

ART AND WELL-BEING

KEVIN MELCHIONNE

Art is commonly thought to promote well-being. Aestheticians, however, have not considered how art plays this role. Over the past quarter century, there has been considerable research in positive psychology, the empirical study of subjective well-being (SWB). This research has resulted in robust findings on the factors promoting well-being. In this paper, I consider the findings for SWB in contemporary psychology in order to identify how art supports well-being. I also explore the implications of SWB theory for aesthetic theory and arts policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Art is commonly thought to promote happiness. Over the past quarter century, there has been considerable research in positive psychology, the empirical study of subjective well-being (SWB). This research offers robust findings on the factors promoting well-being. The findings have filtered back into counselling, organizational management, and popular culture in countless ways. Yet they have provoked almost no discussion in artistic circles. Little empirical work has been dedicated to determining if art plays a meaningful role in well-being. Philosophers of art have not considered the implications of SWB for aesthetic theory.¹ Perhaps the lack of interest in art and well-being stems from the assumption that the connection is so obvious that serious treatment is not necessary. One is quickly lost in bromides. Or, perhaps artistic types fear that the study of art and well-being is just a feckless invitation to all sorts of artistic banality (as if the neglect of SWB were already doing a good job of protecting us from that!).

Happiness or well-being has long been accepted as a goal for human beings.² It is hard to imagine that art would not in some way find its purpose in a larger framework of human well-being. It is tempting to assume that a life devoted to art is more satisfying just because of that devotion. Unfortunately, we cannot assume that art plays such a role even as we acknowledge art's many virtues.

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¹ Goldie's work in this area is in a non-empirical Aristotelian framework: Peter Goldie, 'Towards a Virtue Theory of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007): 372–87, and 'Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008): 179–95. Nehamas relies on a conception of happiness that strays far from empirical findings. See Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

² In keeping with standard practice, I will use the terms interchangeably here.

The admirable qualities of particular works of art cannot be taken as proof that art supports well-being. When art disrupts patterns, upends conventions, or pushes boundaries, the notion of well-being is probably far from the artist's concerns.

At the same time, it is hard to imagine that well-being could be unimportant to aesthetic theory. If it turned out that art and well-being were positively connected, we would need to understand how this happens. And even if it turned out that art had no relation to well-being, this finding would still have to be registered and digested. In this spirit, the intuition behind this paper is that the relation between artistic practices and well-being lies at the centre of any study of aesthetic value. Instead of off-the-cuff speculation, such an account would have to be informed by SWB theory as psychologists now understand it. To understand the relationship between art and well-being, researchers must avoid both bland truisms and knee-jerk dismissals.

I use the term *well-being aesthetics* for the study of the relationship between well-being and art. Art is construed broadly to include the full range of creative *and* appreciative activities in the fine arts and popular culture as well as our everyday lives. If well-being is taken as, at the very least, one of the more important aims of art, must we change what is valued *about* art? Are there some ways of talking about art which are better suited to fostering well-being than others? With these questions in mind, I review the fledgling empirical research, outline the dominant view of SWB in contemporary psychology, and consider the main philosophical problems. I also explore the implications of SWB theory for cultural policy.

II. RESEARCH ON WELL-BEING AND ART

Early studies of well-being in the social sciences were preoccupied with objective conditions of well-being, such as income, longevity, standard of living, and other economic indicators. Following Richard Easterlin, a consensus slowly took hold in the 1970s that economic factors have a minimal impact on well-being once basic needs are met.³ In order to understand happiness, one must look beyond wealth to other features of happy lives. Right or wrong, the Easterlin Paradox, as it has come to be called, was taken as an article of faith for many early researchers on SWB and was crucial to the formation and growth of the field in the 1980s

³ Richard A. Easterlin, 'Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence', in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*, ed. Paul A. David and Melvin W. Reder (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 89–125. And, in a follow-up to sceptics, 'Feeding the Illusion of Growth and Happiness: A Reply to Hagerty and Veenhoven', *Social Indicators Research* 74 (2005): 429–43.

and 1990s.⁴ Without the Paradox, SWB theory probably would not have developed as rapidly as it did.⁵ Today, SWB is poised to become a leading vital statistic and important tool of public policy.⁶

In psychology, the study of well-being emerged as an alternative to the preoccupation with abnormality that has long dominated the field. Researchers and clinicians observed that the study of abnormality did not help them understand psychological health and how to promote it. In keeping with the Easterlin Paradox, psychologists also believed that greater wealth and achievement do not significantly increase well-being. Individuals assess similar circumstances in dramatically different ways.⁷ A person with great wealth and achievement may be prone to unhealthy responses that curtail well-being, while another who secures only basic needs may enjoy a healthy response pattern. Moreover, circumstances such as wealth are not easily changed and are subject to hedonic adaptation. After a rise in wealth, we are likely to adapt to our new standard of living and shift back to a lower point in our hedonic range. With subjective factors crucial to well-being, research shifted from external to internal factors, in other words, from objective standards of living to how our dispositions, inner resources, and coping tendencies support well-being.⁸

It is here that research on art would have been expected to play an influential role. We should have seen arts researchers seeking to determine if and when artistic activity influences well-being. But the application of SWB theory to

⁴ The jury is still out on the 'Easterlin Paradox', with some of the controversy stemming from how we understand happiness and how this understanding is reflected in survey questions. See Betsy Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, 'Subjective Well-Being and Income: Is There Any Evidence of Satiation?' (report, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, April 29, 2013), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/subjective-well-being-income.pdf>. See also Carol Graham, Soumya Chattopadhyay, and Mario Picon, 'The Easterlin and Other Paradoxes: Why Both Sides of the Debate May Be Correct', in *International Differences in Well-Being*, ed. Ed Diener, Daniel Kahneman, and John Helliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 247–90.

