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Reconceptualising Well-Being through Mencius' Ideal of Joy

Mencius'un Neşe İdealinden Hareketle İyi Oluşun Yeniden Kavramsallaştırılması

Charlene TAN¹

Abstract

A survey of the existing literature shows that there is limited philosophical inquiry into the concept of well-being, particularly from East Asian spiritual traditions. In this article, I reconceptualise well-being by critiquing the prevailing constructs of well-being and proposing an alternative formulation from Confucian viewpoints. I argue that the dominant categorisation of well-being into hedonic and eudaimonic has engendered two major weaknesses. First, the emphasis on positive emotions in hedonic well-being privileges individualism and self-interest, catalysed by the positive psychology movement. Secondly, there is a lack of clarity on the role of emotions and the place of virtues in self-actualisation for eudaimonic well-being. I then sketch a Confucian interpretation of well-being by drawing on Mencius' ideal of joy. My argument is that Mencian well-being revolves around virtue-directed joy which is experienced through the extension of innate moral feelings. Instead of an artificial dichotomy of well-being into hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, Mencius harmonises both by acknowledging positive emotions and self-actualisation. Confucian perspectives extend the existing scholarship by providing an original interpretation of well-being that foregrounds the primary role of collectivism, emotions and character development.

Keywords: Confucianism, eudaimonic well-being, hedonic well-being, Mencian well-being

Özet

Mevcut literatürün incelenmesi, özellikle Doğu Asya spiritüel geleneklerinden hareketle, iyi oluş kavramına yönelik felsefi araştırmaların sınırlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Yu ve ark. (2010) tarafından önerilen felsefi geri kazanım ve felsefi yeniden inşa yöntemi çerçevesinde, bu makale iyi oluşu hâkim kavramsallaştırmaları eleştirerek ve Konfüçyüsçü felsefeden alternatif bir formülasyon önererek yeniden kavramsallaştırmaktadır. İddiam şudur ki, iyi oluşun hazcı (hedonic) ve özgerçekleştirici (eudaimonic) olarak kategorize edilmesi iki temel zayıflığa yol açmıştır. Birincisi, hazcı iyi oluşta olumlu duygulara yapılan vurgu, bireycilik ve kişisel çıkarı öne çıkarmakta, bu da pozitif psikoloji hareketi tarafından daha da teşvik edilmektedir. İkincisi ise, özgerçekleştirici iyi oluşta duyguların rolü ve erdemlerin kendini gerçekleştirmedeki yeri konusundaki belirsizliktir. Bu noktada, Mencius'un neşe idealinden hareketle iyi oluşun Konfüçyüsçü bir yorumunu tasarlıyorum. Argümanım şudur ki, Menciusçu iyi oluş, doğuştan gelen ahlaki duyguların genişletilmesi yoluyla deneyimlenen erdem-yönelimli neşe etrafında şekillenir. İyi oluşu yapay bir şekilde hazcı ve özgerçekleştirici olarak ikiye ayırmak yerine, Konfüçyüsçü perspektifler, duyguların karakter gelişimindeki birincil rolünü öne çıkararak mevcut literatüre özgün bir iyi oluş yorumunu kazandırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Konfüçyüsçülük, özgerçekleştirici iyi oluş, hazcı iyi oluş, Menciusçu iyi oluş

¹ College of Arts, Humanities and Languages, Life University, Sihanouville, Cambodia, e-mail: chptan@u.nus.edu, ORCID: 0000-0002-5711-3749
Address of Correspondence: Charlene Tan, e-mail: chptan@u.nus.edu



Introduction

A concept that is intricately tied to mental health is well-being. The notion of well-being has become a “much celebrated” concept in the academic and popular discourses (Graham et al., 2016, p. 367), given its “strong social and political appeal” (Powell & Graham, 2017, p. 214). Research has reported that a high level of well-being has a direct impact on a person’s mental health, enabling one to be more creative and productive, acquire information more effectively and enjoy strong inter-personal bonds (Powell et al., 2018).

Notwithstanding the substantial research on well-being, a review of the extant literature shows that there is limited philosophical inquiry into the construct of well-being, particularly from East Asian philosophical traditions. On the dearth of philosophical discourses, a survey of the current publications on well-being reveals that the majority are empirical rather than conceptual (Anderson & Graham, 2016). Consequently, the idea of well-being remains “under-theorised” (Powell & Graham, 2017, p. 214) and “little understood” (Graham et al., 2016, p. 367). Svane and colleagues (2019) concur that “explanations about exactly what well-being looks, feels or sounds like are elusive” (p. 211). The inadequate philosophical examination of well-being is regrettable, given that this term is a basic concept in philosophy (Engelsen, 2022; Falkenberg, 2015).

A related observation is that writers who explored the philosophical roots of well-being often pointed to the contributions of Greek thinkers especially Aristotle (Svane et al., 2019). What is overlooked are expositions of well-being from other philosophical traditions, especially those from East Asian intellectual traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism. Admittedly, there are some publications on Confucian and Daoist perspectives of well-being (Fletcher, 2016). However, these articles do not utilise East Asian spiritual resources to critique the Greek/Anglo-American underpinnings of well-being notions, theories and worldviews. In view of the present literature gap, this article seeks to critically evaluate the constructs of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and advocate for an alternative formulation from Confucian philosophy. Specifically, this study draws on the philosophy of Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.) who was a disciple of Confucius’ grandson Zisi. Mencius’ impact on Confucian philosophy has been phenomenal: Chan (2014) posits that “one might say that the whole of Confucianism is a footnote to Mencius’ thought” (p. 153). Mencius’ philosophy has been selected for this paper as his thought not only challenges the dominant understandings of well-being in the English-speaking world, but also provides a convincing (re)conceptualisation of well-being through his ideal of joy.

