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14 Types of Internet Use, Well-Being, and the Good Life

Ethical Views from Prudential Psychology

Omar Rosas

Over the last decade, psychological research has made it evident that Internet-related activities have considerable effects on people's mental and social lives. By considering "Internet use" as a one-dimensional construct, early studies posited that Internet use has paradoxical consequences for people's well-being. Although Internet use had been thought to enhance communication, information seeking, and computer-based competence and thus was able to foster social involvement and support, it turned out to be a way of leaving people isolated, stressed, and depressed (Kraut et al. 1998). Although follow-up studies showed that the initial effects dissipated over time (Kraut et al. 2002), further research corroborated the recurrent presence of some of those problematic consequences (Ybarra, Alexander, and Mitchell 2005). This negative impact of Internet use on people's psychological well-being was contrasted, though, with more positive appraisals, particularly those showing that Internet-based activities also provide personal gratifications or positive outcomes in relation to fun, entertainment, social interaction, and relaxing activities pursued by most Internet users (LaRose, Mastro, and Eastin 2001).

Today, several researchers are both questioning the theoretical validity and empirical testability of "Internet use" as a one-dimensional construct and are endeavoring to isolate different types of Internet use to examine psychological consequences of specific Internet-based practices (Morgan and Cotton 2003; Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006). The rationale behind this theoretical and empirical move is that the Internet, considered as an information and communication tool, is neither entirely good nor entirely bad with regard to the effects it is able to produce. This implies a shift in focus away from taking Internet use as a unified category and reconsidering the Internet as a multidimensional space providing different kinds of e-services and e-contents that may have discrete and measurable effects on users' well-being.

Yet the state of the art is still Janus-faced. On the one hand, several scholars—including developmental, social, and life span psychologists—argue that multiple benefits can be derived from Internet experiences, including a sense of self-efficacy (Whitty and McLaughlin 2007),

improvements in learning (Jackson et al. 2006), increasing social ties (Karavidas, Lim, and Katsikas 2005; Zhao 2006), and a feeling of mastering one's environment (Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham 2007). On the other hand, social psychologists and psychiatrists claim that Internet-related practices may foster a number of negative effects, including loneliness (Sum et al. 2008), problematic (e.g., "addictive") use (Caplan 2003, 2007), asking and sharing information related to self-injurious behavior (Whitlock, Powers, and Eckenrode 2006), impoverished personal and family relationships (Mesch 2006), and lower psychological and physical well-being (Yellowlees and Marks 2007), among others. Given the variety and complexity of Internet-related activities, it seems manifest that different modes of Internet use have the potential to yield both psychological harms and benefits to users.

In light of these psychological studies, one basic question can be raised: What are the implications of psychological research on Internet use for philosophical reflection on the good life in a technological age? To answer this question, this chapter will be structured as follows. The next section will introduce what Haybron (2008a and 2008b) has recently labeled *prudential psychology*, that is, psychological research concerned with matters of well-being. The trends belonging to prudential psychology will be briefly introduced to identify conceptual interfaces between them and their philosophical counterparts. The following section will briefly report some case studies in which a particular trend in prudential psychology has been applied to different types of Internet use. This section succinctly highlights the nature of well-being measures and the scope of their empirical results. The final section will draw on the previous section to underline some implications of prudential psychology analyses of Internet use and well-being for philosophical reflection on the good life.

PRUDENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY, WELL-BEING, AND THE GOOD LIFE

After more or less 50 years of psychological work concerned with several aspects of mental illness, the new field of *positive psychology* emerged as a philosophically inspired research program into the positive aspects of people's affective lives, personality traits, and social institutions. As Seligman (2003, p. xi) has put it, "The time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the 'good life.'" This "positive turn" poses the challenge of suitably articulating contemporary psychological research on positive emotion, strength, well-being, and virtue in terms of philosophical reflection on the good life.

