UDK: 177.5:1
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2601195G
Original Scientific Article
Received: 23.05.2025. Accepted 26.11.2025.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 1, 001–268

To cite text:
Gavran Miloš, Ana. 2026. "Capabilitarian Well-Being and the Limits of Contextualism: Against Pluralism and Proceduralism." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (1): 195–216.

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CAPABILITARIAN WELL-BEING AND THE LIMITS OF CONTEXTUALISM: AGAINST PLURALISM AND PROCEDURALISM[1]

ABSTRACT
This paper examines recent challenges to traditional philosophical theories of well-being and proposes a revised framework grounded in the capability approach. Classical theories (hedonism, desire-fulfillment, and objective list accounts) have long dominated philosophical discourse on what constitutes a good life. However, these theories have come under increasing criticism for their abstractness and limited applicability to empirical research and policy-making. Anna Alexandrova (2017) argues that philosophical theories of well-being are too general and removed from real-life concerns, advocating instead for a contextual and pluralist understanding of the concept. Ingrid Robeyns (2020) incorporates this critique into the capability approach, claiming that it is particularly suited to reflect pluralism, contextual variation, and interdisciplinary use. In response, this paper accepts the contextual sensitivity of well-being but rejects the idea that it is a fundamentally plural concept. Drawing on Fletcher (2019) and Hawkins (2019), I argue that different applications of the concept still rely on a unified underlying notion of well-being. Thus, the goal should not be to abandon philosophical theorizing but to develop a context-sensitive yet normatively robust account. The capability approach provides a promising structure for this purpose, but it cannot remain procedurally open-ended. I argue for a monistic version of capabilitarian well-being, grounded in a normatively justified set of capabilities. The paper proceeds by reviewing standard theories of well-being, analyzing Alexandrova's contextual critique, assessing Robeyns's proceduralism, and finally defending a unified, normatively grounded version of capabilitarian well-being that retains contextual sensitivity without sacrificing philosophical coherence.

KEYWORDS
well-being, contextualism, pluralism, proceduralism, capabilities, monism

1 This research was conducted as part of the project *Democracy, Inclusiveness, Cities* (uniri–iz–25–152), funded by the European Union — NextGenerationEU.

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Introduction

Philosophical debate about well-being has traditionally focused on the question of what makes a life good for the person who lives it. Within this debate, three main theoretical approaches are typically distinguished: hedonism (Feldman 1997; Crisp 2006), desire-fulfilment theories (Griffin 1986; Heathwood 2006), and objective list theories (Parfit 1984; Fletcher 2013; Rice 2013; Nussbaum 2011). While hedonism claims that well-being is determined by the experience of pleasure, desire-fulfilment theories consider fulfilled desires to be constitutive of well-being, and objective list theories offer a set of intrinsically valuable goods. Although these theories have provided important insights, they have recently been criticized for their abstractness and lack of practical applicability (Alexandrova 2017; Robeyns 2017, 2020).

In more recent discussions, scepticism has emerged toward the idea that philosophy can provide a universally valid theory of well-being. Anna Alexandrova (2017) argues that standard philosophical theories of well-being are too abstract and that they offer high-level theories useful only within philosophical discourse, but not in interdisciplinary research or policy-making. Instead, Alexandrova advocates a contextual approach, according to which the definition of well-being depends on the specific domain of research and its practical aims. She also claims that the concept of well-being itself is not monistic, as assumed by most philosophical theories, but rather that its meaning depends on its contextual use. For this reason, she endorses a pluralist view of well-being (Alexandrova 2017; Mitchell and Alexandrova 2021). Ingrid Robeyns (2020) accepts this critique of standard theories and applies it within the framework of the capability approach. She argues that this framework is especially well suited for understanding well-being, as it accommodates pluralism, contextual sensitivity, and applicability in the social sciences and public policy.

In this paper, I accept Alexandrova's thesis that the concept of well-being is context-sensitive, but I reject her scepticism regarding the possibility of a single philosophical normative theory of well-being and a unified concept. I argue that even across different contexts we are operating with the same concept of well-being, which shows only that the concept is context-sensitive, not that it is plural in nature (Fletcher 2019; Hawkins 2019). This further implies that we should not abandon the goal of a single, all-things-considered theory of well-being, but rather aim to develop a sufficiently flexible theoretical framework capable of integrating diverse contextual factors.

For this reason, I turn to Robeyns's proposal that the capability approach should serve as such a framework – one that recognizes the importance of contextual sensitivity and remains open to interdisciplinary and empirical research. However, unlike Robeyns, I argue that the capability approach cannot remain a substantively empty procedural framework. It must instead include a normatively justified list of valuable capabilities that are fundamental to human well-being. Therefore, this paper analyses three central objections to proceduralist versions of the capability approach: (i) the lack of normative and

descriptive adequacy, (ii) the limited capacity for critical evaluation of different constructions of well-being, and (iii) the rejection of universally valuable capabilities and functionings.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I begin by briefly presenting standard philosophical theories of well-being. In the following section, I examine Alexandrova's critique, highlighting its strengths and limitations. I then turn to Robeyns's capabilitarian framework, once again addressing both its strengths and weaknesses as a procedural account of well-being.

Philosophical Theories of Well-Being: The Standard Debate

The philosophical concept of well-being captures a specific type of value – that which is *good for* a person. When we talk about well-being, we are not referring to goodness simpliciter; rather, we aim to grasp what is in a person's interest, what benefits them, or what is good for them (Griffin 1986; Sumner 1996; Kraut 2018). This is also known as prudential value, which differs from moral, aesthetic, or other forms of value. For example, imagine you have a certain amount of money you wish to spend on a long-desired trip abroad, but then you learn that someone close to you is suffering from a rare illness and needs the money for treatment. It is clearly morally good to direct the funds toward their treatment, but that means giving up something that was in your own interest. Prudential value refers to what is good for the individual, and for this reason, the relationship to the subject is key to defining the concept of well-being as something *good for* the person.