The research methodology is literature review and Yu et al.’s (2010) philosophical retrieval and philosophical reconstruction. The research process began with a comprehensive survey and analysis of the existing publications on well-being. The goal was to clarify the notions, orientations and presuppositions pertaining to well-being. The next stage was philosophical retrieval which focused on philosophical concepts, theories and presuppositions that were salient to the research topic. Accordingly, this study identified, examined and clarified contents in the Confucian text *Mencius* that were relevant to well-being. The purpose was to elucidate a Confucian understanding of well-being and compare it with the dominant conceptions of well-being in the extant literature. The third stage of the research process was philosophical reconstruction that went beyond an explication of Confucian philosophy. As explained by Yu et al. (2010),

The goal is not to present some Confucian way of thought as it is or has been, but rather to make it more tenable, sophisticated, and compelling for contemporary consideration. Confucian ethics is taken not as something completed and ready for incorporation or adoption, but rather as something still developing and very much a work in progress (p. 2).

For this study, the method of philosophical reconstruction involved extracting the contemporary implications of the Confucian notion of well-being delineated in the second stage. The objective was to make clear the contributions of Mencius' philosophy to the theorising and application of well-being in the modern world.

This paper is structured as follows: I begin with a brief introduction to Confucian philosophy by discussing the concepts of spirituality and Confucian spirituality. This is followed by an overview of the existing understandings of well-being with a focus on two main orientations of well-being, namely hedonic and eudaimonic. In the next section, I identify and question the dichotomy of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, arguing that this artificial demarcation has generated significant weaknesses in both variants. Aimed at addressing these criticisms, I offer an alternative interpretation of well-being from Confucian philosophy that is drawn from Mencius. My thesis is that a Confucian formulation of well-being is Mencius' ideal of joy. This joy is virtue-directed and inter(personal), and is experienced through the extension of innate moral feelings. Rather than segregating well-being into hedonic and eudaimonic, a Mencian approach incorporates and harmonises both by emphasising positive emotions and self-actualisation.

Spirituality and Confucian Spirituality

It is necessary, at the outset, to clarify the idea of spirituality – a nebulous and multifaceted concept that has been defined differently by various authors. For example, Minney (1991) connects spirituality to the distinctive ability of individuals to see themselves as part of some larger whole and broad framework of meaning. Spirituality is manifested and experienced through spiritual ideals, which include both religiously-tethered ideas such as worship, prayer and salvation, and non-religiously-tethered notions such as love, joy, peace and self-awareness (Tan, 2009). Carr (1995) highlights the ethical aspect of spirituality by interpreting the term as “a function of appreciation or reflection upon ideals or goals which are both apt for *positive moral evaluation*” (p. 90, italics added). Yet another formulation is by Shen (2018) who relates spirituality to self-improvement: “the practices and inspiring ideas of self-cultivation and self-perfection that deal with the human desire for meaningfulness and its fulfilment in perfection” (p. 34).

For the purpose of this essay, I follow Shen's (2018) emphasis on self-cultivation, self-perfection and the attainment of meaningfulness, which are integral to a persons' overall well-being. Confucian spirituality is essentially about cultivating one's heart and mind, developing oneself morally and realising *dao* (Way), which is a shared vision of human excellence (Shen, 2018; Tan & Tan, 2016; Tu, 1985; Yao, 2008). Yao (2008) establishes the link between Confucianism and self-cultivation by maintaining that “Confucian spirituality is characterised not only by its affirming the possibility of self-transformation or self-realisation, but also by its admitting that the transformation is fully self-powered and self-resourced” (p. 394). Spiritual ideals in Confucianism include fundamental notions such as *dao* (Way), *tian* (heaven), *ren* (humaneness) and *le* (joy) (for a comparative study of the spiritual ideas in Confucian and Christian traditions, see Tan, 2021).

The Concept of Well-Being

Like ‘spirituality’, there is currently no universally agreed definition of well-being, which is a multidisciplinary and multifarious term (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Im, 2011; Powell & Graham, 2017; Svane et al., 2019; Tov, 2018). Well-being is used synonymously or in conjunction with related terms such as welfare, prudential value, the good life, prudential good life, quality of life,

flourishing, happiness, self-interest, fulfilment, utility, and pastoral care (Fletcher, 2016; Powell & Graham, 2017; Tesar & Peters, 2020). Notwithstanding the diverse understandings, theories and models of well-being, researchers have broadly divided well-being into two main categories: hedonic and eudaimonic. The terms 'hedonic' and 'eudaimonic' reveal their Greek origins: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being are attributed to the works of Aristippus of Cyrene and Aristotle respectively (Svane et al., 2019).

Two clarifications are needed at this juncture. First, the concepts of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being were not coined by Aristippus and Aristotle. These two philosophers did not discuss these two concepts directly but their salient ideas were appropriated by contemporary researchers who devised these two orientations of well-being (for a good overview of the two approaches of well-being, see Huta, 2017). My critique of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in a later part of this essay is therefore not directed at the philosophy of Aristippus and Aristotle. The second clarification is that there are other approaches to well-being that do not fit neatly into the hedonic and eudaimonic orientations. An example is Csikszentmihalyi's state of flow that describes a person's optimal involvement in an activity (Tov, 2018). Due to space constraints, I have limited the discussion of this paper to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being as they are widely accepted and commonly cited in the extant literature (Svane et al, 2019). Pertinently, researchers have extracted elements from these two categories of wellbeing to construct new theories and models of well-being. For example, Seligman's (2011) PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment) model of well-being integrates elements from hedonic and eudaimonic components.

I shall proceed to sketch the essential characteristics of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. First, hedonic well-being stems from a person's subjective assessment of one's moods and life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2015). Reflecting the priorities of hedonists such as Aristippus, the focal point of hedonic well-being is pleasure, which is experienced in the form of positive emotions. Tesar and Peters (2020) write, "A hedonic approach to well-being emphasises one's feeling about life, including how 'pleasant' it is (on a positive/negative scale) – an affective approach" (p. 924). To put it simply, this variant of well-being pivots on experiencing pleasure and positive affect coupled with avoiding pain and negative affect. In tandem with hedonic well-being, activities are valued if they give delight and personal agency to individuals (Hashim et al., 2024). The primary focus of hedonic well-being is subjective wellness, indicated by one's positive emotions and a high quality of life.

Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, is concerned with purpose and meaning in life. As denoted by its name, this approach emanates from eudaimonia (happiness or flourishing). Eudaimonia, for Aristotle is "the idea of striving toward excellence based on one's unique potential" (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 14). Researchers typically conceptualise and operationalise eudaimonia as follows: self-realisation, individual expressiveness, optimal functioning, successful in overcoming life challenges, social wellness, motivation to improve oneself, psychosocial integration, ego development, living a life in concert with one's potential, experiencing flow, long-term meaning-making, and the result of a person's strengths (Heintzelman, 2018). Paramount to eudaimonic well-being is living well and cultivating one's character (Svane et al., 2019). Tesar and Peters (2020) point out that eudaimonic well-being transcends a person's feelings to associate happiness with morality and fulfilment of one's potential. Tov (2018) adds that the qualities of growth, meaning, authenticity, and mastery dominate most formulations of eudaimonic well-being. Eudaimonic well-being, in short, is fundamentally about "fulfilling or realising one's daimon or true nature" (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 143).

To sum up this section, scholars classify well-being into two general categories: hedonic

and eudaimonic. The former is marked by positive emotions which testify to the pleasures one enjoys, whereas the latter is distinguished by self-actualisation, where a person reaches one's full potential.

A Critique of Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-being

In this segment, I critique hedonic and eudaimonic well-being by arguing that the division of well-being into two distinct categories (hedonic and eudaimonic) has engendered weaknesses in both constructs. I shall forward two arguments targeting the two orientations of well-being: (1) the emphasis on positive emotions in hedonic well-being privileges individualism and self-interest, catalysed by the positive psychology movement; and (2) there is a lack of clarity on the role of emotions and the place of virtues in self-actualisation for eudaimonic well-being.

Hedonic well-being

The focus on positive emotions in hedonic well-being promotes individualism and self-interest, which is facilitated and propelled by the positive psychology movement. The individualistic underpinnings in hedonic well-being is seen in its "pleasure-centred" slant (Heintzelman, 2018, p. 145), where one's wellness depends on one's good mood and positive affect as well as favourable assessment of life satisfaction. The individualist influences on hedonic well-being may in turn encourage excessive self-interest. The goal to seek pleasure for oneself coupled with the overriding interest to attend to one's subjective state of happiness puts individual well-being ahead of collective well-being. The point here is not that individualism qua individualism is necessarily bad or harmful. Rather, the concern is that a formation of well-being that privileges individualism and self-interest may undermine the welfare of others and weaken social bonds. Commenting on an interpretation of well-being that prioritises autonomy at the expense of the other, House and Loewenthal (2012) counter that "a heteronomy that is putting the other first may be what is most appropriate in enabling well-being" (p. 11).

It is a significant point that hedonic well-being has been associated with the positive psychology movement (Loewenthal, 2009; Wright, 2014; Zembylas, 2016). Positive psychology seeks to foster the emotional and mental well-being of individuals through human functioning such as positive feelings and capabilities (Caleon & Hian, 2023). Although positive psychology has by and large benefitted individual wellness, the fixation with personal happiness "might set unrealistic standards for happiness, which, paradoxically, could undermine well-being and lead to disappointment, hence producing the very opposite effects that these interventions aim to achieve" (Cabanas & González-Lamas, 2022, p. 1258). In particular, the positive psychology movement has been criticised for turning well-being into a form of therapy, especially in education (Kibe, 2023).

The promotion of well-being through strategies that are geared towards boosting learners' mental health, emotional intelligence and self-esteem is aligned with the agenda of therapeutic turn (Wright, 2014). The term 'therapeutic turn' denotes a propensity to psychologise all aspects of society, such as politics, consumer culture, sports and education (Furedi, 2004; Hayes, 2004; Hyland, 2006; Madsen, 2014; Wright, 2014). Scholars charge that a therapeutic approach to well-being over-emphasises the emotional state, encouraging individuals to turn inward and become self-preoccupied (De Vos, 2012; Ecclestone, 2004; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008; Leviste, 2023; Mintz, 2009). As explained by Leviste (2023), "therapisation labels vulnerable individuals as emotionally fragile and powerless victims unable to withstand everyday difficulties, regardless of contextual factors (i.e. social and political structures) that repeatedly create and perpetuate these difficulties to begin with" (pp. 416-417).¹ In all, hedonic well-being may unintentionally produce

egoism, selfishness, covetousness and antisocial actions in individuals (Huta, 2017).

Eudaimonic well-being

As for eudaimonic well-being, there are an inadequate clarification and explanation on (1) the role of emotions and (2) the place of virtues in self-actualisation. The first objection concerns the significance of emotional experience in eudaimonic well-being. As explained earlier, the focus of eudaimonic well-being is self-actualisation that surrounds personal growth, purpose and fulfilment. What is neglected and not spelt out in eudaimonic well-being is where emotions fit in in the process of self-actualisation. By paying insufficient attention to emotional experience, eudaimonic well-being ignores the relation between the affective dimension and well-being. The assumption that emotions are irrelevant to or unimportant for self-actualisation is questionable, as research has shown the vital contribution of feelings and sentiments to a person's identity formation, personal growth and overall well-being (Deonna & Teroni, 2013; Hansen, 2020; Zapf, 2002).

Secondly, it is unclear how virtues are related to self-actualisation in particular and eudaimonia in general. Aristotle who introduced the notion of eudaimonia has written much about intellectual and moral virtues. However, most researchers do not follow-up on or reference Aristotle's ethical theory in their theories on eudaimonic well-being. A case in point is Hashim and colleagues (2024) who interpret eudaimonic well-being as "individual flourishing where one is able to actualise their skills and personal competencies" (p. 2). Notwithstanding the valuable findings from Hashim et al.'s (2024) report, what is not clarified in their paper is the place of virtues in "individual flourishing" and the connection between moral values and "skills and personal competencies". In this regard, Tesar and Peters (2020) observe that the moral or critical aspects of eudaimonic well-being are typically under-explored in the current literature. An exposition of virtues is essential as constructs of well-being are "essentially moral visions" (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 159). Without a clearly articulated ethical foundation, eudaimonic well-being may be reduced to excessive toil, self-denial and overthinking (Huta, 2017).²

In view of the criticisms levelled against hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, it is necessary to explore alternative accounts of well-being from a plurality of cultural and philosophical traditions. Ryan and Deci (2001) maintain that interpretations of well-being are "inherently culturally rooted" (p. 159).

