The Ladder of Wellness: Relating Happiness, Subjective Well-being, and Flourishing

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Abstract
This paper investigates the various rungs on what I refer to as the “ladder of wellness”. Using an eudaimonist foundation – while setting out key differences with Aristotle’s happiness – the concepts of happiness, subjective well-being (SWB), and flourishing are defined and contextualized. The highest and most desirable state on the wellness ladder is flourishing, followed by SWB, and finally happiness. Drawing on ethical philosophy, positive psychology, and sociology, I describe how there are basic objective requirements for achieving the above terms, conditions which are borrowed from Nussbaum’s “ten central human capabilities” and expanded upon to become time-, space-, and agent-neutral. While these requirements are objective, they can be met through subjective means that vary from person to person. The paper concludes by contextualizing wellness in relation to Butler’s concept of abject or illegitimate bodies. I explain how marginalized groups such as women, racialized people, sexual minorities, and disabled people all share in being illegitimated by subjects (i.e. more powerful social groups). I close by describing why these marginalized bodies are much less likely to achieve the states on the ladder of wellness, and I use the example of ascribed status within a caste system to illustrate how the concept of luck relates to abjection and thus wellness.

Keywords
Ethics — Philosophy — Social Science — Aristotle — Happiness

Introduction
Words such as “happiness”, “well-being”, and “thriving” (i.e. flourishing) are often freely advertised and discussed within contemporary culture. Images and stories of happiness are abundant in media, as well as the proliferation of self-help books on how to be happy which contribute to the the ever-growing wealth of the “happiness industry” (Ahmed 3). It is worth noting that the concept of happiness has traditionally been studied within the area of ethical philosophy. However, there has recently been an increase in the number of disciplines which study happiness. For instance, theorists in history, psychology, architecture, social policy, and economics have all contributed to the growing literature on happiness and well-being (Ahmed 4). This paper combines philosophy, positive psychology, and sociology in studying these related wellness concepts.

Philosophers such as Aristotle and Martha Nussbaum are consistently cited by various scholars for their theories of eudaimonia. While Aristotle’s theory of eudaimonia is often used interchangeably with the concepts “happiness”, “the good life”, and “flourishing” by translators and scholars, I look to compare and contrast some of these concepts. On my account, happiness, subjective well-being (SWB), and flourishing all fall on a ladder of wellness.¹

The word “wellness” is used consistently throughout this paper as the foundation from which the concepts happiness, SWB, and flourishing are all derived. I use the term “wellness” interchangeably with the World Health Organization (WHO) conception of the word “health”. The WHO defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (para. 1). This definition demonstrates that a person who is in peak physical well-being may not fit under the label “healthy” or “well” because he may be languishing or coping poorly with a mental illness. Conversely a social actor who is in peak mental well-being may not be healthy because she lacks social skills and thus cannot interact properly with other actors.

This paper is motivated by the value that I observe so many social actors placing in happiness. It sounds counterintuitive to conceive of a social actor who does not seek happiness as one of the most important ends or goals in life. All people seem to take actions which they believe will bring them happiness. No one seeks unhappiness. While happiness is a major goal for many actors, I will offer an account of SWB and flourishing that implies how these experiences are

¹ I choose to discuss happiness as opposed to eudaimonia because I view Aristotle’s theory of eudaimonia as impractical and unachievable for most people. Aristotle also seems to rely on the virtues as necessary for achieving eudaimonia, something which I view as too demanding for most individuals.

² Because this is an interdisciplinary paper that combines sociology and philosophy, I will follow the sociological tradition of using the term “social actor”, or simply “actor”, to mean a person or individual.
much more valuable than happiness alone. Individuals have a greater desire to reach SWB or flourishing than to simply be happy. By my account, these actors have misconstrued the terms ‘SWB’ and ‘flourishing’ with happiness, and I aim to clarify the difference between these terms.

In this paper, I use philosophical and sociological approaches to engage with questions concerning the ladder of wellness. In using a “ladder” of wellness, I note that the runs which make up the ladder can be ranked. The highest rungs on the ladder stand for flourishing. The runs in the middle represent SWB. The lowest rungs indicate happiness. I also use the ladder metaphor because it demonstrates the way in which each concept builds upon the previous one. A social actor cannot reach the highest rungs without first climbing and reaching the lower and middle rungs. Similarly, an actor must first achieve happiness before reaching SWB, and SWB must be achieved before they can flourish. I claim that happiness is a requirement for and a component of SWB. Similarly, SWB precedes and is subsumed by flourishing. My view that each concept occupies certain rungs on the ladder of wellness implies that there are “zones” of happiness, SWB, and flourishing. In other words, for each ranked condition, there are different degrees or sub-rankings.

