

# The Usefulness of Well-Being Temporalism

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It is an open question whether well-being ought to primarily be understood as a temporal concept or whether it only makes sense to talk about a person's well-being over their whole lifetime. In this article, I argue that how this principled philosophical disagreement is settled does not have substantive practical implications for well-being science and well-being policy. Trying to measure lifetime well-being directly is extremely challenging as well as unhelpful for guiding well-being public policy, while temporal well-being is both an adequate indirect measure of lifetime well-being, and an adequate focus for the purposes of improving well-being through public policy. Consequently, even if what we ought to care about is lifetime well-being, we should use temporal measures of well-being and focus on temporal well-being policies.

## 1. Introduction

Many philosophers working on well-being usually adopt, even if only implicitly, some concept of temporal well-being (Campbell, 2020; Ferracioli, 2020; Reynolds, 2018). On such a view, talking about well-being at a moment or over a limited period is meaningful. It makes sense to ask how well someone was doing yesterday, last year, or when they were a child. We might, however, reject such a view, and hold that it only makes sense to talk about a person's well-being over their whole lifetime. After all, even if someone's day seemed to have gone well yesterday, something that happened might unexpectedly have disastrous implications for the rest of their life. Perhaps someone had a nice time learning to surf yesterday, but that experience led them to commit themselves to surfing only to go on and die a tragic death in a surfing accident the following year. It is not implausible to claim that the pleasant day was not conducive to their

well-being. Insofar as we care about well-being and assign it normative weight, it is always lifetime well-being that actually matters. Or so the claim may go.

There exists a spectrum of approaches to how we should conceive of well-being. On one end of the spectrum is momentary well-being, the view that well-being in a life depends solely on the prudential value of each moment of that life. Somewhere in the middle is periodic well-being, the view that well-being in a life is a function of the prudential value of moments, periods, and the relations between them. On the other end of the spectrum is lifetime well-being, the view that well-being in a life depends solely on the prudential value of the life considered as a whole.

The view that momentary well-being is not the only thing that matters is a common view in philosophy. Authors like Rosati (2013) who assign importance to the relations between a life's parts, or Velleman (1991), who take a life's narrative to matter beyond the sum of the moments, hold such a view (others who hold some such views include (Dorsey, 2015; Kagan, 1994; Kauppinen, 2015; King, 2018; Slote, 1982; Temkin, 2012)). Bramble (2018), however, defends a more extreme position. He groups momentary and periodic well-being together, referring to them jointly as temporal well-being, and distinguishing them from lifetime well-being. Thus framed, Bramble argues not only against momentary well-being, but rather against the idea of temporal well-being more generally. He argues that well-being should only be understood as lifetime well-being, because only lifetime well-being can be viewed as having normative significance, and only by conceiving of existing well-being theories (hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and objective-list) as theories of lifetime well-being can we make sense of these theories.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I do not directly argue against the view that takes lifetime well-being as what matters. Instead, I argue that contrary to what we might think, how this principled

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<sup>1</sup> Several authors have set out to deny Bramble's claim that there is no such thing as temporal well-being (Bradley, 2021; Rosati, 2021; Višak, 2021).

philosophical disagreement is settled does not have substantive practical implications.<sup>2</sup> For some aspects of well-being science and well-being policy, even if we grant that only lifetime well-being has normative significance, temporal well-being remains the appropriate object of our measurement and policy. Trying to measure lifetime well-being directly is extremely challenging as well as unhelpful for guiding well-being public policy, while temporal well-being is both an adequate indirect measure of lifetime well-being, and an adequate focus for the purposes of improving well-being through public policy. Consequently, even if what we ought to care about is lifetime well-being, we should focus on temporal measures of well-being and temporal well-being policies.

In §2, I summarize the debate surrounding the different temporal conceptions of well-being. In §3, I explain why this debate might seem to have practical implications insofar as we are interested in coming up with well-being measures that are adequate for guiding public policy aimed at improving individuals' well-being. In §4 and §5, I argue that lifetime well-being is not a useful object of science and policy, and that both social scientists and policy makers are temporalists about well-being in their approach to well-being measurement and policy. In §6, I argue that even if we have philosophical reasons to conceive of well-being as occurring over a lifetime, we can treat temporal well-being as a useful indirect measure of lifetime well-being that is adequate for the purpose of guiding well-being policy. I conclude in §7.

## **2. The debate between lifetime and temporal well-being**

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<sup>2</sup> Bramble does think that that adopting his lifetime well-being view has practical implications for well-being measurement and policy:

Summing up, policy should indeed be aimed at maximising well-being (at least some of the time), and so we need to know how to measure well-being. The fact that only lifetime well-being exists, then, is a critical insight. (Bramble 2018, 57-8)

Adopting a temporal conception of well-being is quite common in the well-being literature. There are those who are interested in a person's well-being at particular times of their lives, such as childhood (Cormier & Rossi, 2019; Ferracioli, 2020), death (Campbell, 2020; Dorsey, 2017), or during old age (Reynolds, 2018). Well-being temporalism is a conjunction of two views on where a person's prudential value resides—momentary or atomistic well-being, and periodic or diachronic well-being.