To take up the challenge, contemporary philosophers and psychologists have argued for the need to drop their rigid disciplinary blinders and engage

in interdisciplinary work to elucidate complementary dimensions of well-being. While recognizing that each discipline has its own methodological premises and explanatory aims, these scholars have claimed that ethical and psychological research on well-being can benefit from each other in at least two ways: (1) psychological research can raise problems or lend support and credibility to ethical accounts of well-being insofar as the latter's formulation and/or application implies empirical claims (Haybron 2007; Tiberius 2006, 2008), and (2) ethical analysis can inform psychological approaches to well-being and even shape the kind of empirical research it makes sense to do (Haybron 2008a).

In this spirit, Haybron (2008a, 2008b) has coined the term *prudential psychology* to categorize the field of positive psychology that both parallels the related field of moral psychology and, following the philosophical usage of "prudential," denotes matters of well-being. Yet a note on terminology is needed here. Although the concept of "well-being" is sometimes used as a synonym for "the good life," the latter usually implies a broader notion, including not just a morally good but a choice-worthy life, a life that is good, all things considered. I will here follow Haybron (2008b, p. 36) when he argues that the good life "functions as an umbrella concept encompassing the domain of values that matter in a person's life, and can be employed within any ethical framework." This implies that whatever the philosophical approach implemented, we can reasonably argue that well-being belongs to the aforementioned domain of values and, consequently, any improvement in a person's well-being can be seen as a suitable component of that person's good life.

Prudential psychology can be analyzed in terms of subjective and objective evaluative stances. Subjective approaches are principally represented by two trends. The first is *subjective well-being*, which is often called "hedonic" well-being and concerns the scientific analysis of how people evaluate their lives on the following dimensions: overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with important life domains, positive affect, and low levels of negative affect (Diener, Oishi, and Lucas 2003). The second is *psychosocial well-being*, which consists of a cluster of views according to which well-being refers to assessments of intrasubjective dimensions, such as depression, loneliness, overall life satisfaction, self-anchoring, self-esteem, hardiness, interpersonal relations, and perceived control (O'Hare et al. 2003; Brummett et al. 2007).

Objective approaches, which draw on an Aristotelian view of *eudaimonia* defined as leading a well-lived and flourishing life, principally comprise three trends: (1) *psychological well-being*, which is the view that well-being, understood as human self-fulfillment, concerns an individual's striving to realize his or her own true potential. To evaluate such self-fulfillment, researchers have posited six basic measurable dimensions: self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy (Ryff and Singer 1998, 2008); (2)

social well-being is based on a five-dimensional model comprising: social integration, social contribution, social coherence, social actualization, and social acceptance as core components of well-being. The idea behind this approach is that human beings are essentially social creatures whose quality of social interactions has a significant bearing on both how an individual perceives herself as a social being and how she actualizes her inner potentials in a social environment (Keyes 1998). Finally, (3) *self-determination theory* advances a view of well-being that focuses on the process of living well rather than on the outcomes of a happy (i.e., hedonic) life. It posits that fulfillment of the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness is of paramount importance for factors associated with well-being, such as psychological growth, integrity, and the experiences of vitality and self-congruence (Ryan and Deci 2001; Ryan, Huta, and Deci 2008).

Trends in prudential psychology share common interfaces with philosophical theories of the good life. Such interfaces include the evaluative stance being adopted (subjective/objective) and the theoretical tenets underlying specific perspectives (e.g., hedonism/positive emotion, eudaimonia/flourishing, perfectionism/realizing human potential, capabilities/satisfying basic psychological needs). Given its scientific aims, prudential psychology goes a step further by operationalizing and measuring constructs that are designed to tap into the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions implied in well-being and the good life. Although such measures and the outcomes so obtained may seem controversial in the eyes of some theoretical researchers, one should recognize that they are helpful to (1) examine what people feel and think about their own lives, (2) critically assess the scope and limits of ongoing prudential psychology research, and (3) suggest alternative directions and methodologies for future interdisciplinary investigation into the nature of well-being and the good life.