In contemporary philosophy, the dominant classification of theories of well-being follows Derek Parfit's (1984) influential tripartite distinction: hedonism, desire-fulfilment theory, and objective list theory.[2] Hedonism holds that pleasure is ultimately good for us, and pain is ultimately bad. According to this view, the good life is one that maximizes pleasurable experiences and minimizes suffering. Hedonists differ over the definition of pleasure, whether it is a mental feeling or a favourable attitude and whether emphasis should be placed on its quantity or quality (Crisp 2006; Feldman 2004). However, they agree that a person's life goes well to the extent that her hedonic balance is positive, meaning she experiences more pleasure than pain over time.

Desire-fulfilment theory claims that well-being consists in the satisfaction of a person's ultimate, non-instrumental desires. Unfulfilled desires reduce well-being. Theories in this camp vary in how they define "ultimate" desires: some accept all desires, while others restrict them to informed or idealized ones. What unifies them is the emphasis on subjective endorsement: what matters is that the individual wants or endorses a certain state. Unlike hedonism, desire-fulfilment theory accommodates diversity in conceptions of the

2 The philosophical debate still largely builds on Parfit's classification, although it has faced certain criticisms, for instance, in Woodard (2013).

good life and treats individual differences as central (Griffin 1986; Railton 1986; Heathwood 2006).

By contrast, objective list theories hold that some things are prudentially good for a person independently of her subjective attitudes toward them. These theories were developed in response to cases where an individual might lack the relevant desire or not derive pleasure from something that is nonetheless good for her. This implies that there must be some fixed, objective and external standard for what is good for us. They usually provide a list of objectively valuable things among which you can find, for example, knowledge, happiness, friends or achievement (Parfit 1984; Fletcher 2013; Arneson 2003).

In addition to Parfit's threefold scheme, a more recent classification distinguishes subjective from objective theories more broadly (Badhwar 2014; Bradley 2014). Subjective theories define well-being wholly in terms of the subject's mental states (positive feelings, desires, or satisfaction) making a person the final authority on what is good for her. According to these theories, an object O is prudentially good for subject S if and only if S has a positive attitude toward O (e.g., desires it, enjoys it, or finds it pleasurable). Objective theories, in contrast, define well-being by reference to criteria external to the subject's mental states. Something may be good for a person even if she does not recognize or value it. For instance, even if a person does not want to attend school, gaining an education is still prudentially good for her because knowledge is objectively valuable. Within this broader taxonomy, hedonism and desire-fulfilment theory are subjective, while objective list theory, perfectionism, and eudaimonism fall on the objective side.

Other prominent theories that do not feature in Parfit's original classification include: life satisfaction theory (well-being is achieved when a person authentically feels satisfied with her life as a whole; Sumner 1996; Tiberius & Plakias 2010); theories of happiness (identifies well-being with the subjective feeling of happiness; Haybron 2008); value fulfilment theory (defines well-being as the realization of a person's central values, such as parenthood or friendship; Tiberius 2018); perfectionism (grounds well-being in the development of human capacities and excellence in their exercise; Hurka 1996; Kraut 2007); and eudaimonism (holds that well-being consists in developing one's nature through virtue and the excellent use of one's capacities; Russell 2012; Badhwar 2014).

Despite their diversity, these philosophical theories share several key characteristics: (i) essentialism: each theory seeks to identify the essential constituents of well-being whether pleasure, desire satisfaction, knowledge, or virtue. They aim to explain what well-being is, rather than how it may vary across individuals or cultures.

(ii) monism: they typically assume there is a single correct theory or concept of well-being. This commitment to monism rules out the possibility that different conceptions of the good life may be equally valid for different people or contexts.

(iii) unified standard of assessment: all these theories endorse the idea of "well-being all-things-considered", meaning that they aim to provide a

comprehensive evaluation of a person's life (Alexandrova 2017). The focus of the philosophical concept of well-being can be compared to the kind of reflection a person might have at the end of life asking herself: "All things considered, was my life a good one?". This kind of evaluation pertains to life as a whole and does not typically attend to the specificities of life stages or specific circumstances. The ambition of philosophical theories is thus universalist and absolutist: each theory claims to capture the true nature of well-being, offering a general and context-independent standard by which to assess lives.

This approach has recently come under critique, from which alternative contextualist and pluralist approaches to well-being have emerged (Alexandrova 2017; Alexandrova & Mitchell 2020; Robeyns 2017, 2020; Östlund 2024). The critique is primarily aimed at showing that philosophical theories are overly abstract and, as such, of limited use in discussions of well-being in dialogue with empirical sciences. Furthermore, critics argue that currently dominant philosophical theories are inadequate precisely because they are essentialist, monistic, and committed to unified evaluative standard features that make them insensitive to the contextual variability of well-being and incapable of capturing its plural and dynamic nature. As such, they are viewed as unsuitable for interdisciplinary research. Since the most influential critique comes from Anna Alexandrova (2017), I will turn to her argument in the following section.

Contextualism and Pluralism in the Philosophy of Well-Being

In her book *Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, Alexandrova offers a critique of philosophical debates on well-being and of existing theories, which she primarily describes as highly abstract, so-called "high-level theories." According to her critique, the fundamental problem of these theories lies in their abstractness, universalism, and lack of practical applicability to scientific research and measurement of well-being. As such, philosophical theories fail to capture the diversity of human lives and the variability of contexts in which the concept of well-being arises. However, Alexandrova argues, once we take contextual diversity into account, we realize that not only does the concept of well-being change, but also the factors considered relevant to its assessment. This, she argues, leads to pluralism regarding both the concept and theories of well-being (2017). She supports this thesis with the following example.

Let us imagine a pregnant woman, Masha, in three different situations. In the first, Masha falls on the street and a Good Samaritan approaches her asking if she is alright. In this context, the assessment of well-being and the very concept relates to basic physical capabilities and fundamental needs; for instance, whether she can walk and whether she needs help reaching a bench. In the second situation, Masha is having dinner with a close friend. When asked "how are you?", she opens up emotionally and shares her anxiety about her partner's precarious job, her dissatisfaction with quitting her PhD and concerns about becoming a stay-at-home mom. In this context, the assessment of her well-being encompasses a much broader range of emotional states, life circumstances,

and interpersonal relationships. Her friend might conclude that Masha is not doing well. In the third case, a social worker visits Masha and asks her about her income and social resources. The worker concludes that Masha is doing fine, since she not only has her partner's salary but also personal savings and supportive family and friends. What does Alexandrova infer from this?