Well-being atomism is the view that the prudential value of a life depends solely on the prudential value of each moment of that life, and the value of each moment of a life is independent of other moments, of the order in which moments occur, and of other features above and beyond the individual moment (Hersch & Weltman, forthcoming). On this view lifetime well-being is an aggregation of momentary well-being. Aggregationism, or additivism, is the view that well-being at times of one's life summed together are what make someone's life good for that person (King 2018; Bramble 2018, 7). Some hedonists and desire satisfactionists, such as (Bradley, 2009; Bricker, 1980; Feldman, 2004) often endorse such views.

But many philosophers push back against the view that momentary well-being is all that matters. Slote (1982), for example, rejects aggregation both because one might rationally prefer goods to occur later in life, and because Slote thinks we discount the impact of some moments of our life when we calculate well-being. According to Slote, generally we do not think good or bad dreams make our lives go better or worse, and we are inclined to say an unhappy childhood does not matter so long as it is compensated for by a later happy life, so the good of a life is not merely the sum of each moment of the life (Slote 1982, 314).

King (2018) argues against the aggregation of momentary well-being along different lines. First, King argues that if the prudential value of one's life is merely equivalent to the

aggregate well-being they enjoy over a lifetime, then “aggregationism faces a problem analogous to Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion: A sufficiently long life barely worth living will be superior to a shorter span of excellent living” (King 2018, 355). Second, King argues that aggregation implies that “if a period of apparently elevated well-being in a person’s life does not contribute to the goodness of that life as a whole, then we must conclude that her well-being was not actually elevated during that period after all” (King 2018, 364). Slote and King are not the only ones concerned with aggregation (See e.g. Temkin 2012, 113–15; 2012, 122; Kagan 1994).

Others deny momentary well-being because they are committed to relationalism, according to which one’s lifetime well-being does not depend only on their well-being at any moment, but also, as Rosati (2013, 29) puts it, “on the value-affecting relations among its parts.” These relations help determine “the welfare value of a life in a way that is not reducible to the contribution any other factor makes to the value of a person’s life” (Rosati 2013, 30). According to Dorsey’s relational view, some elements of well-being “cannot be locked down to an individual moment but necessarily involve many moments throughout a life and the relationship between them” (Dorsey 2015, 310). Dorsey objects to the priority of temporally discrete events. Dorsey (2015, 2018) endorses relationalism because it can account for the value that events have in virtue of their contribution to some long-term or global goal, project, or successful achievement.

More specific than the view that the value of one’s life stems from relations between moments rather than from moments alone, is the view that the narrative of one’s life affects how well one’s life goes. If something is narratable, there is some story that can be told about it. This feature, according to some, can impact well-being (Velleman 1991; Kauppinen 2015). Lives are

not just aggregated moments but also stories, and better or worse stories entail lives with more or less well-being.<sup>3</sup>

All these views, however, are still committed to a temporal notion of well-being, even if not a momentary one. Well-being temporalism includes a momentary well-being concept, but also a periodic one, which holds that the prudential value of a life can depend on the prudential value of each moment of that life, but also on other factors such as the relationship between moments, the order in which moments occur, the narrative of the life, the shape of the life, and of other features that go beyond the individual moment.

Bramble (2018), however, argues against any temporal notion of well-being, either momentary or periodic. Concisely, Bramble states his main claim thus: “*No Temporal Well-Being*. There is no such thing as temporal well-being. The only genuine kind of well-being is lifetime well-being” (2). Bramble defends this thesis by appealing to what he calls the “Normative Significance Argument” and the “No Credible Theory Argument.” According to the normative significance argument, Bramble argues that only lifetime well-being, but not temporal well-being, can be said to intrinsically matter and to be an ultimate source of reasons for actions. Consequently, lifetime well-being, rather than temporal well-being, is true. As Bramble puts it: “Changes in temporal well-being are not *sufficient in themselves* to affect the value of things *simpliciter*, and temporal well-being is never *itself* an ultimate source of reasons for action” [emphasis in original] (15).

Bramble’s second argument in defense of lifetime well-being, the no credible theory argument, is a negative argument against temporal well-being. According to Bramble, each of

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of anti-aggregationism, relationism, and narrativism see (Hersch & Weltman, forthcoming).

the existing central well-being theories (hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and objective-list) fail when conceived of as theories of temporal well-being.

In arguing against temporal hedonism, Bramble discusses problems that arise with how we conceive of moments of pleasure and pain. Among these are problems with whether a moment is the shortest possible duration or the shortest duration in which we can experience a pleasure or pain, what to do with pleasures and pains that are experienced for different durations, how to conceive of overlapping moments of pleasure and pain, the problem of double counting, and whether moments can simply be added arithmetically towards lifetime well-being (29-33).

In order to discuss how both objective-list temporalism and desire-based temporalism fail, Bramble introduces internalism about temporal well-being—the view that “well-being at individual times depends exclusively on the intrinsic properties of those times” (Raibley, 2016; 343). Internalism, according to Bramble, is an inherent part of well-being temporalism, and rejecting it would have the implausible consequence that what happens at one moment can affect how well-off we are at an earlier moment. This entails backward causation, an obviously problematic proposition.