USES OF THE INTERNET AND PRUDENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

To examine how prudential psychology has been applied to issues in Internet use and well-being, a short selection of psychological studies implementing a particular trend will be briefly covered here. It should be noted, though, that given the huge amount of research published every year on this topic, this selection is just a snapshot of the current theoretical approaches, methodologies, and domain-specific results.

Internet Use and Subjective Well-Being

In an online survey study, Patti M. Valkenburg, Jochen Peter, and Alexander P. Schouten (2006) examined the consequences of friend networking

sites for Dutch adolescents' well-being and self-esteem. Measures included use of friend networking sites, frequency of reactions to profiles, tone of reactions to profiles, relationships established online, social self-esteem, and the satisfaction with life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin 1985). The authors claimed that (1) Internet use has been treated in many studies as a one-dimensional construct, which has yielded inconsistent findings, and (2) at least a distinction between social and nonsocial Internet use is required to adequately investigate Internet effects on self-esteem and well-being. In their view, social self-esteem and well-being are more likely to be affected if the Internet is used for communication than for information seeking. The study demonstrated that adolescents' self-esteem was solely affected by the tone of the feedback that they received on their profiles. Positive feedback enhanced adolescents' well-being and negative feedback decreased their well-being.

Internet Use and Psychosocial Well-Being

Scott E. Caplan (2003) examined the relationships between *problematic internet use* and loneliness and depression in young American undergraduates. Problematic internet use was conceptualized as comprising those maladaptive cognitions and behaviors involving Internet use that result in negative academic, professional, and social consequences. The author measured and analyzed mood alteration, perceived social benefits, perceived social control, withdrawal compulsivity, excessive Internet use, and negative outcomes. Psychosocial well-being was assessed through the Beck depression inventory (Beck, Steer, and Brown 1996) and the UCLA loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona 1980) to account for depression and loneliness respectively. Caplan's theoretical perspective suggests that problematic psychosocial predispositions lead individuals to excessive and compulsive computer-mediated social interaction, which, in turn, worsens their problems. The results of the study supported the claim that preference for online socialization is a key contributor to the development of problematic Internet use, which in turn has negative effects on undergraduates' well-being.

Internet Use and Psychological Well-Being

Yiwei Chen and Anna Persson (2002) examined (1) the impact of Internet use on young and older American adults' well-being, and (2) group differences between older Internet users and nonusers in terms of psychological well-being and personality traits. Psychological well-being and personality traits were assessed through Carol D. Ryff's psychological well-being scale (Ryff and Singer 1998) and a mini-marker scale adapted from the five-factor model (McCrae and John 1992) respectively. As far as Internet use and well-being are concerned, the authors found no significant correlations

between Internet use (defined as time spent online) and psychological well-being in both young and older adults. Older Internet users scored higher than nonusers on two dimensions of psychological well-being, namely “personal growth” and “purpose in life.” Although the study did not find any correlations between average time spent online and psychological well-being in older users, the authors contended that being able to learn and use the Internet seemed to make a difference between users’ and nonusers’ well-being.

Internet Use and Self-Determination Theory

Richard M. Ryan, C. Scott Rigby, and Andrew Przybylski (2006, study 4) examined the effects of Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games on young adult players’ need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The study demonstrated that autonomy and competence provide significant explanations of players’ motivation and enjoyment. In addition, because of the interactive structure of MMOs, the need for relatedness emerged as an important satisfaction that promoted a sense of presence, game enjoyment, and an intention for future play. Game enjoyment and preference for future play were significantly accounted for by psychological need satisfactions. The authors contend, though, that there were many limitations to their studies: (1) their measures are both new and in need of more extensive construct validation, (2) their laboratory experiments artificially induced people to engage in games, thereby ruling out factors such as self-selection and voluntary involvement in game playing, and (3) different genders, game contents, and interfaces may bring about different effects on, and relate differently to, motivational and need satisfaction variables.

