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Sincere Exchanges, Not Fabricated Neutrality:
A Response to Mark Piper

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Mark Piper (2019) accomplishes the impossible in "Struggling for Clarity on Well-Being." He sets up a programmatic paper in under 3000 words, and he insightfully engages specific theories despite aporia. Piper argues that contemporary debates on well-being are stalemated, largely because no one clarifies "well-being," "goodness for," or "prudential goodness."[1] This ambiguity breeds monsters, especially a bull that can aim its horns at every well-being theorist. One horn aims at philosophers who abstractly characterize prudential goodness to speak to all theories of well-being; their flimsy definitions get shredded due to ambiguity and unhelpfulness. The other horn aims at philosophers who explicitly stipulate definitions of prudential goodness by loading them with concrete norms; these philosophers get eviscerated and trampled under the weight of their own assumptions.[2] Piper laments the gore of the literature. And although he ends his paper without resolution, he preserves hope for a better definition of prudential goodness. He hopes for a definition that avoids both abstract cloudiness and stipulative muddiness.

But I want to challenge Piper on this dilemma. I agree that the bull in the labyrinth of the well-being literature has one sharp horn. It really does gut philosophers who flee difficulties via excess abstraction. But the other horn, aimed against stipulative philosophers, is blunted. Substantive discussions about well-being may not provide a neutral ground that all debaters can occupy. But that's not a vice. If any discussions are unavoidably normative, ones about well-being are, and their normative heft shouldn't weigh against them.[3]

In fact, theoretical neutrality isn't needed in moral, ethical, political, or prudential conversations. Rather, open exchange is. And exchange doesn't depend on moral, ethical, political, prudential, or even ontological impartiality. It just requires that we understand ourselves and others, and communicate clearly and fairly. Piper fails to acknowledge one crucial assumption: he implies that exactly one theory of well-being is correct or better than all alternatives. This precludes mixed ideas and multiple truths.[4] Especially in practical domains, it's more likely that many theories will adequately describe the phenomena of well-being, and many theories will lead people to live well. Given the probability of this plurality,

neutrality seems all the more puzzling. Neutrality is a mirage, fooling especially philosophers who yearn for a transcendental sun to elucidate earthly mires. But those securely on earth—boiling crawfish in the bayou and singing about our troubles behind a beat—understand that there is no neutral ground, no way out of the mire, and that's OK. Such a harsh, transcendental sun would desiccate the supple and delicate details of everyday moral life anyway.[5]

Rather than condemning stipulation, we can cast it as careful, overt consideration of our own standards. When we make ourselves vulnerable by revealing our sincere and lived commitments, we can make sense of the gorgeous, hideous, ecstatic, and miserable components of our lives that we must integrate into our unified narratives.[6] Stipulation, if done for scrutiny of one's sincerely held beliefs, is valiantly honest. And if this stipulation is partnered with openness toward alternatives and good faith efforts to expose our own weaknesses and buttress them, then there are no theoretical or practical downsides. The myriad theories about well-being or goodness don't conceal the fact that we can't avoid assuming a specific theory in our everyday lives at any given moment. Our most valued objective goods or subjective experiences direct our lives. And our lives will not all be taken as equally good, no matter the neutrality feigned. When we study well-being, we want our lives to go well in specific ways, not just to think about questions impartially.[7]

This obsession with neutrality and meta-conversations is tired.[8] Philosophers constantly try to ascend everyday messiness; they claw at mountains hoping for higher ground to survey the valleys. But I fear we've climbed so high that altitude sickness afflicts us. These impulses for higher ground, at best, lead to few insights, and at worst, distract from important matters. To warn against this urge, Richard Rorty advised that we should look for "toeholds" on the trails of life, not "skyhooks" that carry us upward (1991a, p. 14; 1991b, p. 38). That is, when facing the jumble of incompatible theories, we can't find a neutral ground, and we can't expect heavenly intervention to lift us out of the problems. Instead, when climbing our own ethical mountains, we should focus on our footing, and we shouldn't fantasize about nebulous escapes.[9]

I feel Piper's unrest and perplexity at the literature. But rather than hold out hope for a better definition, I wonder whether we haven't found answers because the questions and investigative methods are impotent. Critics might be frustrated that I didn't use conceptual analysis or meta-level discourse. But my point is that those very tools constructed the labyrinth we're now in. If we use those same tools, we fortify its walls and convolute its patterns. That's fine if you enjoy life in the trap. But I

prefer life outside. So, if we know that abstraction leads nowhere, and that stipulation is the only other available method, I welcome the latter. And I understand it as proper motivation for problem solving rather than as a horn in Piper's dilemma.[10]

Notes

[1]   "Well-being," "goodness for" and "prudential goodness" are roughly synonymous on Piper's account. Piper carefully shows that traditional ways of disambiguating "well-being" just won't work. Contrasting prudential goodness with other types of goodness doesn't work (e.g. vs. intrinsic goodness, aesthetic goodness, or goodness relative to some perfectionist standard). And providing rough synonyms (e.g. "welfare") doesn't either (Sec. III).