⁵ An observation of Graham's. Carol Graham, 'More on the Easterlin Paradox: A Response to Wolfers', *Up Front* (blog), *Brookings Institution*, 15 December 2010, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2010/12/15-happiness-easterlin-graham>.

⁶ For a review, see Michael R. Hagerty, 'Quality of Life Indexes for National Policy: Review and Agenda for Research', *Social Indicators Research* 55 (2001): 1–96. SWB theorists propose an index based on reports of subjective well-being: Ed Diener, 'Subjective Well-Being: The Science of Happiness and a Proposal for a National Index', *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 34–43.

⁷ For example, among psychologists, the widely cited Paul T. Costa, Robert R. McCrae, and Alan B. Zonderman, 'Environmental and Dispositional Influences on Well-Being: Longitudinal Follow-Up of an American National Sample', *British Journal of Psychology* 78 (1987): 299–306.

⁸ For defense of subjective over objective measures of happiness, see David G. Myers and Ed Diener, 'Who Is Happy?', *Psychological Science* 6 (1995): 10–19.

research on art did not happen. Instead, over the past quarter century, empirical research on art has been dominated by institutional ‘impact’ studies seeking to make a case for art in the economy or to find the most reliable means of audience development.⁹ Usually commissioned by the institutions themselves, these studies are designed for the sake of advocacy and operations. Institutions seek to determine how to best engage visitors for the purposes of improving visitors’ experience, and with it, attendance and revenue. This ‘supply side’ approach, as Kreidler calls it, begs the question by presupposing the role of institutions in our aesthetic lives. In contrast, ‘demand-side’ research would consider how people engage in art for their own purposes, with or without institutional mediation. Finally, looming imperiously over arts research are the disciplines of art and literary history. The fields are disconnected from empirical arts research by their preoccupation with museums and canons. They still exercise a vast influence on the career paths of young scholars interested in the arts. In all, arts researchers are ill-prepared for the Copernican shift from institutional priorities to ordinary lives that is encouraged by SWB theory.

The important exception to this account has been Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, whose ground-breaking work on creativity and what he termed *flow* represents the single most important connection between the psychology of well-being and art.¹⁰ Csikszentmihalyi identifies the features of activity which lead to flow. Flow occurs when individuals engage in an activity with great concentration or absorption. Flow activity has structure but allows for the variety that keeps it fresh. In a flow state, individuals lose sense of time and self. They are challenged but not frustrated by the activity. The result of flow is a sense of vitality that is likely to resonate in positive ways in the overall life of the individual. Thus, a life with much flow is likely to be a satisfying one. In this way, flow is linked to well-being. Artistic activity typically has the characteristics of flow, a strong indicator that art is linked to well-being.¹¹

If well-being results primarily from states of flow, then the goal is to bring about more of those states. If I can create flow through art, then I can secure well-being through art. But the story of well-being is more complex. Coming prior to the explosion of research in SWB in psychology, Csikszentmihalyi’s approach does not reflect the comprehensive account of SWB that later emerges. As important

⁹ John Kreidler, ‘Modeling the Future of US Arts Policy: Beyond Supply-Side Pump-Priming’, *Cultural Trends* 22 (2013): 145–55.

¹⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

¹¹ For instance, Tatiana Chemi, ‘The Experience of Flow in Artistic Creation’, in *Flow Experience: Empirical Research and Applications*, ed. László Harmat et al. (Cham: Springer, 2016), 36–50.

as it is, Csikszentmihalyi's work remains focused for the most part on the sources of positive emotion or affect *in the moment*. As we shall see, SWB usually requires more than intermittent positive feelings. We need to understand how positive affect fits into an overall life. It is possible that a life exhibiting flow-like features in some spheres may not be on the whole satisfying. For instance, there may not be enough flow to compensate for negative feelings in other areas. Or, in spite of flow, the individual may still evaluate life negatively. Unhealthy activities like gambling may also have flow-like features. We are in need of a comprehensive account of well-being in order to guide reflection on art and well-being.

We see the first signs of a broader conception of well-being and art in a 2007 report of the Curb Center at Vanderbilt University, 'Happiness and a High Quality of Life: The Role of Art and Art Making'.¹² The report represents the first attempt to bring together arts professionals to discuss the subject of well-being. For the first time, in 2011, a report of the National Endowment for the Arts called for arts research on well-being.¹³ The report relates the findings of neuroscience research showing, for instance, strong connections between arts and cognitive development in children and cognitive fitness in the elderly. In these studies, the emphasis is on measurable cognitive or social outcomes, which are weak and indirect proxies for well-being. Notwithstanding the title of the report, there is no well-being research cited. Among planners for future SWB surveys, art remains a low priority for discovery. When the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine issued the first publication in the United States devoted to planning for a national survey of well-being, there was no mention of art.¹⁴ In all, when there is discussion of art, there is no mention of well-being. And, when there is discussion of well-being, there is no discussion of art.¹⁵

¹² Steven Tepper, *Artful Living: Examining the Relationship between Artistic Practice and Subjective Wellbeing across Three National Surveys* (Nashville, TN: Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy, Vanderbilt University, 2014), <http://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/artful-living-relationship-artistic-practice-subjective-wellbeing.pdf>.

¹³ Gay Hanna et al., *The Arts and Human Development: Framing a National Research Agenda for the Arts, Lifelong Learning, and Individual Well-Being* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/TheArtsAndHumanDev.pdf>.

¹⁴ Arthur A. Stone and Christopher Mackie, eds., *Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering, and Other Dimensions of Experience* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2013).

¹⁵ As Graham, Chattopadhyay, and Lakhanpal observe, 'the data sets for the U.S. that are available on well-being do not have detailed information on participation in the arts, and the data on the arts do not, at present, have well-being questions there-in'. Carol Graham, Soumya Chattopadhyay, and Jai Roberto Lakhanpal, 'Using New Metrics to Assess the Role of the Arts in Well-Being: Some Initial Results from the Economics of Happiness' (working paper, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2014), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Brookings-Final-Report.pdf>.