Bramble then argues that objective-list theories are incompatible with the internalism thesis, because many standard items on objective-lists (e.g. nature-fulfillment, achievement, or knowledge) take time and require a causal history that entails a relationist view of well-being, rather than an internalist one.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, desire-based theories are incompatible with the internalism thesis because the kinds of things we desire for ourselves are often the kinds of things that make it onto objective lists, such as achievements or knowledge. Since these are

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the plausibility of this view see (Hersch & Weltman, forthcoming).

things that take time, whether desires for such goods are satisfied at one moment depends on facts of the world that occur at other times.

This debate is philosophically interesting and helps us get at a better understanding of what different theories of well-being commit us to. It helps us understand ourselves better. However, in the next section I argue that one desideratum of this debate is that it helps us understand how to better our lives and the lives of others. To improve individuals' well-being through public policy we need well-being measures that are adequate for guiding well-being policy. In §4 and §5, I will argue that lifetime well-being is not adequate for that purpose. In §6 I argue that temporal well-being is.

### **3. Guiding well-being policy adequately**

The literature on values in science makes clear that there is unlikely to be one uncontested assessment of how to adjudicate between the different aims of science (Matthewson & Weisberg, 2009). A recent and influential approach by Potochnik (2017) is to adopt the view that “the ultimate epistemic aim of science is not truth but understanding” (91). Potochnik’s focus on understanding offers one alternative epistemic goal of science to truth, alongside other possible epistemic aims that include, among others, prediction, explanation, and representation. In the well-being context, one goal, for example, might be to allow more effective and timely prediction, leading us to make a survey sufficiently quick and simple to fill out and process. Alternatively, we might seek to increase confidence that inter-linguistic comparisons are reliable and that a broader swath of the population will be better represented in the data, so some questions might be couched in easily translatable language. Potochnik (2017) argues that “success with one aim often *inhibits* success with other aims” (105), and that what is a suitable



tool to further one aim often does not turn out to suit other aims. She argues that this is due both to the complexity of the phenomena of scientific interest and to the limited powers of human cognition and action (108). This holds true in the case of well-being as well.

However, we can justify our practices not only by what promotes our epistemic aims, but also by considering our non-epistemic, or pragmatic, aims. Elliott & McKaughan (2014) put it succinctly when they write that “questions about how best to balance trade-offs between various desiderata clearly depend on what our goals are when we make our choices” (4). Elsewhere, Elliot (2017) argues that scientists cannot avoid social and ethical values since these are ubiquitous in scientific reasoning. He argues that this holds true especially when scientists are working with policy-makers, who might be less fixated on accuracy and instead would prefer methods or models that can generate results relatively quickly and inexpensively. Elliot explains that in light of different users’ needs, scientists “may want to develop models that are not overly complicated, that do not take too long to yield results, that can be used across regulatory agencies in a standardized way, or that are particularly good at predicting specific policy-relevant pieces of information” (64).

Many of us (though not all, e.g. (Wren-lewis, 2013)) as well as various policy-makers (Bernanke, 2012; Cameron, 2010; Stiglitz et al., 2009) ascribe to some form of welfarism, which in its weak form is the view that improving people’s well-being ought to be at least one goal (among others) of policy (Haybron & Tiberius, 2015, 713). As a result, we might reasonably want to figure out what policies can be implemented to further this goal.

There are several ways policy-makers might decide what policies to implement. First, policy-makers can rely on their own experience to guide their decisions. While this might be both efficient and potentially accurate, we seek justification and accountability from our policy-

makers for their policy choices, and a policy-maker who can appeal to nothing beyond her own internal intuition to explain her decisions would come up short. On the other extreme, a policy-maker can defer to her constituents regarding what policies aimed at improving their well-being they would want implemented. Such a strategy, however, conflates preferences with well-being. If we do not start by assuming that well-being is constituted by preferences, what will promote well-being can come apart from what people want.<sup>5</sup>

A more defensible way of going about determining which policies aimed at improving well-being to implement is to turn to well-being science and measurement. Insofar as well-being policy values using well-being measurement to inform policy making, promoting the public good by improving people's well-being is an obvious non-epistemic goal of well-being measurement. The goal of improving people's well-being can lead policy-makers to rely on well-being science and measurement to help ascertain which policies will best succeed in furthering this goal. The flip side of this is that social scientists, in developing their measures, take guiding well-being policy as one of the purposes for their work.

Recently, Parker (2020) has discussed the concept of adequacy for purpose in scientific models. Parker argues that deviating from the truth (misrepresentation) is often useful for achieving some of the goals of science. Science does not require perfect representation. We can make sense of the success of science despite its pervasive reliance on falsehoods. Parker explains that model quality is to be assessed relative to a particular or type of purpose (458). Parker understands a purpose as a goal that can be either epistemic (e.g. used to predict something, to explain something, or to teach something) or practical (460). When discussing how adequacy-for-purpose is meant to be cashed out, Parker explains that to be adequate-for-purpose a model

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<sup>5</sup> For more discussion on this see (Hersch, 2018) and (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022).

