

## INTRODUCTION: WELL-BEING'S RE-PROPORTIONING OF SOCIAL THOUGHT

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Man is apolitical. Politics is born in the *in-betweenness* of men, hence wholly *outside* Man. There is no political substance as such. Politics emerges in the in-between and is established as a relation. (Arendt 1997 [1993]: 46)

... liberal political theory should shape its account of itself more realistically to what is platitudinously politics. (Williams 2005: 13)

What would happiness be that was not measured by the immeasurable grief at what is? For the world is deeply ailing. (Adorno 2005 [1951]: 200)

In describing the Nuer of the southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard describes Nuer happiness as 'that in which a family possesses several lactating cows, for then the children are well-nourished and there is a surplus that can be devoted to cheese-making and to assisting kinsmen and entertaining guests' (1940: 21) This is in line with the Nuer's larger interest in cattle. Men are addressed by names that describe the colour and shape of their favourite oxen; women and children often take their names from the cows they milk. Cattle names also figure profusely in songs and poems; and it is cattle, too, that are used to prescribe marriage payments, and to define kinship rights and obligations. Moreover, men establish contact with the spirits of their ancestors through cattle. Kinship and genealogy are thus expressed through the movement, transference and circulation of cattle.

The focus of Evans-Pritchard's famous monograph is not, however, cattle, but the organisation of political institutions, which amongst the Nuer were structured around the alignment of territorial, lineage and age-system segments. At different orders of social organisation (homestead, village, clan, tribe, etc.), the principles triggering these segmentary alignments create different moments of political cohesion. In the absence of formal government and legal institutions, the principle of segmentation worked as a principle of structural politics: it brought disparate people together in a unified political project. As a second-, third- or fourth-order alignment of kinship-genealogical connections, then, 'the political' thus became the

expression of the Nuer 'hypertrophy of [their] single interest' in cattle (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 41).

In his work Evans-Pritchard did not address the topic of well-being directly. He is not alone in this in anthropology, where the topic has never been the focus of explicit attention. But, as I hope the above vignette illustrates, his extraordinarily rich descriptions of the social and political forms of life in Nuer country provide an alternative route into the political and theoretical imagination of well-being, one that takes ethnography as its point of departure. In this line, this book is about the social theory of well-being, and about anthropology's contribution to the sociological imagination of such a theory. Its main aspiration is to show the relevance of *ethnography* for thinking through questions of political morality, and to do so by trying to engage in an original and innovative way with the literature on the economic, political and philosophical dimensions of well-being. As the first integrally anthropological contribution to the growing literature on well-being and the quality of life, the volume amounts to an effective exploration of the possibilities of an anthropology of political and ethical forms.

The concept of well-being has emerged as a key category of social and political thought in recent times, especially in the fields of moral and political philosophy, development studies and economics (for example Clark 2002; Crisp and Hooker 2000; Dasgupta 1993, 2001; Griffin 1986; Sen 1999; Sumner 1996). It has been used by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the construction of its Human Development Index (UNDP 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in devising its quality- and disability-adjusted life-year metrics (Cummins 2005; WHO 2001; WHOQOL Group 1993, 1998). In this sense, well-being has rapidly become a standard currency in economic and political models of welfare and development: the methodological and epistemological building block for theories of cosmopolitan and global justice (for example Nagel 2005; Nussbaum 2006). As a toolkit for policy-making, well-being has helped to cut through and unify cross-cultural understandings of what it means to be a capable person, bringing together ideas about health, education, political empowerment (political and civil rights), gender relations, human rights, the natural environment, and individual freedom and opportunities. Associated with the notion of well-being, and perhaps more insidious for what they have of a global morality dictum (Strathern 2005), are parallel discussions about the 'quality of life' (Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Offer 1996) and discursive generalisations about what constitutes a 'good life'.

This book takes a critical look at the notion and discursive field of well-being, exploring its valency and analytical purchase for social theory from the vantage point of cross-cultural comparison. By examining what well-being means, or could mean, to people living in a number of different regional and ethnographic contexts (Sudan–Ethiopian border, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, India, Israel, the UK), the collection takes issue with some of the presuppositions behind Western conceptions of well-being, at a time when discourses

about what characterises a 'good life' are being subjected to far-reaching scrutiny under the influence of globalisation and the widespread reach of models of liberal welfarism and development. The book thus intends to open new territories in the anthropological study of political and distributional systems of values and ethical imaginaries, and hopes to establish a major point of departure for those wishing to research the social life of ethics. The volume also makes a contribution to social theory at large by volunteering new analytical models with which to make sense of the changing shapes of people's life and ethical projects.

The rest of this introduction is concerned with reviewing the recent rise of well-being as a category of political and economic thought, and with disentangling its place in, and consequences for, anthropological and social theory. Though I hope to cover sufficient ground to understand the significance of well-being for political theory and social ethics, my review of the literature here is necessarily swift, given the vast number of works that have dealt with the topic. My remit is social theory, narrowly defined to cover political and moral philosophy, as well as economics, but not, for instance, psychology, despite the latter's sizeable contribution to the 'quality of life' literature (for example Skevington 2002; WHOQOL Group 1993). I have concentrated on the former fields because it is in dialogue with these disciplines that I believe anthropology's ethnographic edge can make most of a contribution (though see Thin's remarks in this volume on the relation between anthropology and psychology in this respect).

The review is divided into three sections. In the first section I review the place of well-being in contemporary theories of political morality and distributive justice, where, especially since the appearance of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1999 [1971]), the concept has gained prominence in political thought. Here we take a closer look at how well-being figures in contemporary political and moral philosophy, and how it has made its way into economic and development theory at large. The section aims to show some of the assumptions behind politics and social distribution in modern political theory: about what is 'political' and how 'society' divides itself up for distribution.