The Confucian Ideal of Joy

In this section, I respond to the before-mentioned weaknesses of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being by outlining an integrated conception of joy based on the Confucian ideal of joy. Philosophers have referred to the Confucian concepts of joy (*le*), the Way (*dao*) and 'fulfilling human nature' (*jinxing*), among others, as counterparts to eudaimonia in Greek (Huff, 2015). Utilising the method of philosophical retrieval, my focus is on the thought of Mencius that are related to well-being. Although the term 'well-being' is not found in the book of *Mencius*, this does not mean that the meanings, assumptions and implications of well-being are absent in the text. As shall be evident later, Mencius alludes to well-being in his discourses on joy, happiness and delight. I shall put forward the view that Mencian well-being revolves around inter(personal) and virtue-directed joy, which is experienced through the extension of innate moral feelings. This understanding of well-being avoids the individualistic orientation and excessive self-concern in hedonic well-being. At the same time, Mencian well-being addresses the marginalisation of emotions and under-theorising of virtues in eudaimonic well-being. I shall expound on Mencian well-being through three components: (1) inter(personal) joy, (2) virtue-directed joy, and (3) the extension of innate moral

feelings.

Inter(personal) joy

The first distinctive feature of Mencius' concept of well-being is his ideal of inter(personal) joy that harmonises personal and communal delight. A textual analysis of *Mencius* shows that joy and cognates such as happiness and delight are tied to one's relationships with others. To put it in another way, Mencius regards personal welfare and happiness as inseparable from those of others. A representative passage is 7A20.1 in *Mencius* (all passages are adapted from Van Norden, 2008, unless otherwise stated):

孟子曰：「君子有三樂，而王天下不與存焉。父母俱存，兄弟無故，一樂也。仰不愧於天，俯不忤於人，二樂也。得天下英才而教育之，三樂也。君子有三樂，而王天下不與存焉。」

Mengzi said, "An exemplary person [*junzi*] takes joy in three things, and being King of the world is not one of them. The person's first joy is that one's parents are both alive and one's siblings have no difficulties. The second joy is that looking up one is not disgraced before Heaven, and looking down one is not ashamed before humans. The third joy is getting the assistance of and cultivating the brave and talented people of the world. An exemplary person takes joy in three things, and being King of the world is not one of them.

This passage is about a *junzi* 君子 which literally means 'son of a noble'. Confucius appropriated this historical term and infused it with moral import, thereby changing its meaning to denote an exemplary person (Tan, 2020). After Confucius, Mencius and other thinkers continue to use this term to signify the ideal human being that everyone should aspire to become, regardless of gender, educational achievement or social status (Ames & Rosemont, 1998). That the exemplary person embodies Confucian well-being is evidenced by passages that describe such a person as having "no anxieties" (不患 4B28.7) and experiencing "joy" (樂 7A20.1, 7A21.2).

Returning to 7A20.1 which is cited above, the passage states that an exemplary person does not derive joy from being King of the world. Mencius is not claiming that holding political power is wrong or detrimental to one's well-being. On the contrary, he acknowledges in the next passage that an exemplary person, like all people, "desires a large territory and numerous people" (廣土眾民，君子欲之 7A21.1). Mencius' point is that Kingship, in itself, does not give joy to an exemplary person; instead, such a person "takes joy in taking one's place in the middle of the world and making all the people within the Four Seas settled" (中天下而立，定四海之民，君子樂之，7A21.1). We see here how an exemplary person derives joy by bringing joy to others ("making all the people within the Four Seas settled"). Mencius' message is that an exemplary person does not obtain pleasures and life satisfaction from prudential desires, which are manifested in egoistic ambitions without regard for others. Instead, joy is obtained and shared when a person benefits others.

Stressing that personal joy is intertwined with communal joy, Mencius further identifies three types of relationships for an exemplary person in 7A20.1: heaven, parents and other humans. First, an exemplary person experiences joy when one does not feel disgrace before Heaven.

Reflecting early Confucian worldview, Mencius subscribes to a belief in Heaven, who is a “semi-personal higher power responsible for ‘the Way’ and ‘fate’” (Van Norden, 2008, p. 202). The exemplary person is confident of living well in accordance with the Way (*dao*) of Heaven, following the footsteps of worthy Kings of ancient times who “delight in the Way” (樂其道 7A8.1). Personal happiness, in other words, depends on delighting in Heaven and submitting to the workings of Heaven – a point demonstrated by Mencius himself. A passage in *Mencius* records that Mencius left the state of Qi after failing to persuade the king to govern morally and not resort to warfare. While on the road, a disciple perceived that Mencius looked unhappy and inquired into his well-being. Mencius replied (2B13.5):

夫天，未欲平治天下也；如欲平治天下，當今之世，舍我其誰也？吾何為不豫哉？

Heaven does not yet desire to pacify the world. If it desired to pacify the world, who besides me in the present time is there? Why would I be unhappy?

Van Norden (2008) comments on this passage:

[A]lthough Mengzi seemed to be unhappy, he was actually *never unhappy*. We see here that sages and worthies have both a will that is concerned about their time, but also a *genuine delight in Heaven*, and that these are not contradictory (p. 61, italics added).

