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Kat Wunderlin

PHIL4418 (EP4)-Issues of Life and Death

February 26th 2019

On Ability and Well-Being

As an EMT for NYS, many of the patients I transport have illnesses or conditions which result in the loss of ability. Some examples of these conditions include Alzheimer's where patients suffer from memory loss and reduced mental ability over time and Parkinson's disease where patients lose their ability to control their movements. Other conditions such as strokes or heart attacks can cause the loss of ability as can traumatic accidents such as car crashes or fires. It is this loss of ability that seems to take the greatest toll on patients physically and emotionally rather than the pain or discomfort caused by their condition. Many patients deny their loss of ability so much so that they hurt themselves further attempting to do something they once were able to; this may be a task as simple as trying to walk down the stairs independently or taking their own medication. I have been an EMT for two years and have questioned why people seem to always be in denial about their reduced ability and why illnesses that result in reduced ability over time tend to be the hardest to cope with. It has occurred to me that when measuring the quality of someone's life it is important to take into account their well-being. How to measure the well-being of an individual has been the subject of philosophical debates and many philosophers such as Roger Crisp have taken stances on what the correct measure of well-being should be. These arguments tell the importance of desire-satisfaction, experiencing pleasure and harmony within a person's life yet none describe the importance of ability in accomplishing any of these. My definition of ability extends past just physical ability and includes mental, emotional and psychological ability. Ability should be used in addition to these other ideas which explain someone's well-being firstly because a person's ability is very important when defining oneself and because ability seems to be more quantifiable than the others which makes it more useful when describing medical conditions and what someone's well-being may look like with a particular illness.

Ability by my definition can be used as a bridge between philosophical understanding of well-being and a more health-centered understanding. As Roger Crisp describes “Your well-being concerns how well your life goes for you” (Crisp 2). This generalized definition helps to show that internal and external factors can constitute a person’s well-being. Life can go well in the sense that you grew up with loving parents who provided many opportunities for your success or in the sense that through personal achievement you have given yourself things you have wanted. Ability better describes these internal factors which can make your life go well for you. Having the ability to accomplish something or having the ability to make lasting friendships is as important as actually doing so. Therefore, ability does not have to be measured by physical actions done, it can also be measured in the potential to do those actions. For example, in my current state I do not have the ability to climb Mt. Everest--however through training and discipline I could eventually gain such an ability. This potential to gain an ability brings a certain level of satisfaction. This level of satisfaction is not equal to actually earning an ability or completing a task but brings a certain level of comfort and pleasure nonetheless. This is why there is so many romantic ideas surrounding youth, people who are young and of good health have the highest ability potentials. This sense of endless possibilities and open opportunities brings satisfaction whether or not abilities are learned or opportunities are actually taken. Thus, a component of well-being should be ability because it innately brings satisfaction. The loss of this potential is particularly devastating as well. The death of a young person who “had their whole life ahead of them” or “didn’t get the chance to live their life” is treated as an especially sad case in our culture. In this case I feel that we value potential more so than actual abilities and experiences. A young man who passes away may have lived a good but short life yet because he passes away young there is still a notion of a loss of opportunity. Thus, ability and the potential

are crucial for understanding another dimension of well-being. This understanding better informs us about what should be valued most in life and assists in understanding what aspects of illness make for reduced well-being.

Brad Hooker's piece "The Elements of Well-Being" describes various aspects of well-being including this idea of "individual utility" which is similar to my description of ability. He states "I will take the term 'well-being' to be synonymous with 'welfare', 'personal good', and 'individual utility'. Contributions to well-being I refer to as benefits or gains. Subtractions from well-being I refer to as harms, losses, or costs" (Hooker 1). Hooker explains that individual utility has to do with autonomy or the ability to accomplish tasks independently. This better informs my idea about ability because it supports the idea that loss of seemingly simple abilities such as the ability to walk without assistance are particularly damaging to a person's well-being. This is because these take away a person's autonomy and force them to rely on others. Other theories seem to go hand-and-hand with my description of ability and well-being. Firstly, hedonism is described as "acting in pursuit of the greatest balance of pleasure over pain" (Crisp 5). I think the notion of ability can assist because pleasure and pain are not always valued as most important. Many people value things that are outside of these definitions, such as friendships and truth, and thus certain things exist as good things without directly providing pleasure. Additionally, it can be argued that having the ability to firstly feel pleasure and then the ability to seek that pleasure is necessary. A person who suffers from a traumatic event which leaves her hospitalized with many broken bones may not feel pain because she is given morphine yet she is still unable to leave her bed until she recovers. This person is still not living a good life during that period because she is unable to do as she wishes regardless if she feels pleasure from the medicine or not. A similar argument can be made for how ability influences desire theories.