[2]   Throughout, I will use "stipulative" to refer to this horn of the dilemma. "Stipulative," strictly, seems too narrow to describe the philosophers who begin with thick, irreducibly normative theories. But the label contrasts with the generalist tendencies of the other horn of the dilemma. Most important for my point here is that "stipulative" thinkers start out by theorizing with concrete, particular, definitive values or frameworks that only they and their sympathizers would agree to. They don't try to find some more universal, general, or abstract ground for discussion. Piper sees derides this as vicious question begging. I disagree.

[3]   Piper also seems to think it's a problem that stipulative thinkers open themselves to *reductiones ad absurdum* and *prima facie* disputes (sec. VI). But this seems a strange worry. Philosophers are open to these problems no matter what. And as Marcus Aurelius says, "If anyone can refute me—show me I'm making a mistake or looking at things from the wrong perspective—I'll gladly change. It's the truth I'm after, and the truth never harmed anyone. What harms us is to persist in self-deceit and ignorance" (2003, vi.21). Taking a personal stand and having personal stakes in the debate aren't necessarily downsides. They're proper motivation for getting things right.

Additionally, I assume Piper doesn't want to make the tragic point: all discussions of well-being are doomed to ambiguity and ineffectiveness, and there's nothing we can do about it. This would lead to quietism or cynicism, neither of which I detect in Piper's work.

[4]   One notable exception to Piper's tendency against pluralism is his mention of hybrid theories of well-being (sec. II).

[5]   The debate Piper references in well-being mirrors the debates between moral particularists and generalists/universalists. For example, see the work of Jonathan Dancy for a particularist defense (esp. 2004) and R.M. Hare for a universalist defense (esp. 1963).

[6]   Maybe we can take inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche in discussions on well-being. Nietzsche asks us to integrate every aspect of our lives into a coherent style, "To 'give style' to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer

and then fit them into an artistic plan until each appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. … In the end, when the work is complete, it becomes clear how it was the force of a single taste that ruled and shaped everything great and small—whether the taste was good or bad means less than one may think; it's enough that it was one taste! …" ([1887] 2001, §290, pp. 163-4).

[7] Aristotle puzzled about meta-worries too. Feeling the pressure for precision surrounding the definition of "goodness" on his way to defining "happiness," he reminds his readers that, "some in fact have perished because of wealth, others because of courage" (2002, 1094b18-20). In other words, he reemphasizes the *practical* stakes of conversations about happiness, as some literally die degrading deaths because of the things they value. Aristotle was dialectical, surveying extant opinions. But he wasn't neutral because he knew ethics, politics, and well-being are mortal concerns.

It's also crucial to stress that the practical emphasis doesn't mean we need to resort to actionism or hasty judgments. Rather, the practical stakes should serve to question the goal of neutrality itself. Neutrality gives us nothing if it can't reconnect with practical concerns.

Here, I'm also assuming that Piper isn't exclusively after instrumental goods, like publishing more articles about well-being or starting new academic debates for the sake of monographs and anthologies. No doubt, these are goods and can impact the practical lives of contemporary academics. But the debate seems to aim at something more.

[8] Kant wanted an authoritative morality that bound people categorically and absolutely, no matter empirical differences. So, he constructed a metaphysical and epistemological bargaining table ([1785] 1983, AK389). And British utilitarians recoiled against the casuistry of lawyers, so they invented impartial formulae (e.g. Sidgwick, [1906] 1981, esp. p. 99). I take this strategy of ascent and neutrality as Piper's main tactic in sec. V.

[9] I worry that the philosophical instinct to ascend empirical realities, especially as seen in philosophers like Kant, will lead to oppression. From such stellar vantages, morality gets reduced to 'dignity' or 'categorical imperatives,' and those abstractions will survive despite blatantly racist or harmful attitudes that such philosophers hold when judging real people and real-world events. These harms are largely ignored too, rather than dealt with directly (see: Mills, 2014).

In the well-being literature, I hope we can avoid Kant's fate. I think part of the solution is making sure differences don't disappear and that many lives are represented in our works. That way, we won't lose important features of our lives that affect not only the ways we live, but the ways we think about things. Audre Lorde warned against white feminism and its erasure of difference for the same reasons. She recommended that feminists begin to notice that, "Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" ([1979] 2007, p. 111), adding later, "Difference is the raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged" ([1979] 2007, p. 112). Semantic ascent and further abstraction

should be met with skepticism, especially in ethics and politics where real lives are purported to be discussed or affected. I'm not equating ambiguity of meta-well-being studies to the eraser of important differences between people. I'm warning, however, that such ascents can lead to problems.

¹⁰ The labyrinth parallels Wittgenstein's point about philosophy showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle ([1953] 2001, §309). The point that tools rarely betray their makers is another reference to Lorde ([1979] 2007, p. 112). I don't agree fully with Wittgenstein and Lorde, but their warnings are good to heed here.

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