This idea implies that one actor can experience a greater state of flourishing than another actor, and the same view applies to both happiness and SWB. I am careful to note that because I am arguing for eudaimonist versions of happiness, SWB, and flourishing, it follows that these states of being cannot be subjective in nature. Eudaimonist accounts of happiness assume that there is one general way to be happy, though the way in which actors may achieve this general or theoretical requirement for happiness may have practical differences. I believe that the same idea holds true for SWB and flourishing.

In this paper, I unpack the various concepts that reside on this ladder of wellness and discuss whether or not social actors are likely to achieve them. In section one, I answer the following questions: (i) What is happiness? (ii) What is SWB? (iii) What is flourishing? and (iv) How are these concepts related? In section two, I engage with the following questions: (i) What conditions or facts are needed to produce SWB? and (ii) Are these conditions / facts objective or subjective? In section three, I analyze practical questions around this ladder of wellness: (i) Which actors are likely to flourish? and (ii) Is flourishing influenced by luck?

I present a three-pronged thesis. Firstly, happiness, SWB, and flourishing are all distinct though interrelated concepts. I describe happiness as a temporary, positive psychological state which must first be achieved before reaching SWB. Subjective well-being is a more permanent state that involves judgments of pleasure and desire satisfaction and which precedes flourishing. Flourishing is optimal SWB. Secondly, I borrow and expand upon Nussbaum’s “ten central human capabilities”, listing these capabilities as well as the circumstances or conditions that underwrite them, all of which are required to achieve wellness. While the circumstances or conditions that I present are objective (i.e. they endure through time and space and apply to all social actors), the ways in which actors reach them are subjective. Thirdly, I discuss how many marginalized and illegitimated actors struggle excessively to meet the required resources / goods to flourish. I conclude by discussing how Judith Butler’s concept of illegitimated bodies are much less likely to flourish than more privileged social actors.

In producing a type of eudaimonist theory, I accept the idea that happiness, subjective well-being, and flourishing are all good. Sara Ahmed uses The Promise of Happiness to suspend the belief that happiness is good and instead looks at how “happiness participates in making things good” (13). I disagree and offer the idea that happiness is good as a starting point. I am not concerned with proving why happiness is good, but rather in setting out definitions and characteristics of happiness, SWB, and flourishing, and developing quasi-profiles of the social groups who can and cannot flourish.

1. Outlining and connecting happiness, SWB, and flourishing

The concept of happiness I outline here shares similarities with, but is also different from Aristotle’s eudaimonia.3 For Aristotle, all actions are completed for some end, an end which is desired for its own sake (1094a19-20). The final end is that toward which all other actions are directed, or that for which everything else is desired (Aristotle 1094a-20). The good (happiness) is the final to which Aristotle alludes in the above passages (1094a22-23). Aristotle defines happiness as the following: “human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (1098a16-18).

The way in which a social actor achieves Aristotelian happiness is unclear and has been long debated by scholars. W.F.R. Hardie argues that Aristotle explicitly conceives of a supreme (final) end that is dominant: the supreme end is the “object of one prime desire, philosophy” (279). In contrast to Hardie, Wei Liu and other inclusivist scholars such as John L. Ackrill argue for slightly different versions of this idea: a happy person possesses all of the virtues (except technē) and considerable other goods (58). I reject Hardie’s dominant approach because it is too difficult for most actors to achieve. However, my theory does not fully identify with the inclusive approach since I do not give special attention to commanding the Aristotelian virtues. I focus mainly on a social actor possessing specific internal and external goods.

While Aristotle argued that happiness is the final end (1095a15-18), I consider it a means to other ends of SWB

3 Because scholars often translate eudaimonia as happiness, I will contrast Aristotle’s eudaimonia with my version of happiness. While Aristotle’s eudaimonia and my version of happiness are somewhat similar, his eudaimonia is much more difficult to achieve.
and flourishing. I define happiness as a temporary psychological state of good mood and positive affect, similar to Neera Kapur Badhwar’s concept of happiness as a “positive psychological state” that reaches certain standards (5). This state of good mood and positive affect can be viewed as various positive feelings. I contrast my view of happiness from that of Ahmed, who believes happiness involves but is not reducible to their values and beliefs in life. If they desire and value social actor must satisfy their desires, which are closely tied to feelings. I contrast my view of happiness from that of Ahmed, who believes happiness involves but is not reducible to feelings (13).