From the example, it is evident that all three individuals make a judgment about Masha's well-being. However, as Alexandrova notes, "yet in each case different standard of well-being is used" (2017: 7). She believes that each scenario involves a different use of the concept of well-being, with both the constitutive elements and the standards of attribution depending on the context. The problem with philosophical theories, according to her, is that none of them can account for such contextual variation. Beyond these practical and everyday examples, Alexandrova also points to disciplinary differences in how well-being is conceptualized (2017: 82):

> Other disciplines that study well-being – sociology, medical and clinical sciences, parts of economics – display a similar dynamic. Some hypotheses are on the face of it value free, but they rarely exhaust the full intent of researchers. Economists learn about happiness in order to have a more faithful account of economic growth; sociologists are interested in dignity and well-being at work; developmental psychologists focus on the processes and risk factors that greatly affect children's future functioning.

In her view, these examples demonstrate that well-being is also used in diverse ways across different scientific disciplines. From this, she derives two key claims, which she terms *threshold dependence* and *constitutive dependence* (2017: 8). The first refers to the idea that what counts as well-being depends on the thresholds set within a specific context. In other words, what will be considered "enough" or "not enough" for well-being depends on the situation and the purpose of the evaluation. For example, for the Good Samaritan it is enough that Masha has no physical injuries, while her friend focuses on her emotional state only because he assumes that she is physically fine, and therefore attends to a different aspect of her well-being. Thresholds are not set arbitrarily; rather, they are determined by the specific goals of the evaluation, i.e., in accordance with the function the theory of well-being serves in a given context (e.g., a doctor evaluates physical well-being, a social worker assesses material security). Constitutive dependence, on the other hand, means that what is considered constitutive of well-being depends on the specific factors relevant in a given context. That is, not only the thresholds for well-being vary from one context to another, but also the very nature and elements that constitute well-being change across contexts. This entails that changes in contextual standards transform the metaphysical content of the well-being concept itself, not merely the evaluative criteria used for its assessment.

Given that different thresholds apply in different contexts and that the constitutive elements of well-being themselves shift, Alexandrova concludes that it is impossible to offer a universal standard, definition or theory. Instead, each

context requires its own context-specific understanding. In other words, we must accept contextualism and pluralism as facts, evident from both ordinary language use and scientific practice. Philosophical theories, she argues, should stop ignoring this fact. Rather than clinging to highly abstract and universalistic "high-level theories" that aim to define a univocal and fixed concept and provide a comprehensive standard, philosophers should embrace pluralism as both inevitable and desirable. Embracing contextualism and pluralism would render philosophical theories more precise, empirically grounded, and open to dialogue with other disciplines. Thus, according to Alexandrova, the proper goal of philosophical theories is to develop so-called "mid-level theories."

Mid-level theories aim to strike a balance between universality and flexibility in practical application, thereby facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration. The model they follow is what Alexandrova calls the "toolbox model," in contrast to the "vending machine model". If a theory functions as a toolbox, it does not offer a single, predetermined answer but instead provides researchers with tools that can be applied in various ways depending on the context and adapted to the needs of a particular research goal. By contrast, the vending machine model consists of theories with fixed normative frameworks and conceptual content, making them insensitive to context, much like all traditional high-level philosophical theories of well-being.

To some extent, Alexandrova is right. Philosophical theories often ignore empirical discussions because of their inherently abstract and universalist orientation, offering a single, all-things-considered standard of well-being. Alexandrova's aim is praiseworthy, and I share her motivation to make philosophical theories less abstract and more sensitive to empirical realities. However, I disagree that this requires abandoning monism and essentialism. On the contrary, I argue that such a move is deeply problematic for philosophical theory, since radical contextualism and pluralism ultimately undermine the very purpose of philosophical inquiry about well-being. In the following section, I will provide a more detailed critique of Alexandrova's position.

A Critique of Contextualism and Pluralism about Well-Being

The existing critique of Alexandrova is primarily directed at her fragmentation of the concept of well-being and her endorsement of radical pluralism. Jennifer Hawkins (2019) argues that while the concept of well-being may indeed have multiple uses, Alexandrova overstates her case in claiming that the concept is so changeable that it lacks a unified core meaning. According to Hawkins, philosophers are well aware that the concept of well-being can be used in different contexts, but this does not mean that there is no stable theoretical foundation that allows for normative discussion about what is good for a person. Guy Fletcher (2019) similarly notes that the fact that different contexts emphasize different aspects of well-being does not entail that they are dealing with metaphysically distinct concepts. For both Hawkins and Fletcher, then, contextualism is acceptable, but it does not follow that contextual sensitivity

entails conceptual pluralism. Fletcher claims that "the use of the term 'doing well' *is* context sensitive," because of which he accepts the idea of threshold dependence (2019: 703). For instance, we might say that someone is doing well a few days after surviving a serious car accident, even though we have in fact significantly lowered the standard of well-being compared to our everyday usage (2019: 703). However, Alexandrova's contextualism does not stop at evaluative thresholds. Her constitutive dependence thesis means that the very content of well-being changes across contexts, which makes her version of contextualism a radical one, as both Hawkins and Fletcher argue.

By introducing this thesis, Alexandrova's contextualism becomes radical because it implies that a change in context results in a metaphysical change in the nature of well-being itself. In the example of Masha, Alexandrova claims that we are dealing with three different entities, three distinct conceptions of well-being, because in each case, a different threshold is applied and different factors are considered as relevant in the assessment. Fletcher's main concern with Alexandrova's argument is the assumption that contextual variation in the evaluation of well-being necessarily implies a change in the concept's very nature. Therefore, Fletcher insists on a precise distinction between evaluative variability and conceptual pluralism. While it is undeniable that evaluations of well-being may vary depending on the context, this does not imply that the very nature of well-being also changes.