Lacking data on well-being and the arts, researchers have been creative, teasing the findings out of existing data. Carol Graham and Steven Tepper are the first to look at existing datasets for a correlation between art and well-being.¹⁶ Graham uses a matched cohort approach 'to see whether being a producer or consumer of the arts contributed more to the average cohort level of well-being than not being a producer or a consumer'.¹⁷ She looks at the demographic characteristics of arts participation in the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, published by the National Endowment for the Arts, in Washington, DC, and matches them to the same demographic profile in the *Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index* in order to generate a well-being rating.

The findings are uneven. They do not always cohere as neatly as one might hope. Graham finds 'moderate support' for an association of well-being with arts consumption.¹⁸ For production, however, she finds an association in some arts but not others and, on average, none at all. Looking at other datasets, Tepper finds a 'strong' correlation between art and well-being. He finds that most artistic activity is 'associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, a more positive self-image, less anxiety about change, a more tolerant and open approach to diverse others, and, in some cases, less focus on materialistic values and the acquisition of goods'.¹⁹ Moreover, Tepper finds that more artistic activity is correlated with more well-being.

Graham and Tepper both concede the difficulty of attributing a causal role for the arts in well-being. We cannot determine if individuals with higher well-being are simply more likely to participate in the arts or if the activity itself leads to higher levels of well-being. It is possible that art improves well-being, but it could also be that those who are active in the arts are simply happier to begin with.

Misleading claims derived from correlations are a risk in regression analysis.²⁰ A variable may 'drag along' with it other unknown or unmeasured factors, which may be the real causes. When a correlated variable is wrongly taken as causal, the false claim can elicit all kinds of ill-conceived policy recommendations. This misuse of regression analysis is evident in the Happy Museum Project (HMP). Funded from both private and public sources in the United Kingdom, the HMP is a mash-up of two popular themes, environmental sustainability and well-being. Arts managers increasingly rely on these motifs when designing programs and seeking funding. HMP administrators make the ambitious claim that they have

¹⁶ Ibid. and Tepper, *Artful Living*.

¹⁷ Graham, Chattopadhyay, and Lakhanpal, 'Using New Metrics', 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹ Tepper, *Artful Living*, 6.

²⁰ Richard Nisbett, *Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), esp. chap. 11.

'proof that museums do make you happy'.²¹ Of course, happy museum researchers did not really have 'proof' that museums cause happiness. They simply find the same correlation between well-being and cultural consumption that Graham finds. Although the fine print notes caution, the language of the study is almost without exception one of 'impact', in other words, causality rather than correlation. For instance, the study's author, Daniel Fujiwara, finds that 'being audience to arts has a positive impact on health'. From good health, he infers that arts attendance has a 'positive impact' on happiness.²² He fails, however, to acknowledge the obvious: that bad health is surely a major reason why one would not be able to attend an arts events in the first place.

In fact, well-being is notoriously difficult to influence over the long term. From the perspective of SWB theory, it is hard to see the initiatives funded by the Happy Museum Project, like a 'conversation hub' or community outreach, as likely to enhance well-being. Although more substantial projects, like community gardens and crafts workshops, are promising, researchers may simply be confusing the ordinary satisfaction that participants find in a visit to a museum with well-being as it is understood by psychologists.²³ That one enjoys a particular cultural event is not the same as feeling one has a better life or feels happier over the long term *as a result of* the event. In bypassing this distinction, the Happy Museum Project begins to look more like old-fashioned 'supply-side' advocacy than like authentic research on art and well-being.

We should not be surprised that the correlation of art and well-being is often modest and not terribly predictive. As we shall see, well-being is a complex state, influenced by many factors. Even if art does play a salutary role in the lives of those who pursue it, the engagement may not be more influential than other factors. Tepper's research provides us with an unexpected and somewhat troubling reminder of this complexity. Examining data from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), a survey of arts graduates in the United States, he finds signs of an unsettling relationship between the well-being and artistic

²¹ From their press release for a commissioned research report on museum attendance and well-being, see 'Museums and Happiness – Research Report', press release, 10 April 2013, <http://www.happymuseumproject.org/happy-museums-are-good-for-you-report-publication/>.

²² Daniel Fujiwara, *Museums and Happiness: The Value of Participating in Museums and the Arts* (London: Happy Museum Project, 2013), 24. The report was commissioned by the HMP.

²³ The contradictions with the Happy Museum Project only mount with further consideration. If, following Fujiwara, the HMP has determined that museums already cause happiness just as they are, why do the funded pilot projects depart so radically from conventional museum practices? Either museums cause happiness just as they are and funding for new approaches is not needed or they do not cause happiness and the funding is needed.

activity of what he calls the *pro-am*. A pro-am is a seriously committed, professionally trained artist who does not earn a living from art but continues to practise at a high level. Professional in demeanour though amateur in the eyes of the tax collector, pro-ams represent something of a cultural ideal. The mere fact that pro-am artists abound has long been taken as a sign that a devotion to art has rewards that cannot be measured in material terms. Lacking the ability to make more conventional promises to prospective students and parents, the administrators of professional art schools have long relied on the ideal of the pro-am as a *raison d'être* for their institutions. Yet Tepper's findings suggest that this idealistic view of the artist may be exaggerated. He finds that pro-ams do not benefit from making art in limited spare time: 'arts graduates who make and present art outside of their working lives are no more satisfied with their lives than those who have given up their personal artistic practice.'²⁴ For those who do not earn a living from their art, a limited amount of flow-producing activity in their free time does not generate greater satisfaction than abandoning art entirely. It is only when the pro-am has *enough* free time for art that satisfaction rises. This satisfaction may reflect a better adaptation to circumstances or simply a greater degree of affluence. In either case, Tepper's findings suggest that artists are far from idealistic ascetics. Like most people, they tend to be happier with conventional signs of success like career-related jobs with living wages.