The use of the word “temporary” is critical here. Happiness is not intended to last for a long time. My account of happiness as temporary contrasts with Aristotle’s view that happiness lasts longer and is achieved “throughout a complete life” (1101a14-16). A social actor can be happy for a brief moment (seconds) or a longer time period (months). However, happiness that lasts one year or longer enters into a time period which constitutes the idea of greater permanence through SWB. Eranda Jayawickreme and James O. Pawelski argue that happiness accords with actors’ responses to life circumstances (388). In this sense, happiness is meant to be viewed mainly through a psychological lens: it involves how the brain reacts to and manages both stimuli and emotions. A happy person therefore experiences cognitive processes and bodily / sensory feelings. These processes and feelings are not long-standing.

To illustrate how happiness is influenced by our response to life situations, consider the following example. A man who is unhappy stumbles upon an unclaimed briefcase containing $3600 lying on the ground in an empty park. He picks up and claims the briefcase and money as his own. This man’s negative mood will most likely change to a happy one due to easily acquiring the money because he will now have greater funds to purchase products, pay bills, and so forth. Note that his happiness will still only be temporary because the $3600 he now possesses will likely not last for a long time.4

Happiness is only the first step toward achieving SWB and flourishing. It is important to realize that the higher an actor climbs on the ladder of wellness, the harder it is to achieve each state (i.e. SWB is harder to achieve than happiness, and flourishing is the hardest state to reach). Flourishing is very difficult to achieve because it requires certain life circumstances that some actors are much less likely to attain. The next requirement for achieving SWB involves a more permanent experience than the temporary state of happiness. Subjective well-being is more complex, as it is multi-faceted and involves “diverse concepts ranging from momentary moods to global judgments of life satisfaction, and from depression to euphoria” (Jayawickreme and Pawelski 388).

Both desire satisfaction and the notion of pleasure exist within SWB, though not to the extent of representing a theory of hedonism based purely on pleasure. To possess SWB, a social actor must satisfy their desires, which are closely tied to their values and beliefs in life. If they desire and value nurturing, caring for, and helping others, their SWB depends on living according to those desires and values: in other words, doing work to promote these desires and values. If they were ever in circumstances that undermine those values – such as finding themselves on a career path that undermines their values by harming rather than helping others – then they will will not achieve SWB.

Central to this desire satisfaction is the notion of pleasure, which connects with my above claims concerning happiness. An actor must feel good about satisfying their desires. In other words, there is no akrasia when an actor achieves SWB. Aristotle describes akrasia as the situation whereby a social actor acts in way that is counter to how they want to or believes they should act (1145b11-14). It is counter-intuitive to view a person who is experiencing internal conflict (i.e. akrasia) as someone who possesses SWB.

Once SWB is achieved, there is only one higher level on the ladder of wellness: flourishing. I define flourishing as optimal SWB. Because this claim makes it appear as though flourishing is a type of SWB, it seems unclear whether this concept is distinct from SWB. Flourishing is typically not as long-term as SWB, and can be more temporary or less temporary than happiness. Much like happiness, an actor can experience times when they are flourishing, and then lose that optimal state due to a variety of factors such as many simultaneous, harsh misfortunes. Flourishing is often very difficult to achieve because it requires certain life circumstances that many actors are much less likely to attain.

However, an actor may also still flourish without feeling the temporary but positive psychological state of happiness at all times. For instance, a woman who is flourishing across most areas of her life could have a good friend who commits suicide. While this woman is deeply saddened by the loss of her friend, she is still flourishing in many, but not all, areas of her life. To say that overall this woman is not flourishing is inaccurate. She is still in a general state of SWB where most areas of her life are going right, and the loss of her friend has not ended this enduring state. Notice that there are a variety of different factors which can influence, though not always end, a social actor’s flourishing. These factors include, but are not limited to, the following: changes in brain chemistry; changes in physical and/or social environment; and/or depreciating life circumstances such as the loss of a loved one, an important job, or money.