A problematic consequence of radical contextualism would be that speakers from different contexts, as well as well-being researchers, would not actually be talking about the same thing. They would fail to understand each other, and their discussions would systematically miss the mark.[3] Furthermore, under the assumption of radical contextualism, claims about well-being would become incomparable, and no universal criteria could exist for discussing what it means to live well. Fletcher emphasizes that this would mean people could not have meaningful disagreements about well-being, since each claim would refer to fundamentally different concepts. A further problematic consequence is that radical contextualism treats statements like "Masha is doing well" and "Masha is not doing well," made by the Good Samaritan and Masha's close friend respectively, as not genuinely in disagreement because they are referring to different concepts. Yet, intuitively, we sense that in such examples there is a rational connection between these uses of the term, which suggests that in both cases we are indeed talking about Masha's well-being. The Good Samaritan captures one aspect or dimension of well-being (physical or hedonic), while the friend captures another, emotional aspect. Hence, Fletcher defends the view of aspectualism: in different contexts, we emphasize different aspects of one and the same well-being, but this does not mean we are talking about different things.

3 This claim concerns theoretical mutual intelligibility across frameworks, not ordinary conversational understanding between individuals, such as in the Masha example. I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to this point.

A version of aspectualism is also defended by Hawkins (2019), who argues that the lack of clarity about which aspect of the concept is being referred to is precisely what leads to confusion in debate. She also claims that Alexandrova misinterprets the variability of linguistic usage as evidence for deep conceptual fragmentation, whereas in reality, the problem often arises from the polysemy of language, not from the absence of a unified concept of well-being. She emphasizes that the question "How are you?" and the answer "I'm fine" need not be directly connected to the philosophical concept of well-being. Rather, these are phrases used in various normative contexts, from moral to medical, and they can simply signal that a basic threshold has been met (e.g., that the person does not need immediate assistance). In other words, when Masha says she is "fine," this does not mean she is making a normative judgment about her overall well-being, but merely confirming that she is not in immediate danger. Therefore, Hawkins argues that Alexandrova misreads conversational norms as evidence for conceptual pluralism.

Another argument Hawkins raises concerns the importance of epistemological clarity and the preservation of conceptual precision in debates about well-being. Even if we accept that there are different ways of talking about well-being, she argues that philosophers should not simply accept this diversity as proof of the non-existence of a unified concept. On the contrary, we should work to differentiate among various uses and ensure that key philosophical concepts remain precisely defined. Hawkins believes that contextual variability does not justify abandoning clear distinctions between different types of well-being evaluations. This is especially important because philosophical analysis of the concept of well-being provides tools for critiquing and improving existing standards of well-being assessment. If we were to follow Alexandrova's suggestion and accept that the concept of well-being is independently formed in each context, we would lose the ability to critically examine existing social norms and institutional criteria that define what counts as a "good life." In this respect, Hawkins sees Alexandrova's approach as epistemologically too passive, reducing the role of philosophy to merely describing how the term well-being is used.

Let us now further elaborate these criticisms, first Fletcher's concern about the radical nature of contextual pluralism, and then Hawkins' point about the consequences of this position for philosophy's normative role. Fletcher's identification of the radicalism in Alexandrova's thesis of constitutive dependence can be further clarified by comparing it to epistemological contextualism. Although Alexandrova draws on this analogy, she does not acknowledge that in epistemology, contextualism is not necessarily linked to conceptual pluralism. For instance, authors like De Rose (1995) or Lewis (1996) argue that we are not dealing with different concepts of knowledge, but rather with shifts in the criteria for justification and certainty in different contexts.[4] For example, in an

4 A somewhat more radical version of contextualism in epistemology can be found in the work of Michael Williams (2001), who argues that justificatory practices are

everyday context, we are justified in claiming that we know we have hands, whereas this same claim would not hold in a philosophical debate with a sceptic, because the threshold for knowledge is now much higher (we would have to rule out sceptical scenarios that are not relevant in everyday contexts). In other words, epistemological contextualists accept what Alexandrova calls threshold dependence, that is, variability in standards for attributing knowledge, but they reject constitutive dependence.

Secondly, a serious consequence of this kind of radical contextualism is the loss of the possibility of rational comparison and normative evaluation of well-being. If there is no shared concept of well-being, then we lack the criteria to compare different theories and conceptions of well-being. This means we cannot determine whether one conception is normatively superior to another, or whether certain theories are inadequate or even unjust. The role of philosophy is precisely normative: to analyse the nature of well-being and explain why certain forms of life are valuable for individuals. If philosophical theories become merely adaptable to scientific disciplines and stop providing universal criteria for evaluating well-being, then philosophy loses its distinctiveness and becomes a methodological tool of scientists, rather than an autonomous discipline that investigates prudential value and enables critique of prevailing social standards of well-being. The argument is not driven by disciplinary preference, but by the claim that any philosophical theory of well-being must offer criteria that allow us to evaluate, and not merely mirror, local constructions of well-being.

From this critique, I believe we must draw the following conclusion: the concept of well-being should be monistic but context-sensitive. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a philosophical theory that is sensitive to context yet provides a clear normative account of what well-being is and why it matters. Furthermore, a philosophical theory of well-being should also be empirically applicable, i.e., capable of engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue with other sciences that study well-being. Although highly critical of the existing debate, Alexandrova identifies one theoretical framework – the capability approach – as a potential example of such a theory, but she does not offer a deeper analysis of capabilitarian well-being (2017: 39, 166). This task is undertaken by Ingrid Robeyns (2017, 2020), who constructs a capabilitarian account of well-being grounded in the premises of radical contextualism. In what follows, I argue that the capability approach is indeed a promising framework for developing a flexible theory of well-being, but I reject the version proposed by Robeyns. I claim that her model, which presupposes radical contextualism, faces all of the aforementioned criticisms, and further, that as a purely procedural framework, it fails to fulfil the basic task of a philosophical theory of well-being, namely, to explain the nature of well-being itself.

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historically and discursively situated (inferential contextualism) and rejects epistemological foundationalism. However, even his version would not support what Alexandrova calls constitutive dependence, since Williams does not claim that the very concept of knowledge itself changes across contexts, but rather the criteria for justification.

Capabilitarian Framework for Well-Being: Proceduralist Version

The Capability Approach (CA) is a normative framework for evaluating well-being, quality of life, social justice, and development, grounded in the concepts of functionings and capabilities (Robeyns 2017). Functionings refer to states and activities a person can achieve (e.g., being healthy, educated, politically engaged), while capabilities stand for the real opportunities an individual has to achieve those functionings (for instance, the capability to be healthy includes access to clean water, sufficient food, and medical care). The rationale for introducing these concepts lies in the idea that any inquiry into justice or quality of life must start with the question of what people are actually able to do and to be. This question reveals that it is insufficient to track or measure only achieved well-being; it is equally important to assess the real opportunities individuals have to live valuable lives.