“must stand in a suitable relationship not just with a representational target T but with a target T, user U, methodology W, circumstances B, and goal P jointly” (464).

Applying Parker’s adequacy-for-purpose approach to the context of well-being science, we can ask whether lifetime well-being measures are more or less adequate for measurement and policy purposes than temporal well-being measures are, even if we grant that they do represent a better understanding of what well-being really is. In the next two sections I argue that regardless of how the philosophical debate between temporal and lifetime well-being is settled, lifetime well-being is not adequate for the purpose of measuring well-being and guiding well-being policy, while in §6 I argue that temporal well-being is.

#### **4. The measurement challenges for lifetime well-being**

Even if we accept that what matters is lifetime well-being, lifetime well-being is too difficult to measure, as well as an inappropriate basis for policy-making. Another way to put it is that lifetime well-being faces the challenge of practical adequacy. As Fabian (2021) explains, in order to gain tractability, in this case with respect to well-being measures and policy, we have reason to trade off normative, empirical, and particularly descriptive adequacy for practical adequacy. Even if lifetime well-being is, as Bramble claims, descriptively adequate, it is not practically adequate. I begin by making the case that, in fact, social scientists do not focus on lifetime well-being when they measure well-being. I then provide some reasons for why this is the case.

Both well-being measures and the well-being policies that rely on these measures are important contexts in which the well-being literature has practical application. As I discuss elsewhere (Hersch, 2015), there has been a substantial growth in the various social scientific

well-being-related measures and indicators that are now available to policy-makers. Social scientists have gone beyond relying solely on GDP per capita to estimate how well off individuals are (e.g. (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1999; Dolan & White, 2007; Frey & Stutzer, 2014; Graham, 2011; Hagerty et al., 2001; Kahneman et al., 2004; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Layard, 2005; Ryff et al., 2021; Sollis et al., 2021; VanderWeele et al., 2021; Weijers & Jarden, 2013)).

All these measures are measures of temporal well-being (conceived in a variety of ways) rather than measures of lifetime well-being. First, those who treat GDP per capita and other economic measures as measures of well-being implicitly commit to a view that well-being can be understood temporally, and those that then think that policy makers ought to enact policies aimed at raising GDP per capita also view it as carrying normative weight. Similarly, those working on subjective well-being (SWB) measures, and view them as measures of well-being, also implicitly adopt temporal commitments. As one example, O'Donnell et al. (2014) focus on happiness and life satisfaction understood as a temporal construct: "One solution is to use measures of subjective wellbeing (sometimes expressed as SWB) by which we mean the answers to questions about people's happiness and satisfaction with their lives [at a particular moment]". Lastly, those, like (Kahneman et al., 2004), who adopt 'objective happiness' as their chosen measure of well-being, also commit to well-being temporalism. Kahneman's 'objective happiness' is objective in the sense that it is an aggregation, according to objective rules, of subjective experiences during short periods of time, rather than over one's entire life.

All this well-being measurement work has exclusively focused on measuring temporal well-being. If lifetime well-being is the only appropriate object of well-being science and policy,

and it is wrong to treat temporal well-being as meaningful, then broad swaths of well-being science and policy would need to be dismissed and started over.<sup>6</sup>

There has been very little discussion of lifetime well-being in the social scientific literature. One exception is Ponthiere (2016), who does discuss lifetime well-being in the context of measurement. Ponthiere proposes a preference-based approach that extends the “baskets” of goods over which preferences are defined over an entire life, as an alternative to (Veenhoven, 1996) who proposes a summing up of temporary hedonic well-being levels. Yet despite discussing lifetime well-being, Ponthiere does seem to simply view lifetime well-being as an aggregate of temporal well-being, and that “studying the structure of lifetime well-being amounts to examining the form of this aggregate” (876). As he explains, “[i]n most economic studies concerned with lifetime well-being, it is assumed that lifetime well-being is a mere *sum* of discounted temporal well-being levels” (876). Thus, even Ponthiere, who views himself as focused on lifetime well-being, does so by treating well-being as a temporal construct and then aggregates it over a lifetime to give us lifetime well-being. Such an approach is clearly incompatible with anti-aggregationist views of well-being that a variety of philosophers hold, let alone lifetime well-being views like Bramble’s.

That social scientists have focused almost exclusively on measuring temporal well-being might merely be an unfortunate mistake. It might be that they were misled by philosophers working on well-being into moving away from what Bramble ((2018, 2) considers to be a more intuitive notion to those unfamiliar with the topic, and social scientists are simply confused. But if we wish to apply a principle of charity to the work on well-being measurement conducted over

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<sup>6</sup> While the focus of this article is on lifetime well-being in the measurement and policy context, there are other contexts in which lifetime well-being might be important and useful. We might find the value of the concept of lifetime well-being in how it lends itself to ethical investigation, personal prudential decisions, or any other use the concept of well-being is generally used.

the past few decades, viewing social scientists as confused will not do. Instead, we ought to explore some more defensible considerations that might have led to the exclusive focus on temporal well-being in the social scientific well-being literature.