The idea of flourishing is best demonstrated by the example of a time in one’s life when everything, or at least most things, are going very well. Perhaps a woman is hired for the new job she has always desired, while at the same time she has recently become pregnant with a long-awaited child after a long period of infertility with a man she recently married, but has had as a friend for most of her life. While this example ties the concepts of desire satisfaction and pleasure together, it

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4 I make this statement under the assumption that most actors do not save money they find and claim in public.

5 Flourishing is typically shorter-lasting than SWB because actors find it harder and are less likely to flourish than simply achieve and maintain SWB.
becomes clear that flourishing is much more than mere SWB. The following characteristics of flourishing stand: (i) it is the temporary and possibly recurring final end toward which all human actions are directed; (ii) it rests highest on the ladder of wellness; (iii) it involves both self-concern and other-concern (Annas 276ff); and (iv) it involves “some development of capacities or some achievement of excellence” (Hurka 3-4).

I have discussed some ideas concerning the length of time these concepts of happiness, SWB, and flourishing may last. Because there are different time spans that can be associated with them, it is less useful to attempt to define exactly how long each state must last. It is sufficient to note that happiness is temporary and that SWB is more permanent.

1.1 Connection to positive psychology: Why is flourishing the most important?

As noted earlier, the concepts of happiness, SWB, and flourishing have shifted from residing mainly in the area of philosophy to being studied within different disciplines. While the final section of this paper will focus mainly on sociological implications and ideas surrounding flourishing, I will set up that section by discussing some research in positive psychology concerning the topic of SWB.

I prioritize flourishing because it is the greatest possible experience on the wellness ladder, and a failure to flourish may still result in great SWB or happiness. Paul Cameron conceives of a happy person as one who has a greater number of good moods than bad moods, something which produces positive affect (217). Presumably, the difference must be significant. It seems counterintuitive to claim to be happy when this social actor’s number of good moods has just barely surpassed his number of bad moods. Cameron’s largely quantitative conception of happiness contrasts with what positive psychology describes as well-being, which involves a goal of achieving a “psychology of positive human functioning . . . that achieves scientific and effective interventions to build thriving social actors, families, and communities” (Jayawickreme and Pawelski 387).

There are also similarities between Cameron’s theory and my account of happiness. Cameron’s theory that happiness involves more good moods than bad implies that happiness is temporary. I make this inference because the good moods that constitute happiness are temporary. If what makes up happiness is temporary, it seems that the product of those temporary moods should also be temporary. Therefore, the sum concept (happiness) is similar to its parts (moods).

Cameron’s concept of happiness seems to be the popular view taken up by the public. Notice how this concept, much like my own account of happiness, demonstrates how happiness itself is a weak state. Given this assumption or starting point, it becomes clear that happiness is not and should not be as important to social actors as SWB and flourishing. SWB itself is stronger than happiness due to being more permanent and more complex. SWB affects more areas of an actor’s life than temporary moments of happiness do. Happiness is less about desire satisfaction and more about pleasure: experiencing positive emotions due to the brain chemistry.

Flourishing is more desirable than SWB because flourishing is the optimal state of SWB when many things go right in life. Humans naturally desire to have positive experiences in life or have things go right; it then follows that the optimal amount of things going right concerning SWB (i.e. reaching flourishing) is much more important and valuable than general wellness associated with SWB’s life situation or the happiness’ fleeting moments of positive mood and affect.

2. Facts or circumstances required for achieving SWB

2.1 Prioritizing sociology over psychology

There are certain facts or circumstances required to achieve SWB, and these facts are more firmly rooted in sociology than in psychology. Happiness is rooted in psychology due to my reliance on concepts such as good mood and positive affect. However, while this experience of the above states of happiness is based in psychology, how people achieve happiness is not. I recognize the importance of positive psychology in section 2.2 with the capabilities approach, but I reject the notion that actors improve SWB and can achieve flourishing through psychology alone. I make this claim because I fear that psychology relies extensively on essentialism.

Momin Rahman and Stevi Jackson define essentialism as “any form of thinking that characterizes or explains aspects of human behavior and identity as part of human ‘essence’: a biologically and/ or psychologically irreducible quality of the actor that is immutable and pre-social” (16-17). This notion of essentialism implies that there are certain essential/natural features that only humans can have, a notion I reject. While I do concede that there are certain features that humans can have which no other species can possess, people do not need to have these traits to be human. I avoid psychology’s reliance on essentialism because that stance does not adequately recognize the influence of social environment on these states of wellness.