The introduction of the distinction between capabilities and functionings, between potential and achieved well-being, is the first crucial difference between CA and other theories of well-being. It also serves as a key critique of alternative approaches, especially resource-based theories, which presume that merely ensuring people have resources is enough.[5] What matters more, however, is whether individuals can convert those resources into valuable functionings (Robeyns 2017: 45-47). For instance, building schools in a patriarchal community that believes girls do not need education will not lead to higher rates of female education. Despite the provision of resources (schools), what is lacking is familial support or perhaps the infrastructure (such as roads or buses), demonstrating that women in such contexts lack the actual capability to pursue education.

By introducing these two dimensions, CA allows us to more effectively detect both different forms of injustice and potential elements for improving the quality of life. Compared to classical theories of well-being, CA offers a more comprehensive account for these reasons:

1. In contrast to hedonism, CA shows that well-being encompasses additional dimensions, such as autonomy, education, and participation in social life, thereby capturing the complexity of human life. Moreover, utilitarian hedonism, which seeks to maximize the happiness of the greatest number, remains insensitive to individual cases of dissatisfaction and suffering, and fails to differentiate between qualitatively distinct pleasures (e.g., eating vs. helping a friend).

2. Compared to desire-fulfilment theories, CA highlights problems with defining well-being solely through the fulfilment of individual desires, which may be distorted by injustice or social conditioning, as in the case of so-called adaptive preferences. A frequent example, discussed by Martha Nussbaum (2000), involves women raised in societies where they are expected not to

5 For a critique of other theories and the motivation behind the development of the capability approach, see Nussbaum (2011: 46-69).

pursue education, to handle all housework and to eat only after all family members have finished, often going hungry themselves. These women may have no desire for education, employment, or even adequate nourishment. According to desire-fulfilment theory, their well-being is high. CA, by contrast, enables us to identify the problem as lying in the fact that these desires are shaped by structural injustice. When society denies certain goods, people tend to stop wanting them and adapt to live without them. CA allows us to detect such harmful desires and improve individual well-being.

3. CA is perhaps most similar to perfectionism or objective list theories, since it aims to enumerate valuable goods and functionings. Variants of CA differ on whether such a list should be open and democratically determined (as in the Senian tradition) or fixed, as in Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities (Cf. Nussbaum 2000). However, the key difference is that objective list theories do not account for the distinction between potential and achieved well-being. Also, CA offers an explanation for why capabilities are the currency of well-being. It accommodates the pluralism of values and captures multiple dimensions of well-being through the potential/actual distinction and the various valuable capabilities that define what people are able to do and be.

Robeyns (2017, 2020), thus, describes capabilitarian well-being as a theoretical framework that defines well-being along two axes: achieved well-being (the actual beings and doings, such as being educated, healthy, or voting), and well-being freedom (potential well-being), which refers to the set of real options or freedoms from which a person can choose what to realize as valuable functionings:

> Thus, while travelling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability. A person who does not travel may or may not be free and able to travel; the notion of capability seeks to capture precisely the fact of whether the person could travel if she wanted to. (Robeyns 2016: 405-406)

Moreover, this multidimensionality enables value pluralism in the definition of well-being, which allows us to capture the diversity of human lives and the possibility of conflicting dimensions (e.g., a person may be materially secure but face sexist harassment at work). What Robeyns particularly emphasizes is that capabilities and functionings are value-neutral.

The reason for this, according to Robeyns, is that while some functionings are clearly valuable, such as "being in good health," others are clearly negative, like "being raped or being murdered." But some functionings are more complex to evaluate, such as "giving care" or "care work." As she notes, "care work can be positive functioning if done for a limited time, but becomes negative functioning if it is done for many hours" (2017: 43). On these grounds, Robeyns argues that capabilitarian well-being should be understood as an open framework, filled in with context-specific capabilities, which then shapes the theory of well-being relevant to that specific context. This view is entirely consistent with Alexandrova's thesis and Robeyns fully embraces her contextualism and pluralism: each context generates a different capabilitarian well-being theory

and a different conception of well-being. This is why Robeyns' version is also proceduralist: the process of selecting relevant capabilities must be democratic and inclusive, reflecting the specific needs of the community or society in which it is applied (Robeyns 2020).

She concludes that the advantages of the capabilitarian account of well-being include following: (i) it provides a vocabulary that resonates with people's actual experiences; (ii) it enables the identification of different dimensions or aspects of well-being; (iii) it creates a space for policy-making and development initiatives that improve human lives; (iv) it serves as a less abstract philosophical framework for empirical research on well-being, while still being compatible with classical theories (2020).

While I agree with these conclusions regarding the strengths of capabilitarian well-being, I disagree that they can be achieved through a proceduralist version alone. Since it fully relies on Alexandrova's radical contextualism, I believe it inherits all the previously identified criticisms. I will focus on three specific problems confronting Robeyns' version of CA well-being: (1) its failure to satisfy the criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy, (2) its limited capacity to critically evaluate empirical constructs of well-being, and (3) Robeyns' objection to the possibility of identifying universally valuable capabilities and functionings, given that some, such as caregiving, can have both positive and negative consequences. These concerns motivate the need to consider an alternative version of capabilitarian well-being.

A Critique of Proceduralist Capabilitarian Well-Being

Just as it is a fact that philosophers disagree about the nature of well-being, there is nonetheless a broad consensus regarding the criteria that a theory of well-being must satisfy to be considered adequate. These criteria are normative and descriptive adequacy (Sumner 1996; Haybron 2006; Badhwar 2014; Tiberius 2018). A theory is normatively adequate if it explains the nature of well-being and answers the question of why what we identify as non-instrumentally or ultimately good is in fact valuable. Well-being is a normative or value-laden concept that defines what is in a person's interest or what makes her life go well. Normativity is a distinctively philosophical aspect of the analysis of well-being, as opposed to, for example, psychological research, which typically does not pursue an explanation of prudential value but is instead focused primarily on describing individuals' psychological states (Tiberius 2006). Moreover, normativity also provides reasons for action. If we establish that something is prudentially valuable for a person, then she has reason to act in a way that realizes that good (Rodogno 2015; Tiberius 2018). This action is not arbitrary, since evaluative judgments are grounded in a normative theory that provides a criterion for justifying those judgments. If normatively adequate, theory also offers a standard for identifying when a person is mistaken in her assessment of prudential goods, as well as a standard by which we can say that some lives are better than others. In addition, Sumner identifies a second

important criterion that a philosophical theory must meet, descriptive adequacy (Sumner 1996). A theory is descriptively adequate if it preserves our strong intuitions about well-being and aligns with our ordinary understanding of the concept. The concept of well-being must retain intuitive plausibility; in other words, it must clearly correspond to the concept we typically use when assessing our lives as good or bad. This division between normative and descriptive adequacy ensures that a theory of well-being can both describe human experience and offer normative guidance for action.