The pro-am paradox also illustrates why we need a more substantial conception of well-being. Flow may create a positive hedonic state in the moment. But, as we shall see, SWB does not rest entirely on the good feelings generated by an activity. For the pro-am, low satisfaction in a key domain (that is, an inability to earn a living) may perhaps lower overall SWB even as art-making remains a source of satisfaction. In addition to flow, artistic activity has to fit into the life of the individual in ways likely to increase well-being. With *flow plus fit*, we seek to understand how hedonic components of well-being like flow relate to non-hedonic features like global self-assessment or satisfaction in key domains. In addition to the appropriate artistic skills and background, the pro-am may need the right mindset to pursue the activity on a part-time basis, the right kind of day job, or a supportive partner. To understand the influence of art on well-being, we need an adequate conception of well-being.

III. A HYPOTHESIS ABOUT ART AND WELL-BEING

Graham and Tepper observe that well-being is correlated with artistic activity. Their empirical findings offer some encouragement for philosophers interested in developing theories of aesthetic value around the concept of well-being.

²⁴ Tepper, *Artful Living*, 12. For more on SNAAP, see <http://snaap.indiana.edu/>.

At the same time, Tepper's findings about the pro-am caution us that the relationship is not a simple one. Well-being is a complex state involving more than just direct satisfaction from an activity. It may therefore be useful to ask what researchers should be looking for in the relationship between art and well-being. What does the theory of well-being suggest that we should find? What features of art or aesthetic experience are likely to be most supportive of well-being? If SWB were the main point of our aesthetic or artistic endeavours, what about art would matter most? In order to answer these questions, we need to understand what causes well-being in general and how the arts might fit into that account as a *cause* of well-being. Philosophers and other art theorists cannot reliably do this from their armchairs. Looking at theory can help us to see a way beyond the uncertain correlations found in regression analysis. By making inferences from what is currently known about well-being, we can generate some expectations about art and well-being as well as a direction for future research.

The field of SWB studies is massive, with increasingly nuanced and specialized lines of inquiry. The present account is generated from peer-reviewed, synthetic overviews by leading researchers.²⁵ I generate a summary of the features and causes of SWB and then look for the ways that art is likely to be seen as a cause. It comes to this: *art supports well-being when it is an ongoing activity and less so when it is only the source of occasional aesthetic experience*. This thesis may strike readers as counter-intuitive insofar as aesthetic experience is typically taken as the point of art. But, for well-being, what matters more than the quality of any particular aesthetic experience is the role of art *as an activity*. When art appreciation rises to the level of an ongoing activity, for instance, the habit of reading novels or viewing films, it is more likely to influence well-being.

IV. THE DESCRIPTION OF WELL-BEING

SWB obtains when people have an ongoing flow of pleasant emotions with few countervailing negative emotions (hedonic signs). They find satisfaction in key domains where one typically finds meaning and purpose such as work and relationships (eudaemonic signs). On the whole, they evaluate their life positively. The high incidence of positive affect, low incidence of negative affect, key domain satisfaction, and overall satisfaction or positive self-assessment are four independent factors in a finding of well-being. High scores of SWB can occur via a hedonic or eudaemonic pathway or, more typically, a combination. In other

²⁵ I rely mainly on the synthetic accounts of Ed Diener et al., 'Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress', *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 276–302; and Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, 'On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being', *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 141–66.

words, it remains at least possible to experience oneself as relatively happy, without having high satisfaction in key domains like work or relationships. Likewise, it is possible to experience well-being through rewarding activities and relationships yet still not experience ongoing pleasant emotions, as with, for instance, someone with stressful but meaningful work. Typically, however, there is a degree of correlation; when respondents reply affirmatively in all four areas, they are more likely to assess themselves as happy. Unhappy people are less likely to reply affirmatively in these areas.

Well-being exists in a dynamic equilibrium, that is, a set hedonic range that may vary over time but rarely remains at the extremes for long. We may depart briefly from this range, rising to euphoria or sinking to depression, but we adapt to changes such that good and bad emotions eventually run their course, and we return to our hedonic range.²⁶ As we adapt to changes, we must continually seek new sources of positive experience in order to remain at the higher end of our hedonic range. Positive emotions such as joy and pleasure help us to see life as satisfying on the whole, whereas negative emotions like anxiety or disappointment reduce the sense of overall satisfaction. Positive emotions in the present are likely to generate positive emotions in the future, in an 'upward spiral'.²⁷ Positive emotions are conducive to the higher-level engagements which expand our cognitive resources and reduce stress.²⁸

Importantly for our understanding of the role of art in well-being, intermittent positive experiences like viewing or making art from time to time are not likely to increase well-being over the long term. To have a significant impact, positive emotions must 'accumulate and compound', generating further positive emotions, each building upon the other, lifting us to the higher end of our hedonic range.²⁹

One area of ongoing contention lies between approaches emphasizing, on the one hand, hedonic and, on the other, eudaemonic conceptions of well-being. This debate between, roughly speaking, pleasure and purpose, is longstanding and likely familiar to philosophically experienced readers. Hedonic conceptions of well-being emphasize the feeling of positive emotion, more or less irrespective

²⁶ Bruce Headey and Alex Wearing, 'Personality, Life Events, and Subjective Well-Being: Toward a Dynamic Equilibrium Model', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (1989): 731–39; David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, 'Happiness Is a Stochastic Phenomenon', *Psychological Science* 7 (1996): 186–89.

²⁷ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Thomas Joiner, 'Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals toward Emotional Well-Being', *Psychological Science* 13 (2002): 172–75.

²⁸ Alice M. Isen, Kimberly A. Daubman, and Gary P. Nowicki, 'Positive Affect Facilitates Creative Problem Solving', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52 (1987): 1122–31.