One central challenge to measuring lifetime well-being is that we can only truly evaluate lifetime well-being once an individual has passed away.<sup>7</sup> This, in itself, does not negate the possibility that we can examine how past interventions affected people's lifetime well-being. Consider, for example, the attempts to measure the effects of policies such as encouraging postpartum skin on skin contact between a mother and her newborn child.<sup>8</sup> There is a prolific literature on the benefits this small intervention has on the health and cognitive development of newborns (e.g. (Moore et al., 2016; Takahashi et al., 2011; Thukral et al., 2012)). But imagine that we are interested in whether such an intervention is conducive to improving the newborn's *well-being*. If we only treat lifetime well-being as worthy of our interest, to figure out whether and to what extent such skin on skin contact has on the individual's lifetime well-being we must run an experiment with a test group and a control group at infancy, wait until they pass away, and then assess their lifetime well-being levels and see whether the intervention was casually efficacious. The intervention occurs a lifetime (literally) before the data on its efficacy can be examined.

A direct lifetime well-being measure would create a substantial lag between any intervention on people's lives and our ability to evaluate the success or failure of those interventions. If we treat lifetime well-being as the proper object of measurement, we end up

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<sup>7</sup> If we think that posthumous events can affect one's overall (rather than lifetime) well-being (Bradley, 2009), then it is in principle impossible to measure one's overall well-being, even after they died, because it is indeterminate whether future events might be relevant to their well-being. Viewing posthumous events this way seems more reasonable once we consider that many of us share the intuition that how good one's life was depends, at least to some extent on their legacy (Ben-Porath, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> This example was chosen because it represents one of the most extreme cases—an intervention moments after a person is born (more extreme would be prenatal interventions).

requiring timespans as long as lifetimes to determine with certainty how interventions affect well-being.<sup>9</sup> Even if we could initiate an intervention and then wait a lifetime in order to properly evaluate its effects, the societal context would most likely be so radically different a generation later that the ‘all things being equal’ clause would be violated to such a degree that it would be impossible to confidently apply the same intervention in a significantly different societal context.<sup>10</sup>

That it might take a lifetime does not in itself entail that this is not the right approach for the science of well-being. If only lifetime well-being is the appropriate way of conceptualizing well-being, then so be it. All this entails is that running controlled experiments requires much longer timespans than is usually thought. Long timespans are not unfamiliar to scientific work. There are areas of science in which research takes long timespans (e.g. research on factors that affect tree longevity (Munné-Bosch, 2018)).

Alternatively, we might deny the necessity of controlled experiments, and therefore we do not need to wait for people to pass away before arriving at results. There are scientific domains in which controlled experiments are not possible (e.g. studying supernovas (Smith et al., 2007)). Perhaps, when it comes to well-being science, natural experiments, which Morgan (2013) describes as experiments where scientists find ways to get rid of interferences or disturbances, are the only path forward.

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<sup>9</sup> There are other aspects of how we might view lifetime well-being as being more or less adequate for the purposes of well-being science and policy than temporal well-being is, such as the extent to which they allow us to carve up the causes and effects of well-being or discuss well-being as something that increases and decreases as a consequence of various actions and policies, yet going into such depth is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I take the feedback cycle speed to be at least a crucial, if not decisive reason to prefer focusing on temporal well-being rather than lifetime well-being, and this section is aimed at motivating such a focus.

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there are practical limits to long-term forecasting in general and for public policy in particular (Taleb, 2007; Tetlock & Gardner, 2015).

However, we might wish to sever the connection between the discussion of measurement and experimentation. We do not need to exclusively rely on experimentation to establish well-being policy-guiding causal claims and to determine well-being policy (Bache, 2020). There are a variety of other approaches to well-being measurement that also aids policy-makers in deciding what well-being policies to implement. Bache, who provides an in-depth discussion of well-being measurement and policy, particularly in the UK context, provides a list of evidence sources used by individuals from the civil service, local government, and the voluntary sector, among others (fifteen interviewees in total). The list includes twenty-four items with such diverse sources as, for example, focus groups, online surveys, in-house research, academic papers, evaluations, seminars, and parliamentary events (57).

Privileging some forms of knowledge such as randomized controlled trials can seem appealing, as they can be seen as a “a useful short cut for policy-makers seeking to judge the robustness of material offered to them” (Bache 2020, 13). Nevertheless, as Nutley et al. (2013) explain, the problem with creating a hierarchy of evidence is that they neglect important issues regarding evidence, tend to underrate the value of good observational studies, exclude all but the highest ranking studies from consideration, pay insufficient attention to understanding the issue, and are insufficient for determining which interventions should be adopted (11).

