

Well-Being East and West

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How to cite this paper: Fellmann, F. (2018) Well-Being East and West. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 6, 84-93. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2018.67008>

Received: May 21, 2018

Accepted: July 17, 2018

Published: July 20, 2018

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Abstract

In this paper, I will give the concept of well-being its broadest meaning possible. First, the external conditions of well-being will be listed. In a next step I shall analyze the internal presuppositions of a good life. Then ethical principles are considered in light of the natural pursuit of happiness. Finally I shall discuss how positive psychology will have to proceed to secure well-being for people even in difficult situations. The topic will be considered from two perspectives: from that of western philosophy, relying on Aristotle, and from that of eastern thinking, relying on Confucius. In Aristotle's theory of virtue ethics, *mesotes* or golden mean is the desirable middle way between two extremes, that of excess and that of deficiency. Confucius taught a way of living in the middle that he called *Zhongyong*. *Zhong* means "bent neither one way nor the other"; *yong* means "unchanging."

Keywords

Confucianism, Aristotelism, Communitarianism, Individualism, Family Structure, Erotic Love, Art of Living

1. Introduction: The Meaning of Well-Being

From an objective point of view, well-being means that people possess everything that they wish for: good health, a profitable job, a nice house, a big family, true friends, etc. But, strangely enough, a person who has everything that life can offer need not be happy. A poor fellow may well feel much better than a rich man. This paradox constitutes the riddle of well-being. Well-being is commonly defined as a state of feeling healthy and happy, but well-being exceeds subjectivity: it means having a good life. The good life is made up of situations and feelings that make being in the world comfortable.

First, you feel good at the actual moment, and then, more complicated, you feel good afterwards. The most difficult thing is to feel good in view of the fu-

ture, not being afraid of unforeseen things to happen. You can see here how in well-being the objective and the subjective perspective are interconnected. This reciprocity is at the core of the meaning of well-being which does not allow of a precise definition and can only be expressed in terms of family resemblance. Something always remains beyond the theoretical meaning that calls up moral sense. Well-being, thus, is a behavioral concept as well as an ethical one. In this broad sense it is close in meaning to the Greek *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as “happiness” or “welfare.”

In modern consumer societies well-being in the sense of social welfare is nearly the same all over the world. Trendy fashion, eating out, traveling etc. are the most important things, especially for youngsters, but also for older people. Beneath this smooth surface of the standard of living in monetary terms, cultural differences in outlook continue to exist to define true personal and social identity. Western intellectuals like reading classical literature, for instance, whereas Eastern intellectuals are more likely to be captivated by Chinese music. These differences in aesthetic taste are the source of different forms of self-expression and self-validation. An understanding of the different forms of life helps symbolic interaction between foreign people. It is in terms of these differences that I shall discuss the cultural aspects of well-being and positive psychology.

2. Natural and Social Environment

The external presuppositions of well-being reside in the environment. The quality of an environment is made up out of natural elements like climate, water, fresh air, etc. Similar to animals, humans are by nature adapted to the environment (Wilson, 1975) [1]. People can change places of residence if they do not like the climate. The environment as constructed by humans includes houses, traffic, health care, social support, justice, and so on. Amenable social conditions are those that give you a chance to participate. If this is not the case one may begin to examine the social order and look for appropriate means to change it.

Modern Western cultural philosophers are convinced that reality is a construction of the human mind (Glaserfeld, 2001) [2]. This is evident in the technical world. And synthetic biology is on the way to making bodily constitution an artifact as well. Modern psychology of personality teaches that individuals are constructing or constantly inventing themselves new (Kelly, 1955) [3]. Nevertheless, culture can model neither the natural world nor the human mind in any way (Pinker, 2002) [4]. Despite the uncertainty or indeterminacy principle applied to social-psychology that stands for the general probabilistic nature of social interaction, people need firm laws to orient themselves in the world. The theory of evolution provides the best explanation for the existence of constant behavior patterns (Buss, 2009) [5].

Confucius also thought that the outer environment plays a large role in shaping human conduct. But he is realistic enough not to ignore the natural boundaries of malleability. Humans need to be molded so as to achieve social perfection,

molded especially by a traditional culture and a social system conducive to peace. But this does only work if culture is there to take care of the fabric of the universe between heaven and earth. Confucius was convinced that a man can achieve the highest social perfection through exact observance of ritual rules of conduct (Yuanxiang, 2006) [6].