The second section focuses on the naturalisation of the 'political' in social thought. It reviews some well-known, both classic and modern, approaches to well-being (or surrogate conceptions, such as 'the good life') to draw out some general conclusions about the kinds of displacements the notion of well-being has effected in our political imagination. The notion of displacement, and especially the size or proportions of such movements, is important here, and will stay with us for much of the rest of the introduction, because my concern is to focus on how political morality levers social theory. We are looking here to understand how 'politics', 'society' and 'ethics' become objects or proportionate forms for one another.

The last section brings ethnography into the argument, and does so by setting the chapters that make up the rest of the volume in perspective, and

outlining the general contribution that ethnography and anthropological theory can make to our better understanding of social ethics. Here I make profuse use of the idea of 'proportionality', introduced earlier in the text. This relates to another concept, that of the 'limit'. Building on these two concepts, my conclusion intimates that well-being is a holder of limits: an unstable and fragile resting place for the political, upon which press the disproportionate shadows of a (variously conceived) outside world.

#### EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

All forms of social organisation work, among other things, as institutional systems for the distribution of social justice (Douglas 1986). What makes up the fund of social justice (say, moral values, such as equality, fairness or obligation; resources, primary goods or basic needs; marginal or total utility, etc.), how it gets distributed and which institutions do the allocation, and how the various elements come together into a system, if one may speak of a system at all, are of course matters of difference and dispute. Political philosophy and social choice theory deal in these matters, and do so with a view to finding the most reasonable, rational, efficient and/or egalitarian ways of organising the distribution of justice.<sup>1</sup>

Variably defined, well-being has always been at the centre of such debates about the social organisation of justice. As a surrogate of, or proxy for justice, the term has been used and invoked to telescope the individual into the social; it has allowed economists, political philosophers and policy-makers to collapse sociological differences onto a rational template. Different schools of thought have disaggregated this moment of rationalisation into different units of measurement, such as 'income', 'utility', 'standard of living', 'quality of life', 'human development' or 'intergenerational welfare' (for a comparison and economic valuation of each, see Dasgupta 2001). As one would expect, each unit yields different results of what counts as justice and of where to look for it. More importantly, every method has derivative effects on our political imagination, affecting the way we come to think of the 'persons' that inhabit our theories (Douglas and Ney 1998), and of the institutional arrangements through which these imaginary persons organise their social and political life. For there is little doubt that the theoretical semblance of the kinds of people that aim for, say, utility maximisation is not and cannot be the same as that of those who aspire towards human flourishing – or so our theories say.<sup>2</sup>

Today debates about matters of political ethics and distributive justice are very much framed by the terms laid out by John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971 and described by Bernard Williams as the 'most powerful contribution to Anglo-American political philosophy' in the twentieth century (2005: 29). Rawls's starting premise shares the foundational assumptions of the classic contractarian philosophies of Hobbes or Rousseau: the idea of an 'original position' or primordial state of affairs, where people who do not know how they fare in life today, nor what kind of tomorrow awaits

them, have to negotiate and choose the institutions that will regulate their social lives thereafter. In this scenario, individuals reason behind what Rawls famously called a 'veil of ignorance', an analytical device coined to make sure that people remain considerate of the possible interests of their fellow men, for these could turn out to be not unlike their own 'plans of life' once the veil is removed.

Rawls maintained that individuals in the original position would all share similar kinds of aspirations, and in particular that they would all want to work towards designing a basic social structure whose institutions would always and everywhere maximise the well-being of the worst-off, because this could well be the social position they found themselves in once the veil was removed. In this regard, Rawls reasoned on the assumption that an individual's intuitions and decisions regarding rational prudence could provide a route for solving the larger problem of choosing society's basic institutional structure (a telescoping of the individual into the social not without its problems, see Nagel 1973). In staging such an inaugural moment for the design of our institutions of distributive justice, Rawls made it clear that the idea of the right had to be prior to the good, for individuals must concede to an idea of society premised on fairness, where the good of society as a whole cannot be advanced if it presses against the interests of any one individual. The social structure of fairness summoned here is thus founded on two principles of justice:

First principle: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (Rawls 1999 [1971]: 266)

Rawls articulated this vision for a 'system of equal basic liberties' in terms of a list of 'primary goods'. These were defined as 'things which it is supposed a rational man wants whatever else he wants.... The primary social goods ... are rights, liberties, and opportunities, and income and wealth', as well as 'a sense of one's own worth' (Rawls 1999 [1971]: 79). Throughout his later work, Rawls has insisted that the focus on primary goods is necessary as a minimum legislative requirement, and that those aspects of political morality that fall outside the immediate scope of the primary goods list (which are not few, as we will see below: they touch on matters to do with personal differences in physical and mental needs and abilities, as well as variations in power and capabilities, between persons and communities) are to be settled in a post-original position consensus.

Rawls's emphasis on the 'priority of liberty', and his fleshing out of this inaugural principle in terms of a basic list of primary goods, has been challenged on a number of fronts. Critiques have come from all quarters of the political philosophy spectrum. Although I do not have the space to dwell

in detail on the different types of critiques, a cursory review will be useful, because they touch on questions which go to the very heart of the anthropological enterprise. Utilitarians like John Harsanyi, for example, criticised Rawls for the narrow-minded conservatism of the rational actors he chose to populate his theory with. Harsanyi (1975) argued that risk-taking is part of everyday rational decision-making, and suggested that it could be quite feasible for Rawls's 'original position' citizens to decide not to invest in the kind of institutions that would accommodate a worst-case scenario; people often do things that go against their long-term interests because of the prospect of considerable short-term benefits. Robert Nozick's famous libertarian theory (1974), on the other hand, challenged Rawls's model for its focus on the procedural *outcome* of distributive justice and thus its neglect of the various *processes* through which redistributions are effectively and regularly brought about by society. Nozick's argument is important because it points to the role and mode of appearance of the state in distributive politics, thus bringing attention to the fact that other social agencies are often just as involved in matters of justice. In this sense, Nozick's theory further signals the importance of 'entitlements' to justice: for Nozick certain rights, and most famously the right to property, are inalienable, and the state certainly has no role to play in their distribution.