With respect to 7A20.1, an exemplary person's joy is also experienced through interactions with two groups of people: family members and other people. First, Mencius teaches that an exemplary person finds joy in taking care of one's family members. Mencius underscores the need to “make one's parents happy” (悅親) by following Heaven's Way (天之道 4A12.1). He gives the example of sage king Shun who was “happy” (喜) to be with his brother (5A2.4). Beyond one's parents and siblings, an exemplary person also derives delight (君子樂, 7A21.1) by treating other people well and developing their potentials for the common good. The end result is “making all the people within the Four Seas settled” (中天下而立，定四海之民 7A21.1).

To sum up, Mencian well-being is indicated by inter(personal) joy which harmonises personal and communal delight, as demonstrated by the exemplary person. Communal joy engenders collective well-being, illustrated by the King “sharing the same delight as the people” (與民同樂 1B1.4). By rejecting the view that one should satisfy one's needs apart from the community, Mencius' position is contrasted with the individualistic presupposition of hedonic well-being. Describing Mencius' philosophy as ‘other-orientedness’, Maria (2020) holds that this orientation “chiefly aims to lead people towards enhancing the well-being of others”, which is “unlike some schools of Ancient GrecoRoman philosophy which tend to ultimately aim at individual wellbeing, like personal tranquillity” (p. 66).³

Virtue-directed joy

The second aspect of Mencian well-being is the ideal of virtue-directed joy, which links the personal and communal dimension of joy to morality. The connection between ethics and joy has already been implied in the previous segment, where I explain that an exemplary person is altruistically motivated to serve and bring joy to others (7A20.1, 7A21.1). Mencius displays virtue-directed joy when he heard that the state of Lu wished to put Yuezhengzi in charge of governing. Mencius shared: “I was so happy that I could not sleep!” (喜而不寐 6B13.1). The reason for Mencius' joy was that he knew that Yuezhengzi was “fond of goodness” (夫苟好善 6B13.1), i.e., the latter was a virtuous person who would do good to the masses. Mencius also discriminates between different types of desire, which in turn affect a person's experience of joy. He recognises

that what a person craves for does not always – and, in some cases, should not – give one happiness.

To further understand Mencius’ interpretation of desires, it is helpful to distinguish ethical desires from prudential desires. As explained by Luo (2019),

Ethical desires are often contrasted with prudential desires. A prudential desire may be defined as a self-regarding desire, as opposed to other-regarding desires. I desire wealth and rank because obtaining them makes *my life* go better. Additionally, prudential desires seek the most efficient way for their satisfaction, independent of morality. On the other hand, the object of an ethical desire is the interests of other people or of the *community* (p. 47, italics in the original).

The self-seeking desire to be King of the world (7A20.1) or to control a large territory and numerous people (7A21.1) are instances of prudential desires. Contrastingly, the wish to make all the people within the Four Seas settled (7A21.1) points to ethical desires.

The *Mencius* is replete with the specific virtues needed for personal and communal joy. Linking virtue to delight and life satisfaction, Mencius notes that a person can be self-assured and fulfilled by “respecting virtue and delighting in *yi*” 義 (appropriateness, also translated as righteousness, rightness) (尊德樂義 7A8.1). Another cardinal moral quality is *cheng* 誠 (genuineness, also translated as sincerity). Mencius teaches, “There is no greater delight than to turn towards oneself and discover genuineness” (反身而誠, 樂莫大焉 7A4.2, also see 7A9.3). Besides appropriateness and genuineness, Mencius also singles out three foundational virtues that all people should cultivate: *ren* 仁 (humanity, also translated as benevolence, humaneness, goodness), *li* 禮 (normative behaviours, also translated as rites, ritual propriety) and *zhi* 智 (wisdom). Mencius points out that “those who are humane [*ren*] love others, and those who display normative behaviours [*li*] respect others” (仁者愛人, 有禮者敬人 4B28.2, my translation). A humane person is empathetic, which is demonstrated by Yi Yin who “cared for the people of the world, the common men and women, such that if there were those who did not receive the kindness of Yao and Shun, *it was as if he himself had pushed them into a ditch*” (思天下之民匹夫匹婦有不與被堯舜之澤者, 若己推而內之溝中 5B1.2, italics added). More needs to be said about the connection between virtues and well-being, and I shall return to this topic in the discussion on moral feelings.

In all, Mencius does not view positive emotions such as joy as morally neutral but rather rooted in and motivated by ethical considerations. As Luo (2019) puts it, happiness for Mencius (and Confucius) “consists primarily not in pleasure, but in ethical pleasure; the good life is not a life in which all or most of one’s desires are fulfilled, but a life in which the satisfaction of prudential desires is subject to the constraint of ethical desire” (p. 41). Mencius’ ethics is an instance of virtue ethics that is agent-centric rather than action-centric (Hu, 2023). His conception of well-being is congruent with eudaimonic well-being that includes moral character as an essential aspect. By grounding emotional experience in virtues, Mencian well-being avoids the criticism of excessive individualism and self-absorption for hedonic well-being. At the same time, Mencian well-being establishes the relation between virtues and joy by preferring ethical desires to prudential desires.

Extension of innate moral feelings

The final dimension of Mencian well-being is the extension of innate moral feelings. Mencius stands out among the Confucian thinkers for his acknowledgement and elucidation of human emotions. He posits that inter(personal) joy occurs only when one’s actions are driven and

accompanied by moral feelings. He gives the example of sage king Shun who “acted out *of* humanity and appropriateness”, instead of “acting out humanity and appropriateness” (由仁義行，非行仁義也 4B19.2). Mengzi underlines the primacy of conducting oneself with appropriate emotions and motivations (Van Norden, 2008). The imperative for moral acts to be preceded and satiated by moral feelings is reiterated in another passage: “To feed someone without caring for that person is to treat such a one like a pig (食而弗愛，豕交之也 7A37.1). Evidently, genuine care for a person goes beyond material provisions to include the expression of one’s authentic feeling of concern and affection.

Mencius’ reference to moral feelings addresses the earlier criticism that eudaimonic well-being pays insufficient attention to the contribution of emotions to self-actualisation. Mencius elaborates on moral feelings through his theory on the innate goodness of humans. He argues that all humans are born with the feeling of compassion, using the following illustration (2A:6.3):

人皆有不忍人之心。先王有不忍人之心，斯有不忍人之政矣。以不忍人之心，行不忍人之政，治天下可運之掌上。所以謂人皆有不忍人之心者，今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也；

The reason why I say that all humans have hearts that are not unfeeling towards others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion – not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among one’s neighbours and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries. From this we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human.