3. Internal Life

The internal state is subjective, and consequently the inner state of benevolence is more complex and more difficult to handle. One can change the outer conditions of life, but one cannot easily escape the interior life or character. Interior life is dominated by conflicting desires, and it is an illusionary belief that humans are by nature good, as the French philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau proclaimed in the Age of Enlightenment (18th Century). In China the follower of Confucius, the benevolent Mencius, may have been close to Rousseau (Yuanxiang & Bing, 2006) [7]. Modern evolutionary psychology, on the other hand, finds that human nature is ambivalent, made up of friendliness and aggression at one and the same time (Lorenz, 1974) [8]. This is not a fault, however, but a social capital and the source of the tremendous energy that drives humans to extraordinary activity.

Confucius was mainly a social and a political philosopher. He maintained that in practicing the rules of benevolence a natural well-being would be the result. Traditional Confucian values are focused on social relationships, emphasizing family loyalty, respect for one's elders, and social conformity. The whole ritual system was to create a state of harmony among people of different classes and estates. When Confucius explains the exact meaning of "ren" as "loving people" there is no hint at intimate relations between man and woman (1939, XX, 5) [9]. Social relations were about father and son, teacher and pupil. On the whole, women are not considered equal partners of men. Within the family, erotic hierarchies are strictly observed, and romantic love seems to be the exception.

In ancient Greece the position of women was the same, if not worse. In the polis, women were treated as slaves and birth machines, whereas the hetaera played an essential role in the symposia of homosexual men. Aristotle believed women were inferior to men. In his work *Politics* he writes, "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (2013, 1254b) [10]. A husband should secure the agreement, loyalty, and devotion of his wife, so that whether he himself is present or not, there will be solidarity in her attitude towards him. Husband and wife alike are considered guardians of common family interests.

4. Moral Philosophy

The ethical principles of Confucius are pragmatic and close to utilitarianism and the principle of greatest happiness of John Stuart Mill (2001) [11]. For Confucius the highest good is the path (*dao*) representing process and reality. In *The Doc-*

trine of the Mean he writes: “What you do not like done to yourself, do not do to others” (1939, XIII, 3) [9]. Reciprocity is based on social exchange contingent on rewarding reaction from others. Despite negative experiences in the period of the countless wars and fighting, Confucius was rather optimistic about human social potential. “When one cultivates to the utmost the principles of his nature, and exercises them on the principle of reciprocity, he is not far from the path” (1939, XIII, 3) [9].

To understand the ethics of reciprocity it is helpful to compare it with the position of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. For Kant the highest good is duty. Kant’s theory of moral duty is called “deontological” because Kant argues that to act in a morally right way people must act from duty (Grec: *deon*). Consequently Kant argued that it is not the consequences of actions that make them right or wrong, but the motives of the person who carries out the act. The act must be both good in itself, and good without qualification. In deontology, an act may be considered right even if the act produces a bad consequence. Kant too refers to the Golden Rule that “one should do unto others as they would have done unto them” (Kant 1969, 395) [12]. This sounds like the Confucian principle of reciprocity, but the meaning is somewhat different. The meaning of Kant’s rule refers to the inner conviction, and in this it differs from the utilitarian reciprocity of Confucius.

Kant’s ethics was in sharp contrast to consequentialism, for which rightness is based on the consequences of an act and not on the act itself. In later times, Neo-Kantian thinkers came closer to utilitarianism and tried to make clear how moral perfection has to keep in mind the empirical conditions of human life and the situations people are involved in (Berthold, 2018) [13]. Thus, the rigidity of duty ethics is mitigated and transformed into the art of living that takes care of concrete situations. In this respect Neo-Kantianism is similar to Neo-Confucianism with its pragmatic devices.

5. Human Civilization in the Light of Eros

The unique characteristic of Chinese civilization molded by cultural continuity of Confucianism is comparable to the heritage of Greek philosophy in Europe. Of course, in today’s fast moving world of globalization the traditional values undergo constant changes. An important change took place in the end of the 18th century. In Europe the period of Enlightenment culminating in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* was followed by the Romantic Movement. Here the German poet Wolfgang von Goethe with his famous novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* produced an emotional turn in the general temper of his times. In China romanticism found its expression in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which may be regarded as the Chinese *Werther*. “Red chamber” has become an idiom with several definitions, one in particular that refers to the sheltered chambers where the daughters of prominent families reside. It also refers to a dream of the hero in a “red chamber,” where the fates of many of the characters are foreshadowed.

In the opening chapter of the novel, a couplet is introduced: “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true; real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real.”

The couplet indicates that there exists no hard-dividing line between reality and illusion, but rather the impossibility of making distinctions in either world, fictional or actual. The novel provides deep insights in its depiction of the Chinese culture of the time, including descriptions of the era’s manners, expectations, and consequences (Schonebaum, 2012) [14]. Among these, the novel is particularly notable for its two major themes, those of romantic love and of the transitoriness of earthly sensual pleasures, as outlined in Buddhist and Taoist philosophies.