Internet Use and Social Well-Being

Alberta Contarello and Mauro Sarrica (2007) examined the effects of Internet representations (e.g., information, communication, and emotional texture) on psychology undergraduates’ social well-being through Keyes’s (1998) scale. The study revealed that undergraduates’ perception of any change that has occurred since the Internet entered their lives is on the whole one of improvement. Positive results include participants’ feelings of higher closeness and contribution both to society in general and to their own community, and a growing sense of coherence and actualization. However, the authors also found that despite the aforementioned positive effects of Internet technology, participants overall have less trust in people they meet online and tend to look for certainty and comfort within their own communities. Based on these mixed results, the authors contend that greater access to rich and varied online information may carry with it greater levels of uncertainty and fuzziness, thereby affecting key dimensions of Internet users’ social well-being.

IMPLICATIONS OF PRUDENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY
FOR PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON INTERNET
USE, WELL-BEING, AND THE GOOD LIFE

Let's now turn to the potential implications of prudential psychology for philosophical reflection on Internet use, well-being, and the good life. It should be noted that such implications will depend on how one conceives of the interaction between empirical research and philosophical reflection. I will outline here two possibilities of interaction and draw some of their implications for the issue in question. First, one can implement a *top-down* way in which prudential psychology conceptions of well-being are formally tested for descriptive and normative adequacy. Such a test would include, for example, a substantive analysis of psychological conceptions of well-being the outcomes of which will, in turn, determine the adequacy and normative implications of empirical results for Internet practices, well-being policies, and conceptions of the good life. Second, one can also implement a *bottom-up* way in which empirical results are (a) taken as the object of ethical reflection, (b) heuristically implemented to unveil normative features implied in different types of Internet use, and (c) operationalized in terms of the supporting or question-raising role they play in assessing the application of available theories of well-being and the good life to Internet-related practices. Although both methodological ways can be argued to be complementary to each other, each one provides us with distinguishable epistemic attitudes and procedural patterns.

The top-down way will start from established philosophical views of well-being and look for formal compatibilities between them and their psychological counterparts. Once a particular view or a suitable combination of views is favored and its explanatory and normative authority is settled, empirical results will be evaluated in terms of their relevant support to the endorsed view. In this sense, we could, for example, argue for the explanatory and normative authority of eudaimonic views of well-being and evaluate the extent to which psychological well-being, social well-being, and self-determination theory research lends support to the normative adequacy of capabilities, flourishing, or virtue views. This evaluation would provide normative guides and public policy suggestions concerned with the consequences of Internet-based services and contents for users' individual and social functioning, their satisfaction of basic psychological needs, or their living a virtuous life. However, despite its explanatory and normative strength, this way of articulating both philosophical and psychological domains may unilaterally favor a particular theoretical trend to the detriment of other suitable and/or equally compelling views.

The bottom-up way, by contrast, will recognize from the outset a plurality of philosophical and psychological views about well-being. But instead of engaging in a quest for the explanatory authority of a particular theoretical view, it will take psychological data as a means to assess the empirical

validity of the cognitive, affective, motivational, behavioral, and social background assumptions of available theories of well-being. In this sense, one could, for instance, assess the extent to which problematic Internet use thwarts users' autonomy, positive emotion, social relatedness, self-fulfillment, and self-control, which are considered by various philosophical and psychological views of well-being as components of healthy human functioning and a healthy life. By focusing on empirically observable indicators of problematic Internet use (e.g., predictors of compulsive use, personality profiles of compulsive users, users' assessments of life satisfaction before and after using Internet-based applications, discrete effects of particular Internet applications, etc.), psychological research can help unveil implicit notions of good, right, suitable, bad, wrong, and inappropriate use of Internet applications. In addition, those implicit notions can be integrated into philosophical, normative frameworks to examine whether such frameworks are compelling enough to judge maladaptive Internet-related practices or whether they need some empirically inspired fine-tuning.

CONCLUSION

The aforementioned implications make it evident that the time has arrived for prudential psychology and philosophical reflection to engage in an interdisciplinary work aimed at normatively assessing the effects of Internet technology on people's well-being and the good life. Consequently, it is now up to researchers working at the interface between these two domains both to build their interdisciplinary frameworks and to reap the fruits of their psycho-philosophical collaboration.

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