Perhaps it is the so-called 'communitarian' critique that most resembles the kinds of reservations that anthropologists would have of Rawls's work, although I myself find Bernard Williams's own variation of the communitarian project (a label he did not endorse) more in the line of how anthropologists think. (Williams [2005: 37] coined the wonderful term 'Left Wittgensteinianism' to label his own political philosophy; I will return to his views later.) Communitarian critiques of the Rawlsian project tend to converge on a rejection of the theory's conception of personhood, which they see as too abstract. Michael Sandel (1982), for example, noted that Rawls's agents are put in the position of having to make a decision about their future with no knowledge of who they are; in this sense, their theoretical appearance as 'unencumbered selves' is utterly meaningless: people's reasons for doing things are always embedded, part and parcel of their moral biographies, and it makes no sense to provide an account of rational decision-making which is dislodged from the moral communities wherein these biographies take shape. For if moral reasoning is not the accounting of the obligations, debts and ties of solidarity that weave us into a community, then it is nothing.

We can see, therefore, that the debate around Rawls's theory of distributive justice generated a lively discussion which, though philosophical in principle, was deeply informed by issues and categories central to social theory. Questions of personhood, of the distribution and entitlements of agency, of the structure, responsibilities and appearance of the state, of the make-up and remit of moral communities, have all been raised in contestation, or qualification, of Rawls's arguments, and in the attempt to provide a more robust theoretical description of the mode in which justice ought to appear

in society. In dialogue with these philosophical debates, anthropology's historical corpus of ethnographically informed theoretical contributions should therefore certainly be able to help us clarify the conceptual place of well-being in social experience.<sup>3</sup>

I will return to the question of social theory, and in particular the way in which theories of political morality put certain social imaginaries to work, in due course. But first I would like to return to Rawls's work because it is in dialogue with his notion of justice as a distributed fund of 'fair equality' that Amartya Sen developed his extremely influential view of human development in terms of *capabilities*, perhaps the most prominent of all theories of well-being today.

One aspect of the communitarian critique of Rawls's work noted above was that the design of institutions of distributive justice cannot be carried out in ignorance of the concrete social and historical conditions of a community: justice cannot be a matter solely of *procedural* arrangements; it needs to have a regard for concrete or *substantive* matters of social life too. (This element of the critique echoes the famous formalist vs. substantivist debate of the 1950s and 1960s in anthropology.) Thus, the critique had it, having outlined what the architecture of social well-being would look like in terms of 'fair equality of opportunity', Rawls failed to note that if equality is to operate as a principle of justice, its hold over the social organisation of 'offices and positions' must also be substantive and not just a matter of procedural justice; in other words, primary goods, in Rawls's definition, cannot in themselves accommodate the right type of advantage, if and when inequality is at stake, because inequality is never formal but always takes concrete shapes. Said differently, to those for whom disadvantage is a given (for example, disabled people), access to a set of primary goods provides no remedial mechanism to help overcome their systemic disadvantage. The point was famously made by Amartya Sen in his Tanner Lecture on Human Values (1980), who observed that such resourcist or commodity (that is, primary goods or basic needs) approaches to the question of distributive fairness failed not only to account for the disadvantages in well-being of (say) disabled people, but more generally fell short of addressing the very real question of human diversity. As Sen succinctly put it, 'Rawls takes primary goods as the embodiment of advantage, rather than taking advantage to be a *relationship* between persons and goods' (1980: 216, emphasis in the original). Sen's point is that a focus on primary goods, or indeed on other commodity or utilitarian approaches to well-being, is necessarily deficient, because it draws on what people do with these goods (for example, they use them to expand their use or quota of liberty, or to purchase certain rights, or to increase their marginal or total utility), or on how agents react to their using them (for example, they feel an increased sense of freedom, contentment, pleasure, happiness, etc.) rather than on 'what goods do to human beings', which would serve to emphasise instead how the distributional fund empowers people to do the things and be the people they want to be (1980: 219). Sen's alternative proposition was to

develop a theoretical programme that considered the types of provisioning and social arrangements that need be in place for people to share an equal fund of *basic capabilities* – for people being capable to function as others do.

Over the years, Sen's call for a 'basic capabilities' approach to human well-being has become the most famous of all theories of political ethics, not least because of Sen's own involvement in designing UNDP's 'Human Development Index'. It has also inspired a return to Aristotelian virtue ethics in political philosophy, because of its affinities with Aristotle's metaphysical conception of human flourishing as personal self-fulfilment (Crisp 1996; Nussbaum 1988, 1993). To give the gist of it, Sen's view of well-being is founded in a robust analytical programme that holds a view of human development in terms of the expansion of 'substantive freedoms', which are both the means leading to, and the ends resulting from, the instrumental use of political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective securities (Sen 1999: 38–40). For Sen, freedom is both constitutive of, and instrumental in, human development.