²⁹ Fredrickson and Joiner, 'Positive Emotions', 175.

of its causes. Eudaemonic well-being emphasizes the self-fulfilment of the individual in terms of meaning and purpose, more or less regardless of hedonic states. Hedonia and eudaemonia are empirically distinguishable in the motivations and assessments of individuals. But they are far from incompatible. Although positive emotions and purposeful activity are not necessarily linked, they are typically entwined in SWB.³⁰ Well-being is associated with a 'diverse behavioral repertoire' that incorporates both hedonic and eudaemonic features.³¹ Hedonic improvement may follow engagement with meaningful activity.³² Commitment to meaningful activity with unpleasant features may be facilitated by positive emotions (positive hedonic states). Higher hedonic values (more pleasure, less frustration and anxiety) free and sharpen us, allowing us to pursue more purposeful activity.³³

V. INFLUENCING SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

In general, SWB is influenced by three factors: *temperament*, that is, our hardwired psychobiological disposition; *circumstances*, that is, our work, relationships, living arrangements, and financial situation; and, finally, our *activities*, what we do to maintain or alter our level of well-being.

Temperament and circumstances are not easily changed. For the happy, a capacity for pleasant emotions is very often a hardwired personality trait. A positive temperament helps the happy gravitate to rewarding activities and have positive self-evaluations.³⁴ We all have a temperamental or psychobiological predisposition to certain moods, reactions, and cognitive patterns which either support or undermine a sense of well-being. Circumstances like health, wealth, status, job security, marital status, religious commitment, and immediate surroundings have a limited effect on SWB. Over the long-term, circumstances tend not to change very often. Life-changing positive events may boost

³⁰ Christopher Peterson, Nansook Park, and Martin E. P. Seligman, 'Orientations to Happiness and Life Satisfaction: The Full versus the Empty Life', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 6 (2005): 25–41; see also Todd B. Kashdan and Michael F. Steger, 'Curiosity and Pathways to Well-Being and Meaning in Life: Traits, States, and Everyday Behaviors', *Motivation and Emotion* 31 (2007): 159–73, and Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, 'Hedonia, Eudaimonia, and Well-Being: An Introduction', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9 (2008): 1–11.

³¹ Peterson, Park, and Seligman, 'Orientations to Happiness'.

³² Ethan A. McMahan and David Estes, 'Hedonic versus Eudaimonic Conceptions of Well-Being: Evidence of Differential Associations with Self-Reported Well-Being', *Social Indicators Research* 103 (2011): 93–108; and Michael F. Steger, Todd B. Kashdan, and Shigehiro Oishi, 'Being Good by Doing Good: Daily Eudaimonic Activity and Well-Being', *Journal of Research in Personality* 42 (2008): 22–42.

³³ Fredrickson and Joiner, 'Positive Emotions'.

³⁴ Diener, 'Subjective Well-Being', 279.

well-being in the short term but the effect typically fades in a process called *affective adaptation*.³⁵ Thus, circumstances are not a good target for increases in well-being.

Yet even as efforts to change the level of SWB may be difficult, it is an overstatement to define SWB as just the result of traits and circumstances. What is left is intentional activity, what one chooses to do and think in daily life. Here, we should expect to find art's contribution to well-being.³⁶ Through activities, it is possible to organize life in order to stay 'in the upper half of one's set range, finding ways to remain at a level of happiness that is higher than one's genetics or circumstances would dictate'.³⁷ The crucial difference between temperament and circumstance on the one hand, and activities on the other, is that the former are for the most part out of one's control and not easily altered whereas the latter are, to a large extent, within one's control.

Activities are less vulnerable to affective adaptation than circumstances because they can be adjusted. It is vastly easier to find a new hobby than a new home. Drastic moves carry high stakes and the benefits quickly wear off. The new home might end up as no more satisfying than the old one. Activities, on the other hand, can be continually rejigged. Even as activities remain habitual, routinization can be avoided. By adjusting the time, effort, focus, or environment for an activity, affective adaptation can be minimized

Activities pursued for the sake of well-being tend to be self-concordant, that is, as Sheldon and Lyubomirsky write, 'important to who one is, and that one can stand behind'.³⁸ They allow us to pursue self-generated personal goals or meaningful work.³⁹ Optimal activities fit the traits and circumstances of the individual, squaring with larger goals, motivations, interests, talents, and values. When an activity is optimal, it fits both immediate experience, that is, my mood right now, and my global self-assessment, the kind of person that I am.

³⁵ For instance, Ruut Veenhoven, 'Is Happiness a Trait? Tests of the Theory That a Better Society Does Not Make People Any Happier', *Social Indicators Research* 32 (1994): 101–60; and Michael Argyle, 'Causes and Correlates of Happiness', in *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Edward Diener, and Norbert Schwarz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 353–73.

³⁶ Kennon M. Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky, 'Change Your Actions, Not Your Circumstances: An Experimental Test of the Sustainable Happiness Model', in *Happiness, Economics, and Politics: Toward a Multi-disciplinary Approach*, ed. Amitava K. Dutt and Benjamin Radcliff (New York: Elgar, 2004), 324–42, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon M. Sheldon, and David Schkade, 'Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change', *Review of General Psychology* 9 (2005): 111–31.

³⁷ Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 'Change Your Actions', 327.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 332.

³⁹ Kennon M. Sheldon and Linda Houser-Marko, 'Self-Concordance, Goal Attainment, and the Pursuit of Happiness', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80 (2001): 152–65.

It is what I like to do *and* how I like to see myself. The individual is motivated to pursue the activity for its intrinsic qualities rather than its extrinsic rewards. Individuals who engage in activities that do not mesh with their circumstances or engage their traits will not increase well-being, even if they are otherwise successful.⁴⁰ Self-concordant activities are more likely to generate the upward spiral towards the higher part of our hedonic range. Through well-chosen and well-designed activity, we can push ourselves to the higher end of our hedonic range, staving off affective adaptation, while fostering positive experience and self-assessment.