Mencius is not claiming that all humans will respond morally by rescuing the child. Rather, as noted by Van Norden (2008), “All he claims is that any human would have at least a momentary feeling (literally, ‘heart’) of genuine compassion, and that the reaction would occur ‘suddenly’ (which shows that it is not the result of calculations of self-interest)” (p. 46). Building upon the above example, Mencius propounds his belief in the innate goodness of all human beings that takes the form of four sprouts 四端 (2A:6.5, also see 6A6.7):

惻隱之心、仁之端也。羞惡之心、義之端也。辭讓之心、禮之端也。是非之心、智之端也。人之有是四端也、猶其有四體也。

The feeling of compassion is the sprout of *ren* (humanity). The feeling of disdain is the sprout of *yi* (appropriateness). The feeling of deference is the sprout of *li* (normative behaviours). The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of *zhi* (wisdom). People having these four sprouts is like having their four limbs.

Everyone, according to Mencius, shares the same nature at birth, as epitomised by the four sprouts (humanity, appropriateness, normative behaviours and wisdom) (4B32.1, 6A7.4, 6A10.5, 6B2.1). Stalnaker (2010) notes that the four sprouts represent a unity of the affective, cognitive and conative domains that lead to purposeful (re)actions. The Mencian heart, as Tu (1985) puts it, “is both a cognitive and an affective faculty, symbolising the functions of conscience as well as consciousness” (p. 103).⁴

Relating the discussion to self-actualisation in eudaimonic well-being, Mencius regards the development of moral character as an integral part of self-growth and human flourishing. From a Confucian viewpoint, the mission of “fulfilling or realising one’s daimon or true nature” in eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 143) refers to realising one’s inherent goodness

through self-cultivation. The process of self-actualisation through moral development is a delightful and celebratory one, as articulated by Mencius (4A27.2):

樂則生矣；生則惡可已也，惡可已，則不知足之蹈之、手之舞之。」

If one delights in them [the manifestation of the sprouts], then they will grow. If they grow, then how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then one does not notice one's feet dancing to them, one's hands swaying to them."

Mencius' theory on innate moral emotions diverges from Aristotle who "did not consider natural passions to be inherently good, unless tempered by practical rationality" (Mancilla, 2013, p. 59). The cultivation of innate goodness is not a solitary endeavour, nor is it limited to personal joy. Rather, the attainment of ethical character necessarily requires the *extension of one's innate moral feelings*. Mencius gives details on how the expansion of one's inborn emotions work (7B:31.1):

人皆有所不忍、達之於其所忍、仁也。人皆有所不爲、達之於其所爲、義也。人能充無欲害人之心、而仁不可勝用也。人能充無穿窬之心、而義不可勝用也。

People all have things that they will not bear. To extend this reaction to that which they will bear is humanity [*ren*]. People all have things they will not do. To extend this reaction to that which they will do is appropriateness [*yi*]. If people can fill out the heart-mind that does not desire to harm others, their humanity will be inexhaustible. If people can fill out the heart-mind that will not trespass, their appropriateness will be.

According to the above passage, humans need to extend their natural reactions or feelings of compassion and disdain, so that these two can develop into the virtues of humanity and appropriateness. The same extension principle applies to the feeling of deference as well as the feeling of approval and disapproval for the realisation of the moral qualities of normative behaviours and wisdom respectively (2A:6.5). In practical terms, extending one's inherent moral feelings means "treating your elders as elders, and extending it to the elders of others; treating your young ones as young ones, and extending it to the young ones of others" (老吾老，以及人之老；幼吾幼，以及人之幼 1A7.12, also see 2A6.7, 4A12.3, 4B3.3, 7A15.3, 7B1.1, 7B31.1). Maria (2020) comments that Mencius' approach transforms moral feelings into virtues by "galvanising a person to habitually engage in compassionate or caring acts, beginning with those whom he already cares for, such as his family" (p. 56). Human flourishing is made possible through social roles and human relationships (Ames, 2011).⁵ Children learn ethics first at home and in one's neighbourhood (Waks, 2009).

The extension approach brings to mind the earlier passage on the inter(personal) joy experienced by an exemplary person (7A20.1). Just as joy is both personal and communal, the cultivation of virtues also integrates the self and community, where everyone extends love, care and empathy to one another. The self-actualisation in eudaimonic well-being for Mencius is more accurately described as *selves*-actualisation, where humans achieve their full potential even as they help others to achieve theirs.

To conclude this section, Mencian well-being is exhibited through the ideal of inter(personal) joy, which harmonises personal and communal joy. Furthermore, the joy envisaged by Mencius is anchored upon and powered by virtues, and propagated through the extension of innate moral feelings. With reference to Shen's (2018) definition of spirituality, Mencius' spiritual ideal of joy promotes self-cultivation and self-perfection, thereby fulfilling the human desire for meaningfulness in life.⁶ Mencian theory of innate goodness and moral feelings also makes clear the place and role of emotions and virtues in eudaimonic well-being.