An important element in Sen's conception of human *well-being as freedom* is the analytical distinction he makes between 'functionings' and 'capabilities'. As he puts it, a person's functioning 'reflects the various things a person may value doing or being ... [which] may vary from elementary ones, such as being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease, to very complex activities or personal states, such as being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect' (1999: 75). A person's capabilities, on the other hand, reflect the substantive freedoms that she enjoys or has access to in making realisable the functionings of her choice. The well-known example with which he illustrates the difference is that of the fasting affluent person, who achieves the same functionings as the destitute person who has no option but starve yet has access to a very different set of capabilities (1993: 40, 1999: 75). The distinction is important because it allows Sen to make a second-order distinction, that between the respective places of 'achievements' (functionings) and the 'freedom to achieve' (capabilities) in both our well-being and, more generally, our agency towards our life goals, which may or may not have to do with our well-being. This allows Sen to come up with a four-fold classification, that includes: (1) agency and (2) well-being achievement, on the one hand, and (3) well-being and (4) agency freedom, on the other (1993: 35). This perspective emphasises as much the *opportunities* that people have to bring about changes in their lives, as the *processes* that allow them to realise such visions. In *Development as Freedom*, for instance, Sen develops this point in relation to the question of the social status and agency of women. Women's freedom to pursue and achieve goals other than their own personal well-being, Sen argues, has important consequences for, among other things, community, family and children's development. Fostered by the provision of female education, employment and property rights, women's agency can, for example, play a crucial role in the reduction of birth-rates, as widely shared observations on the relationship between



literacy and fertility rates attest. It can also make an important contribution to changes in the patterns of distribution of resources within families, with women playing a leading role in household decision-making; or in children's welfare, often promoting a reversal of the gender bias against the survival of young girls; or in attitudes towards environmental conservation, when women acquire rights to land and become involved in agricultural work (Sen 1999: 190–203).

Sen's nuanced philosophical anthropology carries its own social theory. Albeit it is not Sen's concern to make this explicit, some aspects of his sociological imagination are informed by an analytical finesse that one seldom finds in the work of anthropologists or sociologists. His theory of personhood is a case in point. Here people's agency and location in a structure of reflexive choices is described as being conditioned and oriented by a set of functionings and capabilities; inflected by instrumental and constitutive factors; and qualified by a temporal horizon of achievements and freedoms. Such a broad and yet nuanced conception of how a person makes her appearance in a political and social field is impressive. Moreover, all such analytical distinctions are operational, readily available to policy-makers for public action – a formidable achievement by all accounts.

There is an aspect to Sen's programme, however, where his social theory starts to become problematic.<sup>4</sup> This is best illustrated if we ask of his work the question that Bernard Williams (2005: 54) demands be put to all political philosophies: what does a theory do to the circumstances that summon it? The question would not, of course, come as a surprise to Sen, who is a self-declared rationalist and universalist (Sen 2002). But it does beg the problem of how a political philosophy (indeed, any theoretical programme) relates to its field of action: how a description of the world embeds itself in that world. Williams's critique of the discipline of political philosophy holds that all its different versions stand discursively *outside* the world. They are not part of the world, and certainly not written in the language of sociological *contrasts* that make ethical practice substantively real (see also Castoriadis 2002 [1999]: 166). Political philosophy is not political, and it is not political because it lacks sensibility to historical particularities (cf. Mouffe 2005 [1993]).

Williams makes one exception to such characterisation of political philosophy: what he calls, with Judith Shklar, 'the liberalism of fear' (Williams 2005: 52–61). Shklar makes a distinction between the liberalism of fear, the liberalism of natural rights and the liberalism of personal development (1989: 26–28). For Williams, who shares Shklar's view on this score, the liberalism of fear is the only truly universal form of political thought, because it is the only philosophy whose 'materials are the only certainly universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty, a universalism of negative capacities' (Williams 2005: 59) It is the only form of political thought that keeps the political inside. And it is this aspect of the embeddedness of politics that brings the limitations of Sen's rationalist programme to light.

For Williams, the asymmetry of power that the liberalism of fear takes to be the basic category of political life provides no ultimate reference point for what 'unfreedom' may look like, except that it entails being in someone else's power. All conditions of coercion and unfreedom are local and historical. In these circumstances, it is not 'freedom' that is of political value, but the 'condition of life without terror' (Williams 2005: 61). This is the first requirement for political life. It may be followed, indeed it ought to be followed, by the gradual securing of other rights, but these cannot be prescribed by philosophy, and can only emerge through local processes of political and historical discovery.

Following Williams's insistence on a mode of political reasoning that captures, and takes recursive advantage of, its own sociological contrasts, the next section takes a closer look at some of the social and political objects that have been made to inhabit, and animate, classical political thought on well-being. Its focus is on how politics has been 'displaced' from political argument (Williams 2005: 58), made to appear in a place 'outside' the political, in what I will call the naturalisation of political reasoning, or its autarkic justification.

#### THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE POLITICAL

Appeals to nature, or justifications of a natural kind, are well known in institutional theories of political justice, the classical case being natural rights and law. Norberto Bobbio puts it bluntly when he says that the 'philosophical presupposition of the liberal state ... is to be found in the doctrine of natural rights developed by the school of natural rights (or natural law)' (2005 [1988]: 5). In anthropology, Mary Douglas once glossed these sociological or moral arguments under the banner of the so-called 'principle of coherence'. She observed that 'the principle of coherence must ... be founded on accepted analogies with nature. This means that it needs to be compatible with the prevailing political values, which are themselves naturalized' (1986: 90). Thomas Scanlon has used the term 'teleology' to make a similar point: the idea that certain 'states of affairs' have intrinsic value, that is, a value that naturally belongs to the state of affairs, and where the state of affairs thus lends itself to an end-based conceptualisation of the ethical (1998: 79–87). Well-being is no different. In the literature, well-being often evokes an image of (basic) closure, a *minima moralia* represented by roundedness or completeness. We have seen some examples above: in the foundational self-sufficiency of primary goods (Rawls), the natural inalienability of property rights (Nozick) or the appeal to a conception of freedom as the capability to function (Sen).