In Europe, the Buddhist idea of Nirvana was promoted by the German philosopher of life, Arthur Schopenhauer, in his best-known work *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) [15]. Philosophers like Kant had not traditionally been impressed in their anthropology by sexuality, but Schopenhauer addressed the topic and pointed out that sex plays an important part in human life. He defined a force within man that he felt took invariable precedence over reason: the “Will to Live” or “Will to Life” (*Wille zum Leben*), defined as an inherent drive within human beings, and indeed all creatures, to stay alive; a force that drives us into reproducing.

Schopenhauer refused to conceive erotic love as accidental, but rather understood it as an immensely powerful force that lay unconscious within the human’s psyche and dramatically shaped the world: “The ultimate aim of all love affairs... is more important than all other aims in man’s life; and therefore it is quite worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it. What is decided by it is nothing less than the composition of the next generation” (1819, WI, 534) [15].

These ideas foreshadowed the concepts of the libido and the unconscious of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis in the 20th century. Freudian psychology had a strong influence on the European way of life. Freud realized that sexuality affords the most intense pleasure, and considered this to be the schema for happiness. In *Civilization and its Discontents* of 1930 he writes: “I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the centre of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved. A psychical attitude of this sort comes naturally enough to all of us; one of the forms in which love manifests itself—sexual love—has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of pleasure and has thus furnished us with a pattern for our search for happiness. What is more natural than that we should persist in looking for happiness along the path on which we first encountered it?” (Freud 1961, 33) [16].

On the other hand, Freud was aware that the pleasure principle alone (in literal translation: “lust principle”) does not lead to happiness. He contrasted the pleasure principle with the reality principle as its counterpart, which describes the capacity to sacrifice the fulfillment of a desire when circumstances do not al-

low its immediate satisfaction. In infancy and early childhood, the libido rules behavior by obeying the pleasure principle. Youngsters merely seek immediate gratification, aiming to satisfy cravings such as hunger and thirst, and later they are looking for sex. Maturity means learning to endure the pain of deferred gratification. Freud argued that “an ego thus educated has become ‘reasonable’; it no longer lets itself be governed by the pleasure principle, but obeys the reality principle, which also, at bottom, seeks to obtain pleasure, but pleasure which is assured through taking account of reality, even though it is pleasure postponed and diminished” (1961, 26) [16]. Freud concludes: “The program of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled; yet we must not—indeed we cannot—give up our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfillment by some means or other. Very different paths may be taken in that direction, and we may give priority either to the positive aspect of the aim, that of gaining pleasure, or to its negative one, that of avoiding displeasure. By none of these paths can we attain all that we desire. Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual’s libido. There is no golden rule which applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved” (1961, 34) [16].

Freud’s insistence on Eros as the source of human culture regarded as a sublimation of the sexual drive is still prevailing nowadays in Western individualism and liberalism. This state of affairs may be compared with the introduction of psychoanalytic ideas into China. For me as a Western philosopher it is not easy to explore ideas that apply to modern Chinese psychology. I have to rely on Chinese secondary sources relevant to cultural issues of analysis and to the cultural interface between Western psychoanalysis and the richness of Chinese medical and philosophical ideas. How modern psychology that is more subjective and bound to individual mood meets Confucianism with its general rules of social conduct is an interesting question that needs further discussion.

To get an idea of this process I am taking up the example of the relation between parents and children. In Western Europe the single child with both parents gainfully employed is often pampered. I suppose that the young people of China in the 20th century are more or less getting to be the same way. The traditional ethical code of the cardinal guide (“father guides son”) needs to be reassessed in light of modern society with its new feelings and aspirations of personal well-being. Son and daughter as well have become partners of their parents—a new form of personal reciprocity.

As far as the intimate relation between the sexes is concerned, the time of arranged marriages is now over. Young people are nowadays allowed to have love affairs and to seek excitement in boundless sexual variety. It seems that in modern Chinese society erotic liberalism is not quite as large as in Europe or in the United States of America. A courteous feeling prevails rather than a licentious one. It may be the echo of a song which was popular at the times of Confucius. The song called *Guan Ju*, the fish hawk, a bird which remains ever faithful to its

mate, is about a young man wooing a pretty and kind girl. They become and remain sweet and faithful lovers as long as they live.

6. The Art of Living

To help people in having a good life, a positive psychology is needed. Ancient Greek psychology was rather simple, and traditional Chinese psychology was nearly the same. Since the discovery of the unconscious, modern psychology has become more complex and subtle. Thinking is no longer one-dimensional, but it is always a figure against an uncertain background of feeling. Positive psychology has to overcome the incongruity between reason and emotion in the sense of emotional intelligence. In this sense, positive psychology urges us to harmonize head and heart. Finding the balance of the two is the source of the art of living.