But even these alternative measures are nonetheless couched in temporal, rather than lifetime, well-being terms. Psychological well-being measures, either for government studies or cohort studies, are all evaluative of a particular person’s perspective at a particular moment (VanderWeele et al., 2021). These include question such as “Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?”, “Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?”, and “Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?”. The answers to these



questions can be aggregated either to a whole group of individuals at a particular moment, a time period for a particular individual, or a whole group over a whole time period. However, all of these are temporal measures that are aggregated, rather than a lifetime well-being measure. There are also broader measures of flourishing, such as the flourishing index by (Vanderweele, 2017), which includes items from several domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. Yet all these items are still presented as questionnaires, and the answers can only be evaluated as positions held by individuals at a particular moment.

An additional worry when moving away from controlled experiments is that it would not be clear that we were actually controlling for other factors (Currie & Levy, 2019). Without a controlled experiment, establishing causality is extremely difficult. Regardless of whether the alternatives to controlled experimentation are sufficiently reliable, in the next section I discuss problems that can arise with lifetime measures, however construed, in the policy context.

## **5. The policy challenges for lifetime well-being**

For the sake of argument, we might assume that the measurement challenges for lifetime well-being measures can be overcome, and social scientists can find it useful to measure well-being over a lifetime directly. Nevertheless, direct measures of lifetime well-being are unhelpful if the measurement of well-being is meant to inform policy, because the timespans needed to determine effects of potential interventions on lifetime well-being are simply too long to be useful. Policy-makers, and especially politicians, are at most judged based on their decisions during the span of their careers. These careers obviously last for shorter durations of their own lifetimes, usually for shorter durations than most people's lifetimes, and often just a few years at

most. Politicians specifically, have extremely short time horizons, and they want to demonstrate the efficiency of their policies quickly enough for it to be relevant for the next election cycle.

What this means is that the concept of lifetime well-being, if its measurement requires long time spans, is simply unusable for public policy.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, to take lifetime well-being as a policy focus, even if correct in principle, is a way of winning a battle but losing a war. For the shift away from the emphasis from GDP and other tenuously related policy goals and towards well-being as a policy goal to be successful requires meeting policy-makers and the public somewhere they are familiar with. Bache (2020) cites a UK national civil servant interviewee who says:

It's very difficult for politicians to talk about wellbeing because people feel that politically there's not demand to express things in that form. They will focus on, for the most part, much more concrete intermediate goals, like you know, how can you reduce unemployment? They tend not to think, fundamentally in terms of wellbeing, at the moment, and particularly in politics, people are afraid that they will be ridiculed for doing so. (63)

Bache explains that the challenges of shifting focus to well-being, however understood, are sufficiently substantial:

It's harder for government ministers to stand up and communicate to the public that, for example, the Work Programme has improved x number of people's wellbeing. Whereas saying they've got this many people into work and these many people out of hospital - those sorts of measures are easier for them to understand, simpler to write into contracts, particularly for the public services, and easier to communicate to the public. (Bache 2020, 90)

It would be politically imprudent to insist on shifting the focus away from temporal based goals in the well-being context, to a policy goal aimed at whole lifetime well-being, which would be even more alien to policy-makers.

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<sup>11</sup> Short term planning need not be viewed as an in principled problem, merely as a pragmatic one. It is possible to find long term policy planning in countries where the political leadership is stable over decades, though these tend to be authoritarian dictatorships.

A different approach is to sever the link between policy and measurement. We might accept that while temporal well-being more easily lends itself to measurement than does lifetime well-being, keeping lifetime well-being as the proper object of well-being policy is nevertheless meaningful and significant. Accepting that only lifetime well-being is normatively significant gives us reason to implement different policies than if we considered temporal well-being as normatively significant as well (or instead of lifetime well-being). Yet this does not give us reason to dismiss temporal well-being as an object of science and measurement, even if lifetime well-being is the appropriate object of policy. Such a lifetime policy orientation does not amount to much that is different from other ways of understanding well-being. This leaves us with business as usual. If our measures are temporal and our policy goals are lifetime, then we end up with an aggregationist approach to well-being measure and policy.

Even if policy-makers accepted lifetime well-being as policy goal, regardless of whether the measures themselves are lifetime or temporal based, their needs with regards to evidence is that it be in some sense actionable (Bache 2020, 67). But lifetime well-being cannot fulfil such a requirement. Policy-makers need to know their chosen policies will work, but, regardless of how one measures lifetime well-being, lifetime well-being-directed policies cannot be evaluated in direct lifetime well-being terms. In the next section I argue that temporal well-being measures can be considered useful indirect measures of lifetime well-being that are adequate for the non-epistemic purpose of guiding well-being policy.

## **6. The usefulness of indirect temporal measures of well-being**

Focusing solely on lifetime well-being and trying to measure it directly introduces some challenges: it makes it difficult to meaningfully discuss well-being over periods shorter than a

whole lifetime, to infer the causes of higher or lower levels of well-being, and to discuss well-being as something that increases and decreases as a consequence of different interventions, among other challenges. Nevertheless, an excellent alternative is readily available and can be treated as an indirect measure of lifetime well-being—temporal well-being.