Overall, the proceduralist account of capabilitarian well-being, as proposed by Robeyns, fails to meet both criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy. When asked what well-being consists in, it refers to capabilities and functionings. However, since these are treated as value-neutral, the account fails to provide the normative guidance we expect from a philosophical theory of well-being. In fact, it does not engage with the value-laden dimension of the concept at all. As a result, it ceases to function as a philosophical theory and becomes merely a formal framework for empirical application.

Robeyns responds by claiming that her version of capabilitarian well-being is an empty, normative framework and that substantive theories with specific content are to be developed within particular contexts of inquiry. She offers three illustrative examples (2017: 125-126):

1. Capabilitarian account used for a first-person perspective on well-being:

> An adolescent contemplating what to do with her life, she may ask herself what she really wants: to study hard and work hard and become a medical doctor? Or does she have a stronger desire to build a family and search for a job that makes it possible to spend enough time with her children? (...) In this personal deliberation, the account of well-being she then uses can be seen as a desire-fulfilment account in which the desires all refer to functionings.

2. Capabilitarian account of well-being used for institutional design:

> There is also often implicitly a desire-fulfilment account, by trying to create valuable options (capabilities) for citizens, but by not forcing them into those outcomes (functionings).

3. Capabilitarian account of well-being used in macro-level poverty analysis:

> The researchers will select a number of functionings that they have reason to believe are good for people, such as their health, educational outcomes, and the kind of shelter in which they can live. The notion of achieved well-being entailed in this normative exercise is an objectively good account, although one could also argue that one has reason to assume that these are dimensions of the quality of life that people would want for themselves (hence their desires).

Thus, in the first case, Robeyns describes a desire-fulfilment theory oriented toward functionings; in the second, also a desire-fulfilment account presupposing certain functionings; and in the third case, an objectively determined

list of functionings, which "researchers have reason to believe are good for people," even if the people in question do not desire them. These examples highlight Robeyns's endorsement of a context-sensitive pluralism, allowing various theoretical interpretations of well-being depending on the practical goals at hand. Although this approach partially satisfies the criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy, since the examples she offers temporarily rely on substantive assumptions about what is valuable, the procedural framework itself remains normatively empty, which generates several further problems.

First, this flexibility relies on an arbitrary combination of existing high-level philosophical theories, such as desire-fulfilment, with no principled justification for selecting that theory. Why, for instance, should we adopt a desire-based account rather than a value-fulfilment theory or objective list theory? Why are functionings prioritized in some contexts but capabilities in others? The criteria for such choices remain unspecified and risk being ad hoc. In addition to the arbitrariness of theoretical selection, there is the more fundamental issue common to all subjectivist theories, namely, that individuals can be mistaken or deluded about what is good for them. Desires can be prudentially bad (e.g., trivial desires like counting blades of grass), crude or poorly cultivated (e.g., a desire for cheap food and drink), or harmful (e.g., wanting to delay a dentist appointment out of fear of pain).[6] Our adolescent may not value education, perhaps because she lives in a society where women are not expected to pursue it. In the capability literature, this issue is addressed through the concept of adaptive preferences; preferences individuals form in response to unjust, oppressive, or limiting social conditions, often by lowering their expectations or desires in order to cope with their circumstances (Sen 1985; Nussbaum 2000; Terlazzo 2014, 2017; Khader 2011).

A further and more pressing concern arises from the problem of adaptive preferences. Even if we set aside the arbitrariness of theoretical selection, Robeyns's framework encounters a deeper difficulty: it lacks the normative tools to critically assess preferences that have been shaped by injustice. Robeyns acknowledges this challenge. She notes that they cannot be ignored, but also warns against overestimating their impact (2017: 137-142). This is a reasonable position, given that adaptive preferences are indeed a serious problem for proceduralist versions of CA. As Robeyns herself notes, procedural methods risk reflecting existing social norms, including unjust ones. They may also overlook cases where individuals possess certain capabilities but refrain from developing them due to internalized oppressive beliefs. Nonetheless, Robeyns insists on retaining a procedural framework for identifying and addressing adaptive

6 In the philosophical literature, trivial desires are often treated as prudentially defective because their satisfaction does not improve a person's life in any meaningful way. Heathwood (2006) argues that some desires are prudentially irrelevant when they concern objects that make no difference to a person's welfare, and Fletcher (2016) points out that such desires crowd out those connected to genuine prudential goods. For these reasons, trivial desires like counting blades of grass are commonly described as prudentially bad or prudentially empty.

preferences through "deliberation and interaction with people of whom one may be worried that their preferences may show a signs of adaptation" (2017: 141). But this raises a fundamental question: On what basis can we determine that someone's preference is adaptive rather than authentic, or harmful rather than harmless?

Serene Khader emphasizes the need for a substantive normative baseline in order to meaningfully diagnose adaptation:

> If we think of adaptive preferences as distorting people's understandings of their needs, it is because we believe there is an objective truth about their needs that is capable of being distorted. A concept of human flourishing can provide us with an objective sense of what human beings need. (Khader 2011: 18)

This quote points to the limits of proceduralism. In order to identify adaptive preferences as problematic, we must presuppose a non-adaptive, prior standard of flourishing. Robeyns's account attempts to sidestep this by letting contextual procedures determine what counts as well-being, but in doing so it forfeits the ability to critically assess distorted preferences, especially in cases where people have internalized unjust conditions. Robeyns's proposal thus faces a dilemma. Either it allows normative standards to be determined procedurally and risks legitimizing distorted preferences and unjust conditions, or it must appeal to some prior conception of flourishing, thereby departing from strict proceduralism combined with radical contextualism.