I use sociology’s social constructionism to reject essentialism; happiness, SWB, and flourishing are not natural. Social constructionism is defined as “the idea that facts are not discovered but [are] socially produced”, and it often suggests that social reality is a narrative or text (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 353). What is considered “social reality” is determined by power relations. In other words, the way in which powerful social groups classify certain information as “knowledge” or “reality” often causes this information to be accepted as truth.
When accepted as truth, these narratives or texts then turn into discourse: “a body of language-use that is unified by common assumptions” (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 111).

In application, conceptions of these states of wellness that are communicated in the media and through powerful groups become commonly accepted as truth. The use of constructionism and discourse is intended to reinforce the idea that happiness, SWB, and flourishing are not essential characteristics to humans. Social actors are not born happy, with SWB, or flourishing, but rather achieve these states after their social experience begins.

### 2.2 Introducing Nussbaum’s capabilities approach

While social actors are not born into but must develop a position on the wellness ladder, they are born with the capability to achieve these states if certain conditions are met. Capability is defined as “a form of freedom . . . [that] affords the opportunity to achieve . . . ” various activities valued and completed by a social actor, some of which may contribute to identity constructionism and discourse is intended to reinforce the idea that happiness, SWB, and flourishing are not essential characteristics to humans. Social actors are not born happy, with SWB, or flourishing, but rather achieve these states after their social experience begins.

Nussbaum outlines “ten central human capabilities” which she argues are necessary for social justice. These capabilities include the following:

- **1. Life**: living to the end of a human life of normal length.
- **2. Bodily Health**: having good health with adequate nutrition and adequate shelter.
- **3. Bodily Integrity**: being able to “move freely from place to place”; being free from physical and sexual violence; “having opportunities for sexual satisfaction” and choice around reproduction.
- **4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought**: being able to think, reason, imagine, and use the senses, as promoted by adequate education.
- **5. Emotions**: experiencing feelings such as attachment (internal and external), love, grief, longing, gratitude, and justified anger, none of which are reduced by fear or anxiety.
- **6. Practical Reason**: being able to conceive of the good and plan one’s life through the use of critical reflection.
- **7. Affiliation**: being able to participate in various forms of social interaction, including living with others and showing concern for other people. This capability also involves “having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation”, which entails non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so forth.
- **8. Other species**: coexisting with and showing concern for animals, plants, and nature.
- **9. Play**: Being able to engage in play through laughter and recreational activities.
- **10. Control over One’s Environment**: Control over one’s political environment involves being able to participate in the political choices governing one’s life, having one’s free speech and association protected, and “having the right of political participation”. Control over one’s material environment involves being able to hold property, seek employment, be free from unwarranted search and seizure, all of which are on an equal basis with others (Nussbaum 76-78).

Nussbaum’s list of capabilities is as much about achieving as much about achieving happiness as social justice. The following list, which I have created, represents the facts or circumstances required for achieving social justice, and thus the states of wellness: (i) modest material resources (e.g. money); (ii) freedom from coercion; (iii) capability to be active (i.e. be an active citizen); (iv) wisdom / knowledge / education; (v) desire satisfaction; and (vi) pleasure / satisfaction. These factors can be external (e.g. material resources) and/or internal (e.g. wisdom).

The list of circumstances I have listed above are time-, space-, and agent-neutral. In other words, every social actor must achieve the circumstances or conditions in order to be happy, regardless of when they were alive and where they lived geographically. Because Nussbaum’s list of capabilities is not explicitly time-, space-, and agent-neutral, the circumstances or conditions I outline work to underwrite Nussbaum’s capabilities. Taken together, my conditions and the Nussbaumean capabilities that they support are required for the states of wellness.

I will now provide a brief description of some of the many capabilities and circumstances that are needed for SWB. Consider Nussbaum’s capability of using the senses, imagination, and thought. When listed, this capability often also includes the notion of freedom of expression, religious exercise, and adequate education (Jayawickreme and Pawelski 385), and I would add freedom of thought. An actor who is not able to express how they feel will have a hard time achieving fleeting moments of happiness, let alone SWB; this is because they will constantly be on guard to ensure that they express what powerful groups in society expect of them. This akrasia will ultimately prevent them from achieving SWB and flourishing.