The Western art of living has its origin in classical philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, and in Hellenistic Stoicism and Epicureanism. Stoics believed in cosmological harmony comprising the human world of social life. They taught that the goal of life was to live in accordance with Nature, and they advocated self-control by reason as a means of overcoming destructive emotions. Epicurean philosophers viewed the universe as being ruled by chance, with no interference from gods. They regarded absence of pain as the greatest pleasure, and advocated a sensual way of life. Epicurus was the main rival to Stoicism and referred to individuality and subjective experience. The Epicurean life-style has become dominant in modern consumer societies, and feeling good is considered the highest value, dominating all other frames.

Confucius is near to stoic cosmic harmony and the conviction that reason is capable to control and dominate the affections: “While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of Equilibrium. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of Harmony” (1939, I, 4) [9]. Consequently the art of living endorsed by Confucius is more bound to communitarian values such as commitment, decorum, and politeness.

The Doctrine of the Mean proposes moderation, rectitude, objectivity, sincerity, benevolence, and propriety. The guiding principle is that one should never act in excess. The goal of the Mean is to maintain balance and harmony in directing the mind to a state of constant equilibrium. The person who follows the Mean is on a path of duty and must never leave it. A “superior man” is cautious, a gentle teacher, and shows no contempt for his inferiors. He always does what is natural according to his status in the world. Even common men can carry the mean over into their practices, as long as in doing so they do not exceed their social status.

The social orientation of Confucianism has been criticized as too limited in negating the sentiment of individuals. This is partly true, but considering this criticism Neo-Confucianism is on the way to be modified in the direction of a more emotional and spiritual attitude. Confucianism thus becomes a positive

resource for ways to combine the utilitarian side of life with its spiritual side. Each of the two sides possesses its own right regarding emotional intelligence in communities and in personal relations.

7. Conclusions

Modern philosophy of life acknowledges that life is a perpetual battle between antagonistic forces, called *Eros* and *Thanatos* by Sigmund Freud. *Eros* is the will to live, *Thanatos* is, not the normal death, but the drive of aggression. Freud speaks of “two heavenly forces” (Freud, 1961, 97) [16]. To deal with them, modern psychology has to follow an empirical method, beginning with the expression of emotions, especially allowing the suppressed unconscious to come to the surface. Learning the language of emotions is certainly of importance for arriving at personal freedom. The guiding principle in this I would like to call the “schema of Eros,” indicating the most palpable elements of human welfare (Fellmann, 2016, 47) [17]. I am disinclined, therefore, to describe subjective experience in the terms of sentimental idealism, for simple fear of missing the hard facts of life. The most basic facts are natural needs such as hunger and thirst and the sexual urge; and all these are needed to help people to learn what well-being is all about.

Western art of living that is close to the art of loving is mainly concerned with personal moods and feelings. It should not be denied that modern emotional enhancement has its dangers. It often leads to exaggerated excitement that renders behavior uncontrollable and devoid of respect for and obligations toward others. To be sure, we have to be friends of ourselves, but severe judges as well. For self-valuation in private life, Confucius is a valuable guide: “There is nothing more visible than what is secret, and nothing more manifest than what is minute. Therefore the superior man is watchful over himself, when he is alone” (1939, I, 3) [9]. How could one possibly forget this superb technique in the art of living? It is conspicuous for a most remarkable combination of small differences in characteristic features. It aims at making the subject independent of false excitations. To that end the wise man finds satisfaction in ritual behavior patterns that are just as conservative and reliable characters as are the rules of heaven. In so doing, the wise does not turn away from the earth; on the contrary, he clings to the objects belonging to the external world and obtains happiness from a reasonable relationship to them.

The main goal of the art of living is to cure people of pride and prejudice. Individuals and even whole societies are inclined to false conscience about themselves. To get things right requires creating situations of sympathetic understanding in which nearness and distance are in balance. In this respect our juxtaposition of Western and Eastern ways of living shows accordance as well as difference in the presuppositions of well-being. This makes culture a precious good that should not be leveled off by the so-called “multi-culty” ideology dominant in the European Union which turns individuals into elementary particles

moving in a social void. It is an anthropological fact that humans are by nature in need of being rooted somewhere. Notwithstanding the growing process of individuation, it is the traditional cultures that give the individual security and a feeling of cultural identity. The Chinese hold fast to traditional values such as intelligence and sincerity for a positive fulfillment in happiness. Confucius taught people not to leave the path they are convinced to be the best for their condition. And the perseverance in following that path requires taking one step after the other without undue precipitation. As a result of this self-discipline the art of living as practiced by Confucius does in fact come nearer to the welfare of mankind than any other method. In my opinion the art of living as taught by Confucius is the royal road to the general happiness and eternal peace in the age of globalization.

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