Measuring unobservable or difficult to observe phenomena indirectly is common in science, and indirect measurement is used frequently in science. Bogen & Woodward (1988), when making their famous distinction between data and phenomena supply us with ample examples:

Examples of data include bubble chamber photographs, patterns of discharge in electronic particle detectors and records of reaction times and error rates in various psychological experiments. Examples of phenomena, for which the above data might provide evidence, include weak neutral currents, the decay of the proton, and chunking and recency effects in human memory. (306)

Kyburg (1984) argues that nearly any relation can in principle be measured directly, even if only on a fallible ordinal scale and very loosely.<sup>12</sup> In the social science context, Kyburg uses intelligence and the ‘brighter than’ relationship to demonstrate his claim (131-2). Clearly our direct judgments in the case of intelligence are extremely unreliable. Kyburg argues that because of this an indirect measure is appealing, and he mentions IQ as one such indirect measure for intelligence.<sup>13</sup> Kyburg explicates two requirements of an indirect measure. First, the indirect measure must conform, more or less, to the direct measure. Kyburg views this as a very weak requirement that indirect measurements do not violate our immediate judgments too often and

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<sup>12</sup> Chang (2004) also touches on the issue of indirect measures when he discusses what he calls the “problem of nomic measurement.” The challenge Chang discusses arises when “Quantity X is not directly observable, so we infer it from another quantity Y, which is directly observable” (59). Nevertheless, Chang does not expand on what he means by direct observation. For a discussion of Chang’s problem of nomic measurement in the context of well-being see (Hersch, forthcoming). See also (Tal, 2013) for a broader discussion on measurement.

<sup>13</sup> Kyburg does not take a stand on how good an indirect measure IQ is of intelligence, only that it meets the requirements mentioned below. There are many criticisms of IQ as a measure of intelligence (e.g. (Mackintosh, 2011) for a wide variety of reasons, and I also take no stand on its appropriateness here.

too flagrantly (132). Second, an indirect measurement should be more consistent or reliable than our direct measurement (132). Indirect measurement that meets these requirements “often provides a much finer and more discriminating measure than does direct measurement” (142).

As an example from economics, Schliesser (2012) discusses Nutter’s (1951) attempt to develop a measure of competitiveness in US markets. The motivation for developing such a measure is to determine the extent to which different US markets are competitive or monopolistic, and undermine the claim that increasing returns have led to monopoly in the US economy (Schliesser 2012, 166). Directly determining how competitive a market is would require measuring the elasticity of demand. The more elastic the demand, the more competitive and less monopolistic the market will be. The problem is that Nutter holds the view that a direct “accurate measurement of long-run elasticity of demand is impossible” (Nutter 1951, 7). Consequently, as Schliesser explains, “Nutter derives indirect evidence from the study of ‘the structure of industries—in terms of number of firms, concentration of output, and so on’ (8).” While it is not clear whether the impossibility is with the measurement in general or with obtaining *accurate* measurement, Nutter does intentionally develop a measure that is meant to indirectly get at the competitiveness of different markets. Such indirect approaches to measurement are commonplace in science.

Temporal well-being, as an indirect measure of lifetime well-being, meets both of Kyburg’s requirements. As was argued in §4, whereas direct measures of lifetime well-being rarely exist, many measures of temporal well-being already do, and so Kyburg’s second requirement that an indirect measurement should be more reliable than a direct one is implicitly met. In regards to Kyburg’s first requirement, our indirect temporal well-being measurements indeed do not violate our immediate lifetime well-being judgments too often and too flagrantly.

When what seems to be good for us at a moment or over some period of life also seems to be good for our lives as a whole, temporal well-being and lifetime well-being conform to one another. Having a great time at a party seems beneficial to us during the party, and it also seems that fun experiences usually contribute to our overall lifetime well-being. Depression seems bad for us while we suffer from it, but it also seems to reduce our overall lifetime well-being as well. Dedicating ourselves to loved ones often seems to have prudential value over some limited period of our lives, and it also seems to be something that increases our lifetime well-being. The cases in which what appears to be conducive to our well-being over a limited period of time also appears to be conducive to our well-being over a lifetime are so common that we often do not even notice them.

While there are cases where temporal well-being does appear at odds with lifetime well-being, these seem to be exceptions that show the rule, and as long as they do not too often and too flagrantly Kyburg's requirement is met. While satisfying my desire to smoke another cigarette today might increase my temporal well-being, it might ultimately reduce the amount of desires I get to fulfil, and so decrease my lifetime well-being by decreasing the length of my lifetime due to an early cancerous grave. While engaging in a meaningful project like writing a philosophical article might be conducive to my current temporal well-being, when I ultimately fail to get it published it can be detrimental to my lifetime well-being. Lastly, while enjoying the pure pleasure of a drug induced high might increase my temporal well-being right now, the addiction it could ultimately lead to will be detrimental to my ability to enjoy pleasures over my lifetime. These cases force philosophers who defend temporal well-being understood as constituted by hedonism, desire satisfaction, or objective lists respectively, to come up with a wide variety of ways to allow them to adjudicate between the discrepancies between what

appears good for someone at a particular moment and what is good for them over their whole life.<sup>14</sup>

But we do not need to overcome such inconsistencies if we instead view temporal well-being merely as an indirect measure of lifetime well-being, one that gets things right often enough and does not violate our immediate judgments too often or too flagrantly. In this regard it is sufficient that the overlap generally exists so that the policy recommendations we draw from temporal well-being will hold true for lifetime well-being *for the most part*. Even if measuring lifetime well-being directly (were it possible) might seem to get closer to the truth, temporal well-being measures, despite being false, can be more useful for reaching other goals of well-being science and policy.