A Comparison between Hedonic, Eudaimonic and Mencian Well-Being

I have delineated Mencian well-being which pivots on inter(personal) and virtue-directed joy that is experienced through the extension of innate moral feelings. It is appropriate at this juncture to return to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and compare them with the Mencian interpretation. Table 1 summarises the key similarities and differences between hedonic, eudaimonic and Mencian well-being:

Table 1: A Comparison between Hedonic, Eudaimonic and Mencian Well-Being

	Similarities with Mencian Well-Being (MWB)	Differences with Mencian Well-Being (MWB)
Hedonic Well-Being (HWB)	Both focus on positive emotions such as joy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MWB goes beyond positive emotions in HWB to emphasise moral feelings HWB presupposes individual well-being whereas MWB supports collective well-being
Eudaimonic Well-Being (EWB)	Both focus on self-actualisation for individuals to reach their full potentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MWB clarifies the place of virtues in self-actualisation through Mencius' theory of innate goodness MWB highlights the contribution of emotions to self-actualisation through Mencius' approach of extending innate moral feelings

I shall elaborate on the points mentioned in the table. On the similarities between hedonic and Mencian well-being, a convergence is the common spotlight on positive emotions. As explained earlier, a distinguishing feature of hedonic well-being, as suggested by the word hedonism, is pleasure-seeking. According to this orientation of well-being, a person experiences a high level of wellness if one enjoys positive mood, affect and overall life satisfaction. The criterion to well-being, in this case, is determined by each individual and conveyed through emotional experiences. Mencian well-being is aligned with hedonic well-being in valuing joy, delight, happiness and other cognates. I have already cited relevant passages from *Mencius* on the joy of exemplary persons and sage kings.

However, there are significant differences between hedonic and Mencian well-being. First, Mencian well-being stresses the need to link positive emotions to morality. Mencius' idea of moral feelings is antipodal to the hedonist's desire to obtain pleasure and avoid pain with little regard for ethics. This does not mean that a hedonist never factors in moral values and actions as part of maximising pleasure and minimising pain. A hedonist may choose not to embezzle company funds because he knows that doing so may result in the pain of imprisonment. Conversely, that person may conscientiously live a morally outstanding life because he relishes in receiving compliments from others. But a hedonist's deliberation and incorporation of ethical issues is incidental and contingent; the development of virtue and ethical character are not a necessary component of hedonic well-being.

In contrast, that not all positive emotions are moral or desirable for Mencian well-being. The *Mencius* records King Xuan feeling embarrassed about being known for liking music that has a negative effect on one's character (1B1.2). The same passage also documents Mencius' rebuke to the King for seeking pleasure for himself without desiring to share the delight with the masses. Mencius also teaches that not all negative emotions are undesirable and should be avoided. He contends that a virtuous person can still experience joy in the midst of physical hardships and pain. An example is Confucius' disciple Yan Hui, who was praised by Mencius for refusing to allow his

abject poverty to “spoil his joy” (改其樂 4B29.2). *Mencius* records that Yan Hui lacked shelter (living in a narrow alleyway) and sufficient food (subsisting upon a bowl of food and a gourd of water 4B29.2). Given Yan Hui’s situation, it was natural for him or any human to feel distressed, anxious and depressed. But Yan Hui was able to experience joy even in the midst of pain and physical hardships because he displayed virtues such as endurance, resilience and integrity. He illustrates Mencius’ point about an exemplary person who is not disgraced before Heaven and not ashamed before humans (7A20.1).

The second divergence between hedonic and Mencian well-being is that the former supports individual well-being whereas the latter is geared towards collective well-being. I have already described how hedonic well-being is predicated upon individual needs and interests, aided by the positive psychology movement and therapeutic turn. Mencian well-being supports collective well-being by twinning self-interests and other-interests. An exemplary person is one who cares for others, and experiences personal and communal joy through one’s relationships with heaven, family members and other people.

Turning to a comparison between eudaimonic and Mencian well-being, a prominent similarity is the shared accent on self-actualisation. As noted earlier, eudaimonic well-being is concerned with the conditions for a person to experience growth and fulfilment, such as autonomy, positive relations, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1989, 2018). Eudaimonic well-being draws upon Aristotle’s theory of eudaimonia as living a flourishing life, which is congruent with one’s true nature (Heintzelman, 2018). Likewise, Mencius places an emphasis on everyone achieving self-actualisation by reaching one’s full, moral potential. His vision is for all people to cultivate themselves morally so that they can become exemplary persons and even sages, like the virtuous kings in ancient China.

As for the differences, Mencian well-being addresses the current literature gap on the place of virtues in and the contribution of emotions to self-actualisation for eudaimonic well-being. Mencian well-being clarifies the role of virtues through Mencius’ approach of extending innate moral feelings. The foregoing has explained how Mencius believes that all humans are endowed with innate goodness through the four sprouts. In addition, Mencian well-being spells out the contribution of emotions to self-actualisation through Mencius’ approach of extending innate moral feelings.

International Implications

I have presented a conception of Mencian well-being which combines the salient features of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Applying the method of philosophical reconstruction, this segment explains how a Confucian formulation of well-being extends the existing scholarship in two ways: (1) foregrounding collective well-being and (2) highlighting the contribution of emotional experience to the cultivation of ethical character.

Collective well-being

First, Mencian well-being brings attention to collective well-being by harmonising personal and communal joy, and viewing self-interest and other-interest as inseparable. Studies have shown that Anglo-Americans tend to exhibit individualistic well-being whereas Asians lean towards collective well-being (Chue, 2023). Pointing out that people in collectivistic societies are “assimilated into strong cohesive groups from a young age”, Chue (2023) writes that harmony and relation-orientation are privileged in these settings” (p. 337).⁷ A clarification is that collective well-being does not mean that the self is unimportant. Rather, as Chang and Lim (2007) put it, collective

well-being is “a self that is dynamically integrated with the community” (p. 54, also see Kibe, 2023; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tan & Neo, forthcoming). Researchers have highlighted the mediating effects of Asian traditions, worldviews and lifestyles on the definitions of and approaches to well-being (Caleon et al., 2023; Yang & Zhou, 2017; Yeo et al., 2007). Mencius' accent on communal joy reflects an Eastern orientation of eudaimonism that prefers harmony to individual mastery. His tethering of personal and communal joy mirrors the integration of private and public morality. Jiang (2011) elaborates:

In Confucian ethics, there is no dichotomy between private and public morality. On the contrary, for Confucians, one's taking responsibilities for others and society presupposes one's being a virtuous agent. Self-cultivation is the foundation of the fulfilment of moral responsibility for society (p. 154).