Another way to understand activity as a source of well-being is through the familiar contrast of having experiences and acquiring things.⁴¹ Positive psychologists strongly encourage people to invest in experiences rather than material goods because experiences are more supportive of well-being than things. Experiences are conducive to positive reinterpretation, leading to more savouring and less affective adaptation. They are more likely to become meaningful parts of one's identity. Experiences also tend to be social activities and so do more to foster relationships. Activities may be thought of as ongoing experiences that can be continually refreshed at the command of the agent. In this way, activities are better than both things and one-off experiences. For example, if the practice of collecting is reduced to the bald activity of wanting and getting stuff, it is not likely to influence well-being positively. But for many collectors, collecting involves research, travel, and membership in clubs. Regular transactions can serve as the basis for satisfying long-term relationships. Collectors compose their holdings, including or excluding pieces based on convictions about the purpose of the larger group and the significance of candidates for acquisition. What seems like a bare-bones pursuit of material goods turns out to have many of the characteristics of a rich and complex activity.⁴²

VI. ART AND WELL-BEING

With this review of SWB theory, we are in a position to consider some of the theoretical implications of the shift towards well-being. There are at least six implications of SWB theory for aesthetic and art theory:

- (1) SWB theory changes how we see artistic value and competency.
- (2) Well-being through art is more for artists than audiences.

⁴⁰ Diener, 'Subjective Well-Being', 284.

⁴¹ Thomas Gilovich and Amit Kumar, 'We'll Always Have Paris: The Hedonic Payoff from Experiential and Material Investments', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 51 (2015), 147–87.

⁴² Kevin Melchionne, 'Collecting as an Art', *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 148–56.

- (3) Well-being is a value for human lives, not a value for works of art.
- (4) Artistic excellence has no necessary relation to well-being.
- (5) Art institutions do not greatly influence well-being unless they promote or inspire art-making as an activity.
- (6) Everyday aesthetic activity is a rich source of well-being.

VI.1. SWB THEORY CHANGES HOW WE SEE ARTISTIC VALUE AND COMPETENCY

Research on SWB focuses on the mood and global self-assessment of individuals over time in order to discover the causes of well-being. The approach is diachronic; it seeks to understand how changes at one time, for instance, in family or employment, influence SWB at a later time. By contrast, aesthetics tends to a synchronic approach. Aestheticians overwhelmingly attend to the nature of discrete aesthetic acts, that is, judgements or interpretations, irrespective of time and with little attention to the overall aesthetic activity of individuals.

To be sure, questions such as whether good taste is possible, whether works of art make truth or moral claims, or whether one judgement or interpretation can be better than another are important to understanding the reach of rationality in the aesthetic realm. But the synchronic approach distorts our picture of aesthetic life, suggesting that each engagement is *only* meaningful as a judgement of taste or interpretation. We over-emphasize esoteric practices like art criticism or art history at the cost of aesthetic engagements that improve well-being, such as ordinary cultural consumption and art in everyday life. This focus on slices of aesthetic life rather than temporality may explain in part why aestheticians have thus far missed the highly visible debate on well-being in psychology.

Well-being theory requires us to reconsider how we characterize aesthetic competency. Aesthetic competency has typically meant good taste or knowledge about art. But well-being through art will be supported by consistent positive affect and ongoing, purposeful activity. Good taste and right interpretation do not necessarily play a meaningful role. From the perspective of SWB, what matters more than getting our judgements 'right' is engaging in activities that instil in us a sense of purpose and push us to the higher end of our hedonic range. From the vantage point of well-being theory, our taste is 'good' if it leads us to activities that fit our sense of purpose and generate the upward spiral to the higher end of our hedonic range. It is 'bad' if it undermines our well-being. We are aesthetically competent if we know which activities take us in the right direction and are capable of going out into the world to engage in them. We are aesthetically incompetent if we do not know what they are.

VI.2. WELL-BEING THROUGH ART IS MORE FOR ARTISTS THAN FOR AUDIENCES

If it is mainly through activities that individuals can influence well-being, then art offers well-being to those who engage in it as an activity, that is, to artists more than to their audiences. Audiences have the most chance of securing well-being through art when their engagement takes on the features of an ongoing activity.⁴³

Prior to any distinctively artistic features, art-making may support well-being merely by virtue of being an activity. When one engages in any new activity, one adheres to a change at the behavioural level, which, hopefully, induces a change in well-being. If I engage in an activity with these features, I will likely feel more self-fulfilled and bring myself to the higher end of my hedonic range. Soon, however, I become accustomed to the practice, undergo some affective adaptation, and sink back down in my hedonic range. Thankfully, activities are flexible, self-designed. Thus, I will be able to repeat the activity, adjusting and refining it in ways that stand a good chance of giving me satisfaction and bringing me back to the higher end of my hedonic range.

In a society with pluralistic interests and sensibilities, art is simply one of many activities that can improve well-being. Yet art has several features that make it especially well-suited to support well-being. The participant usually enjoys considerable autonomy with respect to the time, effort, focus, or environment for art-making. Art-making tends to offer a high degree of self-concordance thanks to its expressive nature. Quite simply, artists choose what they will make or say.

The concept of art as an activity extends to highly active forms of aesthetic engagement which do not result in the creation of conventional works of art. For instance, collectors, connoisseurs, and critics are consumers or interpreters rather than creators of art. Though members of the audience, they nevertheless have more than a casual engagement with art. Their activity tends to be marked by intensive exposure, vast knowledge, and sophisticated evaluations. Through constant pursuit, study, interpretation, and financial commitment, this engagement can rise to the level of a self-controlled and self-concordant activity that fosters well-being. As we saw with the example of collecting, appreciative activity grows in substance and structure, moving beyond occasional consumption to a regular activity supportive of well-being.