Appeals to autarkic justification, however, have an old pedigree in the humanities. They are the expression of natural thought's settled and balanced appearance in the political organisation of the human condition. From Aristotle's idea of happiness as *eudaimonía*, the perfected life, where

the accomplishment of the supreme good of rational self-sufficiency is informed by a metaphysics of natural growth, that is, where only the exercise of contemplative reason realises human's functional capacities to their full (Kenny 1992), to Hannah Arendt's famous conception of the 'human condition' as 'the modes in which life itself ... makes itself felt' (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 120), of which the metabolic vitalism of 'labour' figures as its first moment of expression; throughout Western political thought, then, one finds an urge to locate a resting place for politics in (some form of expression for) nature's wholeness, and in particular to make some variant of autarkic morality a central category of political life.

The manner in which ideas about autarkic wholeness have circumscribed and shaped contemporary political thought have, therefore, in this sense, been determinative of our larger conceptualisation of 'society', and of the ways in which different people make their own articulations of social ethics appear. As we have seen above, enfolded in the notion of well-being one finds competing social models about the organisation of, and articulations between, the public good and private life. Said differently, different theories of well-being produce different versions of how and when society appears as a whole, under the banner of social justice, the state or cosmopolitanism; and how and when it appears as a part, under the labels of individualism, rights or moral claims;<sup>5</sup> about, also, the legislative instruments and formations of such parts-and-wholes assemblages, as in human rights law or the responsibilities of states or international agencies for structural poverty (Williams 2006); and, furthermore, about the movements and orientations of reason, which sometimes hold people together in moral communities, welded by ties of solidarity, obligations or debts, and sometimes keep them separate, sanctioned as autonomous and rational agents (Overing 1985). In other words, all theories of well-being carry a social theory within them, that works to naturalise a programme of political morality, where all kinds of problematic social objects and categories clash in a confrontation that threatens to tear apart the stability of the programme.

In this section I want to examine how the autarkic tendency of political thought has created its own social objects of inclusion, first and foremost 'society', but also other ethical artefacts, such as 'life', 'politics', the 'economy', and that complex hybrid of all of the above which is 'well-being'. A good place to start to understand the work of this type of political naturalism is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), because it is here that he develops a political argument around virtue ethics, and because it is virtue ethics, as noted above, that some political philosophers have turned to in recent times (for example, Nussbaum 2005, 2006; see also Lambek, this volume).

Aristotle's view on the perfect life rests on a biological paradigm, where all things tend towards their teleological functional end. And human happiness, Aristotle tells us, is no different. In fact, for Aristotle happiness is the supreme good, the end towards which other activities tend: 'the complete good is thought to be self-sufficient ... the self-sufficient we now define as

that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be' (Aristotle 1984 [c. 4 BCE]: I.7.1097b5–17). Jonathan Lear has examined in detail the movement of Aristotle's thought in the *NE*, and concluded that what one sees at play in Aristotle's ethical and political thought is the development of a 'structure of trauma' (Lear 2000: 45). Happiness is defined throughout the *NE* as a state of self-fulfilment, the highest of the virtues, or 'goods', of practical life. What Aristotle means by self-fulfilment, however, is never clear; or rather, the definition is always on the move, self-effacing itself. According to Lear, the process is first set in motion when Aristotle introduces his definition of 'happiness': this should be read as an 'inaugural instantiation' (2000: 8), where Aristotle both injects the concept into our life *and* prefigures the structural shape that our *life itself* will need to take for happiness to occur inside it (2000: 26). The gist of Lear's argument is that Aristotle is a 'seducer' (2000: 22), someone who never quite ties his subject down because he keeps shifting attention to new objects of ethical curiosity: happiness is a matter of *practical virtuousness*, which when looked closely turns out to be a matter of *self-sufficiency*, which suddenly makes problematic the question of *life as a whole*, which on second reflection opens up a new perspective on the relationships we have to others in life, and thus on solitude and *contemplation*, which is ultimately something that only the gods can do full time, and is thus a reminder of our mortality and of the very limited nature of happiness, wherever it turns out to reside. Every one of Aristotle's intellectual movements aims therefore at 'remaindering' itself out: at creating a surplus or space 'out there' from which things look different; or, as Lear puts it, 'any form of life will tend to generate a fantasy of what it is to get *outside* that life' (2000: 48, emphasis added).

Lear's is a psychoanalytic take on Aristotle's ethical project, although his insights into the remaindering tendencies of his thought have sociological validity too. Indeed, Lear himself notes how, in a last and desperate movement, Aristotle tries to save his ethical edifice, which crumbles from the pressures that keep displacing it, by resorting to the *political* principle of law enforcement (2000: 58). Politics is Aristotle's last desperate attempt at safeguarding the integrity of his ethics. We need politicians and legislators to guarantee our peaceful existence, to provide us the time of leisure necessary to lead a life of contemplation. In this light, politics becomes both a means and an end; at once the vehicle and goal of political life, the impetus behind, and the constraining system of, political organisation.

Now the appearance of politics as the regulatory mechanism of ethical life suddenly creates its own sociological forms. Aristotle's own thought contains some clues: *outside* political life, we have seen, only contemplation can deliver ethical sovereignty; *inside* politics, however, this now obtains through the work of friendship, for Aristotle believed that, amidst the frenzy of practical life, only in friendship can one come close to experiencing the 'complete' goodness of happiness (Marías 1989: 67–89). Friendship and contemplation

become, in this light, reversible forms: one achieves in social intercourse what the other obtains in solitude.