Emotional experience and the cultivation of ethical character

The second contribution of a Confucian conception of well-being relates to the educational context: a recognition of and argument for the pivotal role of emotions for character development. The call for moral cultivation is not new to well-being, as exemplified in eudaimonic well-being. But what makes the Mencian approach to well-being unique is that it does not downplay the place of emotions in well-being, as in the case for the dominant concepts of eudaimonic well-being. As noted earlier, researchers have associated emotions with hedonistic well-being and not eudaimonic well-being. Mencius directly connects emotions to eudaimonia (flourishing) through his theory on innate moral feelings. Mencius also advances the extension of the moral qualities of humanity, appropriateness, normative behaviours and wisdom through one's spontaneous moral reactions. Emotional experiences are critical for moral development as they are the first step and means for a person to recognise one's innate good nature and the potential for one to develop morally. The expansion of one's natural feelings of compassion to others results in the harmonisation of personal and communal joy, as everyone gives and receives love, care and empathy.

It follows that each person therefore needs to be aware of their inborn feelings of kindness towards others, and deliberately expand the feelings by acting in accordance with the affective motive (Kim, 2018). The implication for schools is to enact moral education curriculum and character development programmes that integrate the students' emotions, reasoning abilities and actions. Wong (1991) observes that “Mencius held a picture of the role of emotion in moral motivation that militates against a general separation of reason from emotion” (p. 31). Confucian self-cultivation entails a process whereby a person is aware of one's moral obligations and also experiences the motivation to do so (Nuyen, 2009).

Conclusion

In this article, I critiqued the constructs of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and suggested an alternative conception by referring to the spiritual ideas of Mencius. I have argued that the questionable division of well-being into hedonic and eudaimonic which are derived from Greek thinkers has given rise to significant flaws in both constructs. For hedonic well-being, its accentuation on positive affect leans towards individual well-being and fosters self-interest, against a backdrop of the positive psychology movement. Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, does not give enough attention to the function of emotions in self-actualisation; this orientation of well-being also lacks clarity on how one can develop the virtues needed to live well and flourish.

In the second part of the paper, I provided a Confucian formulation of well-being by discussing key passages from *Mencius*. Instead of an artificial dichotomy of well-being into hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, Mencius harmonises both by acknowledging both positive

emotions and self-actualisation. I have proposed a Mencian construal of well-being which circles around the ideal of virtue-driven joy that harmonises personal and communal delight. Furthermore, Mencian well-being is experienced and sustained through the extension of one's inborn moral feelings. In the last part of this essay, I detailed how Confucian perspectives on well-being extend the current scholarship on well-being in two ways: advocating for collective well-being, and a justification of the primary role of emotions in character development.

In closing, it is essential to consider alternative and diverse philosophical and cultural understandings and paradigms surrounding the construct of well-being from varied spiritual traditions. Graham and colleagues (2016) remind us that well-being is "an embedded cultural understanding". There is therefore a need to (re)conceptualise well-being from a broader perspective by taking into consideration plural and even competing understandings of this term. An analysis of Mencius' thought as recorded in the *Mencius* has enabled us to rethink and (re)conceptualise the current notions and assumptions of well-being. It should be added that the Confucian interpretation of well-being elucidated in this paper is not the only or best understanding of well-being. Relatedly, the Mencian interpretation of well-being outlined in this essay is not the only possible formulation, given the variety of and debates within Confucian traditions. What this essay hopes to achieve is to critique the current conceptions of well-being which have been narrowly confined to Greek philosophical traditions, and suggest a tenable interpretation that is drawn from Chinese spiritual sources.

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Notes

¹ Alluding to the therapeutic approach to well-being, Svane et al. (2019) notes that well-being in schools is often influenced by a deficit perspective, as evidenced in interventions that promised to resolve perceived challenges in a disorganised and uneven fashion.

² It is also important to point out that the idea of eudaimonia is understood differently in Asian and Anglophone societies. Chue (2023) writes that “in western eudaimonism, the notion of individual mastery over the environment is celebrated whereas in eastern eudaimonism, achieving harmony with the environment is prioritised” (p. 335). Elaborating on individual mastery, Ryff and Singer (2008) aver that Aristotle’s well-being hinges on “the task of self-realisation, played out individually, each according to his or her own disposition and talent” (p. 17). It needs to be clarified that Aristotle does not dismiss “harmony with the environment” or societal harmony. In fact, Aristotle recognised the contribution of the community towards the moral development of the young (Kato, 2021). The point here, however, is that more needs to be said about the ethics of eudaimonic well-being by unpacking the nature of virtues in self-actualisation.

³ While I agree with Maria’s point that Mencius calls upon all to enhance the welfare of others, I would add that it is more accurate to characterise his outlook as valuing both well-being of oneself and others (Tan, 2018). As explained

in the foregoing, personal joy is intimately bound up with communal joy, or what I describe as inter(personal) joy.

⁴ It needs to be added that Mencius is not championing the view that human beings are actually or already good. Rather, his usage of ‘sprouts’ signals that human goodness is incipient, and requires personal cultivation and the right environment for them to grow (Jiang, 2011; Tan, 2020).

⁵ The Mencian approach of locating morality within the family and then expanding it to people in the neighbourhood and other parts of the world finds resonance in contemporary sociobiology. Noting that morality begins with the families before it is expanded to other people, Ryan (1998) holds that instinctive affection towards one’s kins is translated into respect for one’s neighbours, acquaintances and strangers locally and overseas.

⁶ Calling Mencius “a eudaimonist”, Huff (2015) writes that “Mencius maintains that the most satisfying life for a human being is the life of benevolence, rightness, wisdom, and ritual propriety, and that such a life fulfils essential desires and capacities of the human heart” (P403). While I agree with the tenor of Huff’s point, I would add that Mencius’ views on well-being differ from eudaimonic well-being in the sense that he places a premium on the role of moral feelings in wellness.

⁷ Collective well-being is illustrated by Asian adolescents experiencing a strong sense of well-being when they partake in collaborative activities; in contrast, adolescents in Western societies enjoy higher well-being when they compete and surpass their peers in activities (Chue, 2023).