Although art-making fits the profile of an activity supportive of SWB, the empirical findings are not always as clear. Surprisingly, Graham et al. find a stronger relationship to well-being for consumers than producers. They write,

⁴³ An intuition shared by Tepper, *Artful Living*, 27: 'most theories would argue that the benefits come from mastery, self-expression, positive feedback, and self-development, all of which are more directly tied to making art rather than simply experiencing art that someone else has made.'

‘the profiles of the consumers in the SPPA data set are closer to the prototypical “happy” person in the Gallup U.S. survey than are those of producers.’⁴⁴ By contrast, well-being theory tells us that a causal role for casual arts consumption in well-being is improbable. It is more likely that participation in arts events is dragging along some other factor like affluence or extroversion. For reasons other than art, arts consumers are simply happier people on average. These other reasons drive their attendance at art events. Or, perhaps artists are less happy to begin with, and their artistic engagement is compensatory. More research is needed.

When it comes to the kinds of arts with the strongest correlation to well-being, the empirical research currently offers little guidance. Among pro-ams, Tepper finds that film and theatre do not have any relationship to satisfaction whereas music along with fine arts and dance do. In a dataset of college students, Tepper finds that theatre does badly again, but this time it is joined by music. Film now stands with music composition, fiction, fine arts, dance, and cooking in having some positive correlation. The practices sort in still other ways in Graham’s research, leaving the value of the findings open to question at this stage.

VI.3. WELL-BEING IS A VALUE FOR HUMAN LIVES, NOT A VALUE FOR WORKS OF ART

Debates about art and culture rarely pass by way of the concept of happiness or well-being. Aestheticians and other art theorists tend to construe artistic value at the level of works of art. Art furthers all sorts of cognitive, moral, and social goals that may have only an attenuated link to well-being. It is not easy to see how any particular work of art supports well-being or how one could design a work of art with well-being in mind. Instead, we make and seek out works of art for the immediate satisfactions we expect them to deliver. The work of art is good in some respect: expressive, colourful, thought-provoking. We cannot say that works of art support well-being *because* they are expressive, colourful, or thought-provoking.

The very best art, it may be argued, challenges conventions, disrupts assumptions, and leaves us unsettled in ways that may be incompatible with well-being. SWB is simply too anodyne to capture what matters in challenging art. The goals of challenging art seem incompatible with or irrelevant to well-being. But insofar as those artistic goals are addressed within the context of an ongoing, self-concordant activity, they are quite compatible with well-being. Taken alone, an evening reading the work of, say, Samuel Beckett (or any artist

⁴⁴ Graham, Chattopadhyay, and Lakhanpal, ‘Using New Metrics’, 9.

with a 'dark' sensibility) may be experienced as unsettling. But over the long haul, the creation or consumption of most disruptive, challenging, or negative art may end up as quite supportive of SWB. For instance, imagine a reader immersed in Beckett's work and examining the various ways in which the author captures the hopelessness of life. The influence of the depressing vantage point of the writer – assuming it is depressing – has to be measured against the reader's satisfaction with mastering the *oeuvre* and contemplating some of life's tougher questions. The activity of reading literature is quite likely to be sufficiently supportive of well-being to ensure that the troubling content of the novel will not undermine it. As an activity, I control the pace at which I consume the troubling works and how they are interspersed with other, less demanding ones. I will have the opportunity to engage in the evaluation, comparison, and ordering of the works. And, I will be able to share my thoughts with other readers. So long as the art permits this activity, it is compatible with SWB. In other words, what matters in the framework of well-being is the quality of the engagement with art *as an activity*, that is, as a part of one's life.

VI.4. ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE HAS NO NECESSARY RELATION TO WELL-BEING

A common objection to the well-being approach to artistic value is that, by subordinating excellence to activity, we countenance mediocrity. By excellence, we usually mean artistic products of the highest levels, attainable by only the very best professionals. In valuing the quality of the activity over the quality of the art produced, it is argued, we give mediocre art a value beyond its merits. This levelling process is bound to lead to a dullness of sensibility, an inability to tell the difference between great and ordinary art. On this objection, the well-being approach is an apology for hobbyism. In my experience, readers recoiling from the well-being approach most frequently raise this objection.

At the most basic level, excellent art is simply a source of positive experience. Merely by virtue of the satisfaction it generates, excellent art has positive hedonic value. It offers peak experiences, which have a regulative role to play, refining aesthetic norms and orienting future efforts. Bad works of art, on the other hand, can instantly demoralize. The more excellent art that exists, the more positive experience is possible.

Excellent art can play a role in directing the artistic practice of the hobbyists. Mediocre amateurs may still be in a better position to recognize excellent art than non-practitioners because they also engage in it. More than non-practitioners, they are likely to have been humbled by the challenges of the art form. As pointed out by Csikszentmihalyi, the pursuit of excellence creates a sense of challenge that helps to generate flow. Without challenge, activity quickly

becomes boring. For many people, it will be just this excellence – or at least striving for it – which generates satisfaction. In this way, excellent art and mediocre art need each other.

On the other hand, excellent art can sometimes discourage ordinary engagement. Flow theory tells us that when an activity is too challenging, it becomes frustrating and cannot be a source of flow and thus well-being. At even the most introductory levels, many people give up on art in the face of the demands of the disciplines, a sign that the burden of excellence can weigh heavily from the outset. Beautiful dancers and virtuoso musicians may make us feel that our own artistic activity is inadequate and pointless, just as the greatest sporting events can turn fans into couch potatoes. The unhappiness of the program that Tepper observes may stem in part from the demanding standards of rigorous professional education. In contemporary culture, we see the tension between well-being and professional culture in singing. Prior to the onset of studio music, singing was a common and vital group activity. Singing took place in classrooms, on trips, around campfires, or after dinner. With the onset of studio music, its glossy production values, Auto-tune, and electronic instrumentation have made ordinary singing sound incongruous, out of place. People no longer know the words to once familiar campfire songs. Today, singing is replaced by recorded music and, increasingly, the silent insularity of the mp3 player and headphones. The capacity of music to generate well-being through its most elemental form, singing, seems virtually lost.

