown (which in my twenties would have felt very tragic). But of course I know what you mean, it is hard to keep up the motivation when all around you find your passion ridiculous and indulgent. I guess I just kept the candle burning ever since I read Sophie's World as a teenager. Once my family saw that, as well as being my passion, philosophy is also my ticket to professional life (I am glad they didn't know how bad the odds were!), they helped me to continue. If philosophy is what truly makes you happy, stick with it.

Thank you so much for doing this AMA and taking the time to answer our questions!

My question relates to climate mitigation. It's been known for [some time](#) that a carbon tax is the optimal way to mitigate climate change; it's also known that [taxing carbon would be welfare-improving](#) since [climate change has net costs](#). Carbon taxes are generally understood to be regressive (though [less regressive when life cycle analysis is used](#)). It's also [trivially easy to design carbon taxes to be](#)

[distributionally-neutral](#), or even [progressive](#).

So, given that [the wealthy tend to be disproportionately responsible for carbon pollution](#), would it be more appropriate to design a carbon tax to be distributionally-neutral or would it make more sense to design carbon taxes to be progressive?

[ILikeNeurons](#)

It sounds like you know more about it than I do, I don't have much to add, thank you for the links!

I did not suggest language did not matter. I suggested it was to be determined by the question at hand. If you ask a very precise, narrow question, you need precise, sensitive tools to study it. If you ask a general, rough question, you can use a five-paragraph essay to outline your argument. To claim that allegiance to tools blinds social scientists seems like a stretch.

[argmax](#)

I see, that sounds right. The question is what sort of questions social scientists should be asking and what sort of tools serve these questions best. Assuming we are still talking about modelling, my view is that there are some questions that models can answer but that too often certain questions do not get asked just because models are not the tools that can answer them. Did I get you right?

Are you concerned about the way that those with power in society are able to use poor quality 'well being' research to present policies that shift power and money away from those at the bottom of society as being 'caring' in a paternalistic manner?

It seems that much of the problem stems from the difficult of measuring 'well being' reliably, and researchers ignoring problems with bias in nonblinded trials. The DWP's PACE trial is an important example of this: <http://www.thecanary.co/2016/10/02/results-really-didnt-want-see-key-mecfs-trial-data-released/> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1359105317722370>

Are many people in UK academia fighting against this? To me, it seems that it is largely outsiders who are speaking up (international academics, patients, disability campaigners, etc), and that the personal and professional connections that bind senior UK academics may encourage people to stay quiet about this scandal.

[ASABM](#)

Wow, thank you for sharing, that does sound concerning to say the least (I'll have to read the links properly). Yes I see danger that well-being agenda serves the politics of austerity and neoliberalism. No wonder, this research programme started off in management and marketing and was aimed at making us more docile consumers and workers. I really appreciate the work of Will Davies on this topic (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/2162-the-happiness-industry>), he's in the UK!

But equally there is a lot of responsible and idealistic work in well-being sciences and it is this work precisely that has often challenged various norms of consumerism. So it's complicated. The science of well-being is certainly not ethically neutral, but it does not have to be dangerous either. I appreciate you bringing this up very much.

Hello Dr. Alexandrova

Your works and book sound interesting and intriguing. I might buy it after looking into it further. My

question is do you believe that the results of you research and findings could be applied on a practical level to the common man. For say: a college student(grad or undergrad), well read individuals not well versed in philosophy, even literal common people like the mailman or a waiter. Basically I'm asking that if the results that you write about in your book, if simplified, could be practically implemented?

[isaac2289](#)

Thank you for asking. My hope for practical impact from my book is to inspire philosophers to build mid-level theories of well-being and social scientists to attend to these. That would be plenty for the time being

A user in the announcement thread asked:

What role do suffering and sadness play in our lives, and is that role an important one? Are we too focused on being happier when perhaps we should do more to appreciate and embrace less pleasant experiences?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thank you for these good questions. To the first one my answer is yes (which is not particularly original of me). Obviously there is the essential evolutionary role of pain and negative emotions, but also their formative and social role of making us more empathetic, understanding of others, and generally more appreciating of the human condition (of which pain and uncertainty are surely part). With the second question there is no one answer, it all depends on who 'we' are. There are certainly moments in positive psychology when it comes across as being focused on production of positive emotions at the expense of recognising, accepting and validating suffering. I am thinking especially of the frightening tendency to recommend mindfulness meditation to get rid of anger at the world's many injustices. This seems like an outrageous advice to give when anger is appropriate and fitting. There'd be no protest without anger. But on the other hand, there are clearly situations when pursuit of positive emotions is right and fitting and worth recommending. It's rather inhumane towards a depressed person to harp on about the formative nature of suffering. So yes I agree with you happiness isn't everything, but the extent of the problem depends on where you look. Does that answer your question?

I'm wondering if you can help me settle a dispute with my brother, who started but never finished his philosophy degree.

Given the [economic](#) and [psychological](#) impacts of sexual assault on victims, what are the ethics of a man inviting a known sexual predator to social events with mixed company?

He thinks this question has nothing to do with philosophy. I think the question has an obvious answer that philosophers would generally agree with.

What's your take?

EDIT: typo

[ILikeNeurons](#)

You are right and your brother is wrong (in a couple of ways as it sounds)

In the announcement thread [/u/Scethrow](#) asked:

What is the philosophy of science and well being?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

A name of an article of mine? :-)