In his essay, Lear makes the point that, in postulating an outside for political life in contemplative activity, Aristotle appears to be valuing death, for only in a deathlike state do we find ourselves properly removed from the pressures of practical life (2000: 53). This is a convincing argument, and Lear has good reason for pursuing it, for his interest is in elucidating the contribution that psychoanalysis can make to virtue ethics. But here I want to focus on the sociological dimensions of Aristotle's thought instead. And though death might indeed be an appropriate *outside* for politics in psychoanalytic terms, there is also a case to be made about its sociological counterpart. Said differently, if we focus our analysis *within* the political, the play of reversibilities noted above (friendship:solitude) casts its own sociological 'outsides' or remainders.

As it turns out, the remaindering moment of political life *inside politics* is given by tyranny. In a remarkable essay on the 'shadows' of Western political thought, Eugenio Triás (2005) has observed that the Aristotelian virtue of friendship is in fact obtained, in the classical context, as the figure-ground reversal of tyranny. Using Plato's description of tyranny as the *hostis* or public enemy of the republic, Triás shows that for the tyrant any and all forms of social mobilisation are potentially threatening to the *status quo*. To uphold his mantle of dominance, the tyrant must of necessity exercise violence over the social body *as a whole*: there must be no place outside, or remainder over, the reach of the tyrant's power (2005: 134–35). Only the tyrant can stand *outside* society. Tyranny thus makes 'society' appear in an inverse relation to what friendship and its social ethics enables. More importantly, this moment of appearance makes ethics in turn a residue of a form of proportional sociality, where the tyrant's need for unlimited or *disproportionate* political violence creates a total social object ('society'), which leaves no or very little space for ethical action. Classical Greek thought, then, effected a set of displacements between 'ethics', 'politics' and 'society', whose sociological imagination was essentially incommensurable,<sup>6</sup> and where ethics thus appeared as a leftover of political organisation.

The question of the *size* or proportional forms that 'society' takes in politics, only vaguely noticeable in Aristotle, makes a central appearance in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1998 [1958]). Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and, like many of her works, it is an attempt to make sense of the political predicament of humankind in the aftermath/presence of totalitarianisms and unprecedented state violence. The classic locus is Auschwitz, which for Arendt brought about the collapse and confusion of society 'over elementary questions of morality' (Arendt 2005 [1963]: 125). Margaret Canovan has said of the book that it is an attempt to grapple with the 'miraculous openness and ... desperate contingency' of political action (1998: xvii), a view that contrasts sharply with Aristotle's explicit, if flawed, teleological framework.

Arendt's vision for humanity is intrinsically possibilistic, embedded in a rich and recurrent world of beginnings, from the birth of a new human being to the 'space of appearance' which characterises pure political life, and to which she gives the name *vita activa*, the 'life devoted to public-political matters' (1998 [1958]: 12). Elsewhere Arendt described this life of action and recurrent nativity as 'miraculous', and 'the political' as the place where one can hold out and hope for miraculous happenings (1997 [1993]: 66). The institutional organisation of such assemblies of hope has taken different shapes at different historical times, and Arendt dedicates much of *The Human Condition* to contrasting classic and modern modes of convention. Effectively, what Arendt attempts in this book is an archaeology of the different ways in which ethics, society and politics have been conjoined or separated in Western political thought, and does this by exploring the different modes of articulation of the categories that she calls 'labour' (as we will see, contemporary political thinkers – like Sen – would call this 'well-being'), 'work' (sociality) and 'action' (politics).

Central to our interest here is the way in which Arendt makes the concept of 'society' appear as a proxy for understanding the very functioning of the life process, in a way not unlike how Aristotle makes 'politics' the end-point of a teleological process. For Arendt, the rise of 'society' as a concept of theoretical significance in the modern age marked the moment when 'the life process itself ... [had] been channeled [sic] into the public sphere' (1998 [1958]: 45). There are two movements to this conceptualisation. First, we need to understand that Greek thought lacked a concept of society. Social life, as we understand the term today, was circumscribed to the realm of the household (*oikonomia*). Social relationships inside the household were conducted to provide for the biological necessities of survival, what Arendt called the life of labour. Outside the household, on the other hand, men encountered one another in the reality of the *polis*, where the space and possibility for political life effectively took shape.

We come to the second movement. The Greek situation, Arendt observed, is starkly different from our own. She insisted that our contemporary equation of the public with 'society' is a peculiarly modern phenomenon, characterised by the movement of 'life' (that is, labour) out of the realm of the household and into the public sphere. The new public sphere is thus a *political economy*: a household (*oikonomia*) gone public, where the routines of everyday survival, the labours previously hidden in the privacy of the household, have now acquired public status.

In typically poignant and lucid style, Arendt concludes that this new 'society' is 'the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with *sheer survival* are permitted to appear in public' (1998 [1958]: 46, emphasis added). In this world, the political organisation of survival amounts to, and in effect requires no more than, its economic organisation. This is why, for Arendt, contemporary political philosophy falls short of fulfilling

its intellectual project unless it takes charge of the analysis of the economics of industrial labour and the new regimes and organisation of technocratic work; and why, when she described our modern world as a 'society of laborers' (1998 [1958]: 46), she was in fact making a profound metaphysical statement about the sociology of our contemporary human condition.