Desire theories are those which state that well-being consists “in the satisfaction of preferences or desires” (Crisp 7). Once again the satisfaction of desire cannot be accomplished without the ability to do so but also the simple fulfillment of desire should not completely constitute a good life. Again the potential to satisfy a desire can bring satisfaction in a way similar to actually satisfying that desire and many times in life things we believe we desire do not often bring the satisfaction we were expecting thus there is a certain level of misunderstanding that occurs. In some ways it is better to imagine the satisfaction from doing something rather than actually do such a thing because of this mismatch. Finally, objective list theories are those which purpose “lists constituting well-being that consist neither merely in pleasurable experience nor in desire-satisfaction. Such items include knowledge or friendship” (Crisp 9). Objective list theory is beneficial because it recognizes aspects that can contribute to well-being that are outside of those that simply lead to pleasure or satisfaction. These aspects seem to be those that are particularly devastating to lose in the case of illness. Alzheimer's patients who lose their knowledge or stroke victims who lose their ability to communicate suffer from a special type of loss which I believe has to do with the way we value these other aspects outside of just pleasure. An objective lists theorist would argue that ability is just another good which ought to be added to the list alongside friendship and knowledge and I would agree with this statement. When people describe what is important in life they are able to quickly list family, friendship, success and so forth but ability is hardly thought about. People, especially young people, forget about their potential, begin to take their abilities for granted and allow opportunities to pass. Thus, I think it is important that objective list theorists recognize the importance of ability when creating their lists of goods which enable a good life. Therefore, overall the idea of ability can be used to better understand the other theories of well-being.

One possible problem I can foresee with this emphasis on ability when regarding well-being is its practical use in medicine. There is still a gray area about when people truly lose their abilities and how to measure such. Ability is more measurable than pleasure or pain yet the potential of ability can be just as difficult. In the case of issuing DNRs (Do-Not-Resuscitate) and Euthanasia the information about recovering or coping with a particular condition or illness may not be completely true for all cases. Thus, healthcare decisions are still difficult to make even with the understanding of the importance of ability in defining someone's well-being. A second objection that arises when stating the importance of ability for well-being is that ability can be consciously used or not. Let us say that I have the ability to paint masterpieces and the potential to become a famous artist, yet I decide that I would rather pursue science, would I receive the same level of well-being from my ability despite not pursuing it? I would argue that some level of satisfaction which leads to improved well-being is derived simply from having the ability to do something. Let us say that I decide to not pursue painting because I think science is a safer option, this decision can provide the same amount of well-being than if I suddenly broke my hand and was no longer able to paint for the rest of my life. Therefore, I am unsure if choosing not to pursue an ability yields the same happiness as pursuing it but it can be confirmed that choosing not to pursue it is by far better than having it taken away by some external force.

In conclusion, ability should be considered when defining well-being because it is something that is more quantifiable and more important than simply measuring pleasure compared to pain. Ability should be defined not only physically, mentally and emotionally but in terms of the potential to have an ability. Despite the importance of ability in yielding positive well-being it is often forgotten when considering what makes for a good life. Therefore, ability

should be emphasized alongside objective list theory and desire theory in order to better understand well-being. This can then be translated into defining the level of negative well-being a particular condition or disease may cause or simply into generating satisfaction and appreciation for what skills a person already has and can develop through time.

Works Cited

1. Roger Crisp, *Well-Being* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2001), 1-13.
2. Brad Hooker, *The Elements of Well-Being* (University of Reading, 1996), 15-23.