

# Introduction: Collective Welfare

## Individual Welfare

A confusing diversity of labels: welfare, well-being, happiness, prudential life, good life, utility, eudaimonia, flourishing, meaningfulness.

It is not clear that all of these labels mean the same. Let us define **welfare = what makes someone's life go well for that person.**

Four clarifications:

(i) This is an evaluative category. It tells us whether we should think of someone's life as good or bad. It does not (immediately) tell us what duties and rights we have, and whether or how we should intervene in that person's life.

(ii) "for that person" does not mean "from that person's perspective". Someone's life might not be going well even if they do not know it (or inverse).

(iii) "what makes a life go well" is different from: what makes someone a good person. (Ex. the happy torturer.)

(iv) "go well" is different from: what makes someone's life morally valuable. (Ex. the unhappy altruist.)

Please note that the following seem to be open questions: do you need happiness (a certain type of emotional feeling) for your life to go well? Do you need meaningfulness (a certain sense of purposefulness) for your life to go well? You might answer "yes" to these questions. But these questions cannot be answered by definition.

## Welfarism

Why think about collective welfare? Many of our moral and political choices have an impact on many people. Some people will benefit, and some will be harmed. Even if everyone benefits, people will often benefit unequally. We want to have some way to make judgments about these cases.

Is welfare the only thing which morally matters? Call this

*Welfarism.* Welfare is the only thing which morally matters.

It is important to know the following:

(i) Welfarism does *not* entail utilitarianism:

*Utilitarianism.* An action is right just in case it maximises aggregate welfare.

But welfarism is much broader than that. You can accept welfarism while rejecting every aspect of utilitarianism.

(ii) Also, note that utilitarianism is *not* a theory of welfare. Utilitarianism does not tell what you should think about welfare.

(iii) You do not need to be a welfarist to think that welfare is important. Think of the following position: it matters that we respect people's rights and liberties, and on top of that, it matters that we promote collective welfare.

## Collective Welfare

Collective welfare is **the degree to which the lives of a group of people is going well**. The group could be any group we are interested in: my friends, women, minorities, immigrants, everyone in a country, everyone affected by my choices, ...

Other labels: common good, aggregate utility, general welfare, public interest. Once again, it is not clear that these labels mean the same!

(i) *Can we compare the welfare of different people?*

If person A lives life X, and person B lives life Y, is there some way to determine whether A is better off than B? If you think that the welfare of different people cannot be compared, then very little can be done—only the Pareto criterion really works then.

(ii) *How does distribution matter?*

A simple thought: if we have a group of people A, B, ..., then the collective welfare of the group is simply the welfare of A, plus the welfare of B, plus .... Call this view *sum-ranking*. When many people hear “collective welfare”, they think it must be sum-ranked. But that’s not obvious.

(iii) *How should we politically think about welfare?*

You might think that, once we have figured out what collective welfare is, we can immediately use that idea in politics. But once again, that’s too quick.

## Collective Welfare in Different Disciplines

Different disciplines deal with welfare, and each has their characteristic approach. One of the primary questions of this seminar will be how these different disciplines can learn from each other.

*Philosophy.* Philosophers are primarily interested in abstract analysis. For example, they have given us advanced analyses of (i) the concept of welfare, and (ii) different theories of distribution. Philosophers tend to think about welfare through abstract thought experiments.

*Economics.* One of the central concepts in mainstream economics is utility, which is often implicitly equated with welfare. In decision and game theory, economists have developed a sophisticated mathematical theory of utility. Economists use this theory to explain and predict human behaviour.

*Happiness Research.* Happiness research is a branch of psychology, but it also overlaps with other fields. Happiness researchers empirically investigate the effects of different life events and situations on people’s subjectively felt well-being, usually understood as a type of positive affect. This is primarily done through surveys.

*Politics.* Politicians and political theorists often appeal to collective welfare or the common good. International organisations measure the development and economic health of different countries through various indicators. What matters a lot for those indicators are their practical features (transparency, reliability, cost to measure).