Another important circumstance involves possessing modest material resources, namely money and the necessities: food, water, clothing, and shelter. For instance, a social actor who lacks modest material resources, such as an adult living on the street, will find continuing to live an extreme challenge, even at the most basic level. This adult will have great difficulty focusing, thinking and taking any physical action if they are starving. They will most certainly have difficulty in finding employment if they lack the adequate money to afford any of the following: shelter, a phone with which to...
be contacted for a job interview, and/or a computer to type up a resume to be submitted to various businesses. Without shelter, especially during inclement weather, this actor will likely become ill, something which could require a visit to or an extended time spent in hospital. In areas where healthcare is not available to all social actors, managing to find and afford a hospital requires further material conditions (more money, transportation, and so forth).

Amartya Sen adds a qualifier about financial resources in proposing that money is not the main requirement for achieving happiness (14). Sen refers to an Aristotelian maxim by suggesting that wealth is not what people seek as the final end because money is only useful for acquiring other things; wealth is not useful or choice-worthy in itself (Aristotle 1096a5-7). Sen seems to believe that some (modest) wealth is required to live well and be happy, but magnificent sums of money are not needed.

2.3 Objective circumstances vs. subjective means to realize them

The circumstances listed above are objective insofar as they are circumstances that must be met for every agent to be happy, have SWB or flourish, regardless of who they are, when they were alive, or where they lived geographically. Every person needs to have at least each condition from the two lists outlined above if they are going to achieve SWB. Nussbaum’s list of capabilities is not explicitly agent-, time-, and space-sensitive, and thus cannot be considered objective by itself. When added to Nussbaum’s theory, the circumstances I describe make it objective.

While the list of circumstances required for SWB is objective, the ways in which social actors achieve those circumstances are subjective. I define subjective as relative to the actor and therefore not constituting universal requirement. The ways in which two agents achieve the same circumstance required for SWB may be different. For instance, John finds pleasure and desire satisfaction in listening to jazz music and learning about its history. David lacks interest in music or its history, instead finding the same pleasure and desire satisfaction in watching and playing soccer. Because John and David both possess the remainder of Nussbaum’s central capabilities, their unique interests in jazz music and soccer, respectively, help them achieve happiness. Over time, these interests contribute to subjective well-being.

It is tempting to suggest that happiness, subjective well-being, and flourishing are entirely a social actor’s subjective experience. This type of argument would suggest that Nussbaum’s central capabilities and my circumstances which underwrite them are also subjective. However, I do not accept that reasoning because I am using a type of eudaimonist framework that borrows from the theories of Aristotle and Nussbaum. No eudaimonist framework can be subjective, largely due to the way in which Aristotle envisions happiness. Aristotelian happiness – regardless of whether it is realized through philosophy / contemplation or the combination of all of the virtues and other goods – is achieved through universal and objective fashion. Happiness as subjective would require endless different possibilities for reaching the final end, and eudaimonists reject such a notion.

Furthermore, a subjective view of happiness would be more likely to suggest that everyone can be happy, attain SWB, and flourish. A eudaimonist theory, by its very structure and requirements, would not allow for everyone to reach those states of wellness. Ahmed notes that classic Greek ethics used an exclusive theory of the good life: only some individuals possessed the self-ownership, material security, and recreational time necessary for happiness (12-13). Since only some people have possessed all of these features in ancient Greece and in modern times, there will be some people who cannot flourish.

For instance, Ahmed takes a dominant interpretation to Aristotelian flourishing by suggesting that only those few ancient Greeks who could engage in “contemplative speculation” could flourish (13). Many people are unable to be happy, at least at the current moment, due to lacking key features such as modest financial resources. Others may be considered free agents, but their job(s) ensures that they are practically enslaved by modern capitalism. Many people, including those workers just mentioned, work long hours for small incomes in order to survive, and are unable to find much time for leisurely activities due to their struggle to survive.

3. Which social groups can flourish?

This section investigates which social groups are able to flourish. I choose to focus on flourishing because I prioritize it over the other states of wellness. Because section two considered capabilities and conditions needed for happiness, SWB, and flourishing, I will now connect these conditions to the lives of individual social actors.

My central argument in this section is that, due to the fact that many social actors’ lives do not include the required conditions or circumstances listed earlier, it is very difficult and often improbable that these social actors will flourish. While not entirely exclusionary, this idea creates many obstacles for marginalized actors. The concept of luck also influences which social actors are able to flourish, largely due to the space, time, and identity factors into which these actors are born. I use Butler’s concept of abject bodies to note that powerful social groups illegitimate and marginalize weaker groups to the point that flourishing is very unlikely.