This leads to a deeper critique: proceduralism, like radical contextualism, lacks the tools to distinguish between valid and distorted conceptions of well-being across contexts. In a framework that lacks normative constraints, any local judgment risks being legitimated as a valid expression of well-being even if it results from social deprivation, oppression, or indoctrination. This issue parallels critiques of Alexandrova's contextualism, which similarly neglects substantive criteria for well-being in favour of context-bound constructions. But how are researchers within a specific context making justified judgments about which capabilities or functionings are valuable? Robeyns states, in the quotation above, that in macro-level poverty analyses, researchers select functionings such as health, education, and shelter because they "have reason to believe" that these are good for people. The question remains: on what grounds? Suppose, for example, that in a given society political participation is not considered important for well-being. If the theory lacks an independent normative foundation, it cannot explain why political capabilities should nonetheless be promoted. This raises the justified concern that procedural CA may merely reproduce empirical constructs without any capacity to normatively interrogate their limitations. Robeyns's solution, thus, reduces capabilitarian well-being to a methodological framework, in which the normative content is left to the discretionary judgment of researchers or institutions. As such, capabilitarian well-being ceases to function as a philosophical theory of well-being and becomes merely a technical tool for empirical research. In contrast, as previously emphasized, a philosophical theory should provide a prior value-justification of

the core assumptions about what constitutes human well-being, assumptions that can then serve as the basis for evaluating empirical constructs in specific contexts. If we want the capability approach to offer more than procedural adaptability and to serve as a philosophical theory with critical and normative force then we must go beyond value-neutral frameworks and affirm that certain capabilities are intrinsically valuable because they enable human flourishing.

As already mentioned, Robeyns's reluctance to endorse a fixed list of valuable capabilities stems from her concerns about value neutrality. Recall that she notes that the same capability, such as caregiving, can be both empowering and oppressive. Caring may enable deep relationships and moral development, but it may also burden women disproportionately in unjust social arrangements. From this, she infers that we cannot determine in advance which capabilities are valuable; instead, such judgments must be left to procedural determination. However, this line of reasoning, in my view, conflates two distinct questions:

(i) Is a capability intrinsically valuable for human well-being?

(ii) Is that capability justly distributed in society?

Justice concerns the fair distribution of resources, responsibilities, and opportunities to convert capabilities into valuable functionings. Well-being, by contrast, concerns what constitutes a good life, i.e., which valuable capabilities are constitutive of human flourishing. The risk of a capability being unjustly distributed does not imply that it is not intrinsically valuable. In fact, recognizing the injustice depends on having already identified the capability as valuable. As Nussbaum rightly notes:

> We have a hard time talking about justice in the family until we know whether the right to seek employment is a basic good, whether political liberties and the opportunity to participate in politics are basic goods, whether the capability for sexual expression is a basic good, and so on. The list gives us somewhere to go in saying whether the treatment of women is or is not exploitative. I don't think the thin procedural approach gives us enough without this. (Nussbaum 2000: 159-160)

The list Nussbaum refers to is her well-known list of central human capabilities (Nussbaum 2000: 78-80), which Robeyns often criticizes as insufficiently inclusive, especially for neurodivergent individuals (Robeyns 2016), and argues that lists should emerge from democratic deliberation. But is there a room for universal values?

A strong argument in favour of selecting universally valuable capabilities stems from the ability to identify what is universally bad. This is the strategy to some extent employed by Nussbaum, who starts from the premise that being beaten, starved, or abused is universally bad (Nussbaum 2000: 34-85).[7] So,

7 Nussbaum's method of "internalist essentialism" can be interpreted as a form of negative heuristic: by identifying what we consider non-human, deficient, or inhuman, such as the emotionally isolated Cyclopes, who lack any sense of belonging or care for others, she reveals the positive features that constitute human life. In this way, her

if social isolation is universally bad, then the capability for affiliation is a universally valuable human capability; if emotional deprivation is always harmful, then the capability for care and emotional connection is likewise universally valuable. This symmetry between what is bad and what is good supports two claims: (i) that it is possible to identify universally valuable capabilities, and (ii) that we can construct a monistic concept of well-being by identifying those dimensions of life that are universally bad, thus transcending contextual variation. In various contexts, we are in fact talking about the same underlying concept, as Fletcher has previously argued. The capabilitarian account enables us to capture multiple dimensions or aspects of well-being understood as flourishing (the development of valuable capabilities) which do not vary from one context to another. In other words, well-being is contextually sensitive, not metaphysically fragmented. Capabilitarianism can therefore preserve descriptive flexibility while maintaining conceptual unity.

Even some contextualists and pluralists in the CA well-being debate acknowledge the existence of universally bad states that cannot be justified through contextual variation. Sebastian Östlund (2024), for example, proposes the so-called disqualification criterion into the discussion. This is a methodological principle intended to help assess theories of well-being by identifying unacceptable views within a pluralist framework. The disqualification criterion sets boundaries for pluralism by ruling out certain forms of life, practices, or social norms that systematically prevent or undermine what is fundamental to human well-being. In other words, even if we accept that different forms of well-being can be contextually determined, there are limits beyond which certain theories or practices become unacceptable, such as systematic discrimination, exploitation, or physical abuse. The disqualification criterion establishes the following threshold: some ways of life and social structures are not merely different expressions of well-being but are incompatible with the very idea of human flourishing. Östlund claims that the disqualification criterion is compatible with radical contextualism and pluralism because it does not require a fixed list of universal goods or capabilities, but only imposes minimal normative boundaries, a form of negative universalism. It does not determine what well-being is, but only what it cannot be.

method implicitly applies the principle of symmetry between the universally bad and the universally valuable, aligning with the thesis that universally valuable capabilities can be identified through what is universally bad (Nussbaum 1992: 201-221). Even in her later, politically liberal phase, Nussbaum continues to rely on a method of identifying valuable capabilities through what she describes as “central prerequisites of a life worthy of human dignity” (Nussbaum 2008: 361). Although she distances herself from essentialism, the underlying evaluative logic remains: the threshold of dignity is set by identifying what makes a life no longer human. This indicates that her approach still reflects a form of normative asymmetry since valuable capabilities are discerned through the recognition of what is universally harmful or dehumanizing, thereby reinforcing the symmetry between what is bad and what is good. Cf. Nussbaum 2000, 2006.