Well-being is not a term that Arendt uses, although if we were to endorse the current interest in biological functionings her notion of 'labour' would play an analogous sociological and political role. In this sense, what Arendt's analysis brings to the imagination of well-being as a political category is her insistence that the appearance and disappearance of sociological categories (the rise and death of the 'household', 'society' or 'the public') is fundamentally entangled with the political organisation of the life-process.

The point has in fact been recently brought home by Giorgio Agamben in his analyses of the structures of sovereignty and the modern state. In *The Open* (2005), Agamben suggests that our historical and ever-shifting sense of humanity entails, at its very heart, a debate with its own animal condition. Agamben's definition of our human nature dwells on the idea of opening or caesura, the very movement and debate through which the human condition takes stock of its ever-displaceable limitations: in other words, how people constantly push their de-finitions (their limits) outside (2005: 28, 77). For Agamben, this historical conversation with ourselves about the possibilities of our own animal nature makes for one of the most fundamental categories of political life. Historically, we have come to define our politics through consciousness of our humanity's natural limits.

Today, however, Agamben argues, the place of this most basic political-cum-metaphysical relation (between our human and animal conditions) has been displaced (2005: 53); the relationship has disappeared from our political vocabulary, the human and the animal reciprocally hollowing each other out from our existential equation (2005: 36). No longer a central aspect of how we define ourselves, the disappearance of our human-animal openness from our existential consciousness has left us historically homeless; the structure of human life has been evacuated of its historical condition and been left nude of itself. Today, humanity is 'bare life' (see also Agamben 1999).

Like the social organisation of Arendt's 'sheer survival', 'bare life' carries a political moment of its own and Agamben's *oeuvre* at large is dedicated to the task of fleshing out its sociological episteme (see Agamben 1996, 2000, 2004). In *Means without Ends* (2001), for example, Agamben criticises the moment of *spectacular* politics through which the modern state takes its form (cf. Debord 1995 [1967]). All modern political communities, states included, endorse a vision of, and become institutional guarantors for, a foundational programme for the 'good life' or 'sufficient life' of the community.<sup>7</sup> This substantive approach to political life has been corrupted in modern government, where politics has become an autarkic goal in itself, no longer a means to an end (Agamben 2001: 97). We are witnesses here to politics' consummation of its own teleological end: having arrived at its historical *telos*, humanity has

become *animal* once again, realizing the exhaustion of the human project (Agamben 2005: 98). The point is a simple one: politics, Agamben suggests, is no longer about managing the understanding of our human-animal condition. The relationship has been cancelled and a final definition of what we are – sheer life – stabilised. In our present conjuncture, then, humanity is left with no task other than the management of its own biology, a return to the *oikonomia* or life of labour that Arendt ascribed to the pre-political (that is, the household). With Foucault, however, Agamben believes that this moment of epochal self-consumption is nevertheless capable of re-politicisation, indeed, it is a political moment itself, and he identifies three domains where this is happening: bioethics, the global economy and the new political economy of well-being or humanitarian assistance (2005: 99).

Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (2004) have recently furthered this line of thought from an anthropological perspective. They have explored the global appearance of what they call 'regimes of living', by which they mean the coming together of political, technical and moral forces in the creation of temporarily stable funds of ethical reason: where 'ethics' emerges as a signpost to the kind of new questions about human nature and the life process that have been opened up by technological reason and biopolitics (see also Ong and Collier 2005). Regimes of living are, in this light, anthropological artefacts of 'bare life', for which there appears to be no shortfall of examples: the liberal ethics behind the regulation of new human reproductive technologies (bioethics); alternative legal and appropriative modes of intervening in or generating capital flows (global economy); and the counter-politics and claims to citizenship of the urban disenfranchised (global humanitarianism) (Collier and Lakoff 2005). These and other developments, Collier and Lakoff argue, are calling for a new formulation of the question 'How should one live?', where the means of techno-political practice (how), the protocols and models of evaluative behaviour (should) and the subjects of ethical reflection (one) are cast anew for every new regime of life.

In the notion of 'regimes of living' we find thus an analytical device with which we can start mapping both the displacement of the political *and* its substantive reappearance in concrete claims for ethical recognition. Arendt and Agamben's critical reading of the taking over of the political by the economic offers support to such a view of political morality as a moment of fugue. Comparing their views with Aristotle's insights into the development of ethical life provides further evidence of the location of political justice in its outside or remaindering spaces. In reviewing the writings of these authors I have therefore hoped to serve two purposes. First, I hope to have shown that there is no single space where one may look for well-being. Liberal political philosophy provides us the means to analyse the ways in which modern society makes questions of justice and equity appear (to itself); it does not provide us with a recipe for isolating well-being as a universal value. For modern plural society, questions of distributive justice become questions of state sovereignty, where political morality is a matter of the legislative



administration of biological life. But this account of how well-being ought to be distributed arrives already a political moment too late: it is supported on an architecture of social institutions that finds no empirical counterpart in how society recognises and assembles its different parts together.

A second purpose of my selective review has been to bring attention to the way in which political philosophy creates its own sociological imagination. I have attempted to provide a sense of the way in which 'society', 'politics' and 'ethics' (or their absences) are assembled in different proportions every time human nature or the human condition are invoked to legitimate a political programme for the sustenance of life. Another way of saying this is to note that political categories take different proportional sizes; that they create a lever for themselves by distributing their own contrasts or remainders from other categories. Not to attend to these contrasts is therefore to mistake the distribution of justice for a decision about resource allocation: to think of politics as a one-sided gesture rather than as a continuous displacement in the 'terms of recognition' of society itself (Appadurai 2004).

#### THE DISTRIBUTION OF CONTRASTS

I want to turn now to some concrete examples of how people create their own spaces of recognition by re-proportioning the imagination of the 'social wholes' to which they belong. I do so by providing a critical commentary to the chapters that follow. I do not review my own chapter, which is but a theoretical reformulation of the argument I have been developing in this introduction.