3.1 Butler, abject bodies, and marginalization

Judith Butler constructs the dichotomy of abject bodies versus subjects. For Butler, abject bodies are “unlivable” and reside in “‘unthinkable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life” (3). I interpret Butler’s concept of the “unlivable” abject body
as one in which real life does not exist. From an existential standpoint, all social actors are alive. However, in practice “living” involves more than simply breathing and possessing a pulse. Butler seems to be searching for a more complex vision of being alive, one that involves happiness, SWB, and perhaps even flourishing. In contrast, subjects are autonomous and have a claim to life because they are separate from the abject (Butler 3). I read Butler as suggesting that all bodies are born abject, while some bodies come to reject that status and transform into legitimate subjects (Butler 3). Subjects can also be referred to as the norm (Sandahl 15). I define the norm as the ideal, preferred, desirable, and normative status for a social actor. Subjects who represent the norm wield great power in society.

The purpose of this short discussion on abject bodies, subjects, and the norm is to preface an analysis of marginalization. All marginalized bodies – i.e. all social actors whose participation in the economic, political, and social spheres of life are limited – are abject or illegitimated. I add ‘-ed’ to the word illegitimate to demonstrate how abject bodies do not choose to be abject. They are often forced into illegitimate status by subjects who prevent abject bodies from having access to resources which could help them gain subjecthood. This social process relegates abject bodies into a “glass ceiling” of sorts. The glass ceiling metaphor often describes women who are in a room with a glass ceiling, through which they can see men standing in a higher paid and more powerful position above them on the next floor of a building (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 228-229). These women see the men in a higher position, but the strong glass ceiling prevents these women from reaching the higher, more lucrative, and more powerful positions occupied by men. The glass ceiling serves as a subtle and almost invisible obstacle to the advancement of women (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 228-229). These women see the men in a higher position, but the strong glass ceiling prevents these women from reaching the higher, more lucrative, and more powerful positions occupied by men. The glass ceiling serves as a subtle and almost invisible obstacle to the advancement of women (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 228-229). I extend the metaphor of the glass ceiling to include any marginalized group. In other words, the women in the feminist example of the glass ceiling can be replaced with racialized actors, sexual minorities, social actors with disabilities, and so forth. Abject bodies and marginalized bodies are imprisoned below the glass ceiling by subjects.

Not only do subjects relegate illegitimated bodies to abject status, but many social actors are born into circumstances from which they will likely never escape. For instance, many actors are born into oppressive circumstances by being born racialized, born as women, or born with disabilities. Because these oppressed groups of actors maintain a status that is often results in poorer life chances – i.e. less ability to share in the material / economic and cultural goods of a society (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 221) – these social actors are faced with obstacles to flourishing upon birth. The inability to fully participate in economic, social, and political spheres of society makes flourishing harder. These actors who are born abject and have many obstacles preventing them from becoming subjects will likely struggle their entire lives to flourish.

Lisa Tessman notes that certain hardships faced by less privileged actors are necessary for them to exercise virtue and thus flourish (49). This idea implies that certain actors with hard life circumstances can still flourish. However, the greater the number of obstacles to reaching subjecthood that a social actor faces, and the more powerful those obstacles are, the harder it becomes to flourish. This discussion has highlighted the importance of considering how subjecthood and abjection interact with the circumstances I listed and Nussbaum’s capabilities.

3.2 Is flourishing influenced by luck?

The following example of a woman living in a caste system is meant to illustrate how the concept of luck relates to flourishing. A caste system is a system of “hereditary ranks, usually dictated by religion, that tend[s] to be fixed and immobile” (Witt and Hermiston 213). For example, a woman living in India is born into the Shudra: the artisans / farmers rank which is the lowest caste in the country (Witt and Hermiston 213). Despite this woman’s incredible intelligence and academic ambition, she is relegated to this low ascribed status. Ascribed status describes an actor’s social position that is assigned to her without giving attention to her unique talents and characteristics (Witt and Hermiston 212). This woman’s potential for rising out of her caste, which currently provides poor life chances, is very weak. She will most likely live in this caste and have little access to power as well as economic and cultural goods / resources for the rest of her life, which leaves little potential for her to flourish.