Although the disqualification criterion does not prescribe a positive list of capabilities, it nevertheless establishes negatively defined *universal* boundaries. This means that radical contextualism is compromised. If we can disqualify certain forms of well-being, then pluralism must operate within certain constraints and, in my view, those constraints are best understood as universally valuable capabilities. To put it differently, if some forms of life are not merely different due to a context variation but unacceptable, then we must assume that some capabilities are non-negotiable. Hence, I argue that Östlund's disqualification criterion does not actually support radical contextualism, but rather points to the necessity of normative universalism.

This appeal to universal harms is not merely a theoretical move, but has a clear empirical function. In practice, identifying states that are universally harmful, such as chronic pain, coercion, social isolation, or extreme dependency, offers a minimal evaluative baseline that can guide interdisciplinary research. It enables researchers to distinguish cases where context merely shapes the form well-being takes from cases where context actively undermines the conditions of human flourishing. For example, even if social norms differ in their expectations regarding family roles, systematic exclusion from education or persistent fear of violence can be empirically recognised as impediments to well-being because they block capabilities whose absence is universally harmful. This baseline does not prescribe a fully specified list of capabilities, but it ensures that empirical constructs of well-being do not normalize deprivation or misclassify adaptive preferences as genuine flourishing. In this sense, universal harms function as a normative filter, enabling the capability approach to remain empirically grounded while avoiding the pitfalls of radical contextualism.

The implication is clear: to maintain a critical, philosophical theory of well-being, we need a monistic, normatively grounded conception of flourishing, one that identifies intrinsically valuable capabilities while allowing for contextual flexibility in their interpretation and application. In my view, that alternative is a monistic capabilitarian theory of well-being.

Towards Conclusion: A Monist Capabilitarian Well-Being

In this paper, I have examined and critically assessed the growing influence of contextualist and pluralist approaches to well-being, particularly as formulated by Anna Alexandrova. Her critique of traditional philosophical theories rests on the claim that these theories are excessively abstract, normatively rigid, and unresponsive to the diversity of well-being contexts. On this basis, Alexandrova concludes that the concept of well-being itself is context-dependent and irreducibly plural. I have interrogated this conclusion and argued that, while context does indeed shape the operationalization of well-being, this does not entail conceptual pluralism. Instead, I contend that the concept of well-being remains unified, though context-sensitive in its application.

Building on this analysis, I turned to the proceduralist version of the capability approach, as developed by Ingrid Robeyns, which attempts to accommodate

contextual pluralism within a normative framework. I identified three core problems with this proceduralist model. First, it fails to satisfy the criteria of normative and descriptive adequacy, as it avoids specifying what well-being consists of and does not preserve our ordinary intuitions about the concept. Second, it lacks the critical resources to evaluate empirical constructs, such as adaptive preferences, since it offers no independent normative standard. Third, I challenged Robeyns's scepticism toward the identification of universally valuable capabilities, arguing that the recognition of universally harmful conditions enables us to specify the normative core of human flourishing. This does not require a rigid or decontextualized universalism, but rather a conceptually robust standard that can guide critical evaluation across contexts.

Together, these objections call for a revised theoretical model: a monistic and normatively grounded version of capabilitarian well-being, one that affirms the importance of universal human capabilities while remaining responsive to contextual variation. Such an approach offers a philosophically defensible alternative that avoids both the rigidity of essentialist abstraction and the indeterminacy of proceduralist relativism.

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Ana Gavran Miloš

Dobrobit u pristupu zasnovanom na sposobnostima i granice kontekstualizma: protiv pluralizma i proceduralizma

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razmatra novije izazove tradicionalnim filozofskim teorijama dobrobiti te predlaže revidirani okvir utemeljen na pristupu zasnovanom na sposobnostima (*capability approach*). Klasične teorije (hedonizam, teorija ispunjenja želja i teorije objektivne liste) dugo su dominirale filozofskom raspravom o tome što čini dobar život. Međutim, te su teorije sve češće predmet kritika zbog svoje apstraktnosti i ograničene primjenjivosti u empirijskim istraživanjima i oblikovanju javnih politika. Anna Alexandrova (2017) tvrdi da su filozofske teorije dobrobiti preopćenite i previše udaljene od stvarnih životnih problema te zagovara kontekstualno i pluralističko razumijevanje tog pojma. Ingrid Robeyns (2020) uključuje ovu kritiku u pristup zasnovan na sposobnostima, tvrdeći da je upravo taj pristup osobito prikladan za uvažavanje pluralizma, kontekstualnih varijacija i interdisciplinarne primjene. Nasuprot tome, u ovom radu prihvaća se kontekstualna osjetljivost pojma dobrobiti, ali se odbacuje teza da je dobrobit u svojoj osnovi pluralan pojam. Oslanjajući se na radove Guy Fletchera (2019) i Jennifer Hawkins (2019), tvrdim da različite primjene pojma ipak počivaju na jedinstvenom temeljnom pojmu dobrobiti. Stoga cilj ne bi trebao biti napuštanje filozofskog teorijskog promišljanja, nego razvoj kontekstualno osjetljive, ali normativno robusne teorije. Pristup zasnovan na sposobnostima pruža obećavajuću strukturu za takav projekt, no on ne može ostati proceduralno otvoren. U radu stoga zagovaram monističku verziju dobrobiti u okviru pristupa zasnovanog na sposobnostima, utemeljenu na normativno opravdanom skupu sposobnosti. Rad je strukturiran na sljedeći način: najprije se prikazuju standardne teorije dobrobiti, zatim se analizira kontekstualna kritika koju iznosi Alexandrova, potom se razmatra proceduralizam u verziji Robeyns, a naposljetku se brani jedinstvena, normativno utemeljena verzija dobrobiti u okviru pristupa zasnovanog na sposobnostima koja zadržava kontekstualnu osjetljivost bez odustajanja od filozofske koherentnosti.

Ključne riječi: dobrobit, kontekstualizam, pluralizam, proceduralizam, sposobnosti, monizam.