Angner (2011) discusses indirect measures specifically in the context of well-being measures. Angner argues that even if we should treat direct measures as superior to indirect measures, SWB measures are not more direct than economic ones (118). As part of his argument, Angner reconstructs what he takes to be the argument made in defense of preferring SWB measures over economic measures. Most relevant to our purposes is premise 2, according to which a direct measure better represents an object of measurement than an indirect measure does: “(P2) For all X, if M and M\* are measures of X, and if M is a direct measure of X whereas M\* is not a direct measure of X, then M better represents X than M\* does” (119). As Angner notes, it is not entirely clear what it means here to say that a measure is direct, but by generalizing from the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary’s definition of a direct measure in the context of attitude measurement, Angner defines a “measure M is a direct measure of a person P’s state S if and only if M is based on P’s report about whether (or to what

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<sup>14</sup> In Hersch & Weltman (forthcoming), we propose a well-being atomism that can accomplish this.

degree) she is in S” (121). This focus on whether the measurement is derived from a person’s report as the central aspect of directness is at odds with Kyburg’s treatment of any measure as an indirect measure if it more or less conforms to the direct measure, while being more consistent or reliable than the direct measurement.

As Angner sees it, the reason some might think that direct measurement is superior to indirect measurement is that a direct measure better “succeeds in representing that which it is designed to represent” (122). This connection between measurement and representation is not one that Angner develops further, since he is interested in arguing that subjective measures are not more direct than economic ones. Nevertheless, Angner is also clear that “there are contexts in which direct measures are demonstrably less valid than properly designed indirect measures, as in the case of the measurement of prejudice” (123). While Angner, in response to his interlocutors, is treating here “direct measures” as self-reports, the point that direct measures need not be always considered more valid than indirect measures still stands for the case of direct lifetime well-being measures, whatever they may be, compared to indirect measures that get at lifetime well-being by way of temporal well-being.

To get a better handle on when direct or indirect measures should be used is an important issue on which too little has been written, yet it is beyond the scope of this article to settle the question. For our purposes, it suffices to establish that indirect measures are at least sometimes useful. In the case of lifetime well-being, since direct measurement suffers from the challenges highlighted in the previous section, temporal well-being is a promising alternative indirect measure.<sup>15</sup> In the case of well-being, it is not farfetched to claim that measures of temporal well-

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<sup>15</sup> One might draw an analogy to the paradox of hedonism, according to which the only way to attain happiness is to aim at something else:

But I now thought that this end [one's happiness] was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own



being do not violate our immediate judgments too often and too flagrantly when we think of lifetime well-being. While there are cases in which our judgments diverge, in most cases what seems conducive to a person's well-being at a time is often good for them over their lives. Furthermore, consistent and reliable measures of temporal well-being have been developed in the social science, while the same cannot be said for lifetime well-being. Social scientists working on well-being are committed, albeit implicitly, to a temporal concept of well-being.

Measuring lifetime well-being directly faces too substantial a challenge to be practical. We should adopt a different approach. Treating temporal well-being as an indirect measure of what we really wanted to measure and improve, makes sense.<sup>16</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

We might be entirely on board with the view that only lifetime well-being is the normatively adequate conception of well-being, we might be convinced that the current theories of well-being only make sense understood as theories of lifetime well-being. Nevertheless, as I have argued in this article, lifetime well-being is both difficult to measure directly and inadequate for guiding policy. Focusing on temporal well-being, which is both an adequate indirect measure of lifetime well-being, and an adequate focus for the purposes of improving

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happiness [...] Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness along the way [...] Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so (Mill, 1909, 94)

Similarly, in the case of public policy and lifetime well-being—in order to increase lifetime well-being (which is what we truly want) we should aim at increasing temporal well-being (even if this is a vacuous concept).

<sup>16</sup> It is not entirely clear that doing so would conflict with Bramble's position, since he writes that:

It is important to note that my claim here is not that temporal well-being, if it were to exist, could not have normative significance for us. It could have such significance. It is just that this significance could not be intrinsic. It could have normative significance for us only to the extent that it happened to bear on our lifetime well-being. It would not be worth promoting or seeking for its own sake, or independently of any such implications. (Bramble, 2018, 15)

well-being through public policy, is a way to effectively promote well-being understood as lifetime well-being.

One upshot for the debate regarding how we should understand well-being philosophically is that exploring the application of lifetime well-being in the context of measurement and policy is that its usefulness, or rather lack thereof, gives us prima facie reason to be less certain about it as an object of moral consideration. Nevertheless, the clearest upshot is that we ought to be very careful before we assert, as Bramble does, that the time for temporal well-being has passed.<sup>17</sup>

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