What proves to be most frustrating for this woman is the reality that she did not choose to reside in the Shudra caste. She was born into it. Because there was nothing she herself could do to change the position into which she was born, the concept of luck was at least partially at work in determining how her life would be projected. Luck does not control everything that happens in a social actor’s life, but it can influence how parts of an actor’s life will unfold. The idea that luck influences happiness seems at odds with popular sentiment that actors create their own luck or fortune. If luck influences how happy an actor is, it follows that there is much less free will for the social actor to act and become happy. This is a reality often overlooked by actors who wish to convince themselves that they have a great deal of control over their lives. This paper is not meant to debate whether it is free will or determinism which has the greatest impact on human actions. Determinism, or circumstances beyond any individual actor’s control, is at least partly at work in influencing luck.

By conceding that there is at least some potential for both of these worldviews to work within the same framework without major conflict – i.e. by using a compatibilist perspective (Kane 12) – I note that there is space for both luck and hard work to impact a social actor’s happiness. To believe that only circumstances which are in an actor’s control impact happe-
ness – as seems to be the message presented in the popular press and in many self-help books – is to assume that all actors live on an equal playing field. This concept presupposes that all social actors are born equal and have the same opportunities in life. Many social actors do not live on an equal playing field. This reality is clear when considering the social, economic, and political inequalities that exist in the world. Simply being born of a certain race, sex, sexual orientation, ability, or even body size can greatly impact an actor’s life chances and therefore their ability to flourish.

The main conclusion in this section is that powerful groups of social actors (i.e. subjects) have much less difficulty and are much more likely to flourish than abject bodies or marginalized actors. This reality is important because all social actors have a right to the least impeded pursuit of happiness, SWB, and flourishing possible. In other words, the ascribed status of a social actor should not create such powerful obstacles that impede their ability to reach these states of wellness. While there may be some exceptions such as the Oprah Winfreys who come from very oppressive conditions with poor life chances, and who are able to eventually flourish later in life, these cases are rare and very unlikely to occur. We cannot expect that all actors with a similar childhood background to Winfrey will be able to rise above their disadvantaged start in life.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the broad concept of the ladder of wellness. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I have combined approaches in philosophy, positive psychology, and sociology. In section one, I located happiness, SWB, and flourishing on the ladder of wellness as distinct states. SWB was presented as a more permanent state, and flourishing as a (typically) somewhat less permanent state than SWB. Happiness was described as a temporary, positive psychological state. Happiness is required for SWB, and because flourishing is optimal SWB, an agent can only flourish once they have attained SWB. Flourishing is the most desirable state on the wellness ladder, followed by SWB, and then happiness.

In section two, I outlined some of Nussbaum’s ten capabilities required for flourishing. Because Nussbaum’s capabilities are not time-, space-, and agent-neutral, I provided my own list of conditions or circumstances which underwrite her capabilities. Both Nussbaum’s capabilities and my list of circumstances are required for a social actor to flourish. I noted that these conditions are objective (universally required, despite agent, space, and time), though the ways in which they are achieved are subjective (vary per social actor).

Finally, section three was heavily influenced by sociology. I discussed the concept of the abject body as part of a larger social process whereby powerful social groups illegitimize marginalized social actors by creating circumstances of discrimination which negatively influence the life chances of these bodies. Since many social actors are born into circumstances of oppression (e.g. being discriminated against on the basis of an actor’s race, sex, or sexual orientation, and so forth), they cannot fully control the fact that they are often denied subjecthood. Since social actors who are illegitimated have poorer life chances, they consequently have a reduced likelihood of flourishing. This reality demonstrates that luck can play an important role in influencing an actor’s ability to flourish.

I close by identifying some significant gaps in research. I have identified that many illegitimated social actors struggle to flourish due to discrimination and oppression from powerful social groups. However, I have not discussed the ways in which social policy could and should be changed in order to ensure that more actors are able to flourish. Further research should be completed around possible policy-making that will help more actors flourish. While positive psychology is likely a very popular approach to studying SWB, the focus of the research I am noting should use a sociological perspective. I make this claim due to the way in which psychology often relies on essentialism, something which I earlier claimed is a flawed and inaccurate perspective. This approach should also be used because policy-making lends itself more closely to sociology due to the collective impact of policy as opposed to the individual focus that is often used in psychology.

5. Works Cited


Jayawickreme, Eranda and James O. Pawelski. “Positivity and the capabilities approach.” *Philosophical Psychology*