Although excellence and activity can stand at odds in some situations, the relationship is too complex to argue in a priori terms. Excellence neither guarantees nor undermines SWB necessarily. We can be more certain that if art, regardless of its quality, is not part of an ongoing activity, it is unlikely to influence SWB. Thus, if excellence does not inspire activity of the right sort, it cannot influence SWB.

VI.5. ART INSTITUTIONS DO NOT GREATLY INFLUENCE WELL-BEING UNLESS THEY PROMOTE OR INSPIRE ART-MAKING AS AN ACTIVITY

SWB theory tells us that artistic excellence is irrelevant for SWB if it does not inspire people to engage in artistic activity on their own. In addition, well-being requires ongoing engagement in order to lift us reliably to the higher end of our hedonic range, resist affective adaptation, and allow the practice to become a 'key domain' leading to self-fulfilment. SWB theory offers little support for the idea that traditional art institutions like museums and orchestras will have this kind of impact on their users. For all but a few of us, museum- or concert-going is simply too infrequent to be influential. The intensity of the aesthetic moment

cannot make up for its rarity. The visitors' engagement is also too passive. Visitors will not have developed the skills that would allow them to practise art as an ongoing activity. Most of them will not have even developed adequate skills as consumers or appreciators. In order to influence well-being, art institutions must engage audience members as practitioners. By offering teaching in ways that help sustain art-making as a habit, they can remove barriers to creative activity.

Of course, art institutions still have an important role to play in our culture. Going to museums, theatres, and concerts offers inspiring peak experiences. They suggest new possibilities for ongoing artistic activities and higher levels of excellence. But outside the context of ongoing activity, they sink to mere diversions. Professional orchestras may not support SWB as well as community music schools that teach people to play instruments; art collections may not support well-being as well as community art schools where people learn to draw. More research is needed but the artist-in-school exposure programmes and the audience-building initiatives popular with many funding sources are probably weaker supporters of well-being than regular in-school art education and community art schools. Rather than a few architecturally stunning museums and the occasional visiting artist, SWB theory suggests that we need vibrant, well-funded community art centres and regular art education in the schools.

Perhaps unintentionally, the Happy Museum Project seems to reflect these intuitions. By encouraging museums to include ongoing activities like gardening or crafts, the happy museums have simply found another way of saying that conventional museum practices without complementary creative activities are inadequate. The HMP has only discovered that museums are better when they act less like conventional museums and more like community gardens or crafts associations.

VI.6. EVERYDAY AESTHETIC ACTIVITY IS A RICH SOURCE OF WELL-BEING

The emphasis on well-being as a value for our aesthetic lives changes how we esteem broad regions of aesthetic activity. Highly visible, critically significant works of fine art or popular entertainment may not compare favourably with private, everyday practices involving food, wardrobe, dwelling, and going out (running errands or commuting) that largely escape critical discussion or mass distribution.⁴⁵ For individuals who are not working as artists, everyday life may offer the best avenue to well-being through artistic activity.

⁴⁵ Kevin Melchionne, 'The Point of Everyday Aesthetics', *Contemporary Aesthetics* 12 (2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0012.017>.

SWB theory tells us that, rather than the intensity of emotion, it is ongoing, milder emotion that best supports well-being.⁴⁶ Intense emotions are harder to create and rarely last. Intensity of emotion, if pursued regularly, creates higher expectations for future emotional states and a greater chance of disappointment. Fond memories of prior intense experiences have less of an influence than ongoing experiences in the present.⁴⁷ Our everyday aesthetic practices are immediately accessible to individuals. They are conducive to the refinement and redirection that resist hedonic adaptation. Everyday aesthetic activity affords us the control over time, effort, focus, or environment that helps to lift individuals to the higher end of their hedonic range and generate a sense of self-fulfilment.

VII. CONCLUSION

Well-being is complex; it is dependent on many different features of our dispositions and circumstances. While it is far from an elixir, art nevertheless resembles the kind of activity that researchers believe can be effective in improving well-being. On a theoretical level, it is reasonable to believe that, when practised as discussed here, art will influence well-being. Nevertheless, the empirical research conducted so far is inconclusive, and further research is needed. In the meantime, well-being theory encourages changes in how philosophers conceive of aesthetic value. It moves the debate about aesthetic value from discrete aesthetic objects to overall aesthetic activity. In turn, we are compelled to consider redefining what counts as valuable artistic activity. Those features of our culture which encourage participation become more valuable. Excellence becomes the handmaiden of participation. Institutions fostering participation are favoured over flagship art institutions featuring great performances. Artistic competency is aligned more with securing well-being than with having good taste. The application of SWB to aesthetics will help philosophers generate a better conception of aesthetic value and a better view of the role art plays in our lives. Well-being theory leads us to rethink the mix of ingredients in a flourishing arts community.

Kevin Melchionne

3 Prospect St, 4F,

New Rochelle, NY, 10805 USA

kevin@kevinmelchionne.com

⁴⁶ Ed Diener, Ed Sandvik, and William Pavot, 'Happiness Is the Frequency, Not the Intensity, of Positive versus Negative Affect', in *Subjective Well-Being: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Fritz Strack, Michael Argyle, and Norbert Schwarz (New York: Pergamon, 1991), 119–39.

⁴⁷ Eunkuk Suh, Ed Diener, and Frank Fujita, 'Events and Subjective Well-Being: Only Recent Events Matter', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (1996): 1091–1102.

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