The comments, and the chapters, are organised around three themes: 'Distributive Values', 'Persons' and 'Proportionalities'. The chapters themselves, however, should not be read as examples or elaborations of the themes that I ascribe to them. They touch on these issues, but they certainly touch on many more too. My choice simply reflects the introduction's narrative strategy, and my own theoretical interests.

#### *Distributive values*

Justice and equality are, still to this day, political philosophy's classic distributive values. Theories abound on how they ought to be conceptualised, where to look for them and how to distribute them; we have looked at some of them in this introduction. Distributions, however, should not simply be seen as moments in the institutional allocation of values.<sup>8</sup> We can lend more purchase to the notion of 'distribution' if we think of it as a social moment too. What is given away is always an index of what is left behind. How people make themselves available to others, or, in Thomas Scanlon's sober phrasing, what we owe to each other (Scanlon 1998), is therefore always already a distributive moment: an expression of society's dislodgement of itself into the parts that it values. This is what social life amounts to: the ongoing re-

evaluation and re-distribution of sociality itself. To attend to these social moments of evaluative redistribution is to attend to the configuration of the political.

The focus of Ian Harper and Bryan Maddox's chapter is precisely the ordering of 'the political' in Nepal, with particular attention to its mode of disappearance in development discourse and practice. Their argument revolves around two examples: public health interventions and literacy programmes, which they candidly gloss as 'the view from the clinic' and 'the view from the classroom', respectively. Health and literacy are, of course, fundamental constituents of well-being; they are both dimensions of the Human Development Index, and both contribute a central set of functionings in Sen's capability approach. Both are values, then, that have been institutionally sanctioned for distribution.

Public health interventions in Nepal have been guided by what Harper and Maddox call an ideology of 'pathologisation', where the body politic is medicalised and benchmarked against normalised (bureaucratized, fiscal, chartered) conceptions of the diseased and afflicted. Examples abound and include the introduction of the Disability-adjusted Life Year metric (DALY), the Directly Observed Therapy Short-course programme for the treatment of tuberculosis, or the vitamin A capsule distribution programme. These programmes are designed to leave politics 'outside'. The recipients or beneficiaries of these programmes are counted as 'bodies', whose well-being directly correlates with the distribution and delivery of medical treatment. The social context of intervention is thus neutralised. Health problems are the problems of 'individuals'; the structural inequalities and social conditions that make life for these individuals 'problematic' (from a normalising perspective) is rarely, if ever, considered. And when they are considered, the bureaucratic logic tends to pathologise them too, part of a discursive field of 'social pathologies' that includes terrorism, corruption, crime, violence and human rights violations. The view from the clinic thus polarises the world into pathological beings and 'well beings'. Under such conditions, the moment of appearance of the political takes the form of what Harper and Maddox, following Finkelkraut, call 'humanitarianism'. Their analysis echoes on this point Agamben's diagnosis of the governance of 'bare life'.

The view from the classroom presents a contrasting scenario which comes to confirm the distressing realisation of a view of development predicated on the absence of politics. As they argue, literacy is nothing if not a political affair. A long tradition of anthropological scholarship on literacy has shown that the shaping of literacy practices is deeply embedded in social contexts that are always complex and burdened with inequalities. To fetishise literacy as development agendas do is therefore, once more, to uproot the political from the social moment of action to which it belongs.

Eric Hirsch takes up the question of comparing *institutional* and *social* perspectives on the distribution of values. His chapter offers a rich description

of two different 'distributional logics' at work in Fuyuge responses to state welfarist policies in contemporary Papua New Guinea (PNG). PNG is the focus today of very significant resource extractive operations (mining, for the most part), which have already had a massive impact on the local ways of people. The scale of the operations has surpassed the cultural capacity of the Fuyuge (and other PNG) people to accommodate their sense of well-being to the new situation (see also Rumsey and Weiner 2004). It has turned them into 'patients' rather than 'agents' of development, to use two terms that Hirsch adapts from Sen's work. To understand how this has happened Hirsch contextualises his argument by first outlining the historical conditions under which the state made itself present to Fuyuge and other PNG people during colonial times, and by relating these to Fuyuge understandings of what they call *mad ife*, the good ways or, we would say, well-being.

The Fuyuge notion of 'good ways' carries a number of corollaries. It is supported on the presence of an *amede* or 'chief', a person who can summon and unify all Fuyuge productive relations (productive, that is, of other relations, not just goods). In colonial times, the good ways of the *amede* were contrasted with those of *ha u bab*, men with a renowned capacity for instilling fear. With the advent of colonial government the ways of *ha u bab* disappeared, and people today speak appreciatively of 'the law' for having furnished an environment where they can walk around without fear of attack, and for providing also the means (for example, money) with which to make relational life yet more productive.

Fuyuge appreciation of 'the law', however, is contrasted with their reaction to resource extractive operations. Mining corporations require a legislative framework to carry out their projects: they need landowners to compensate for the use of land; they need provincial, national and governmental stakeholders (schools, local elites, ministers, officials) with whom to negotiate the terms of access and exploitation. These are not categories that Fuyuge relate to. Coerced to participate in a distributional game the scale of which exceeds them, the Fuyuge have had a hard time 'converting' the wealth of their land resources into a valuable set of relational capacities. Whereas the introduction of 'the law' allowed the Fuyuge to act as both agents and patients with regard to one another (that is, to reciprocally augment their relational capacities), resource extraction demands from them an orientation towards redistributive exchanges where the form of their human capacities has no value. Hirsch's elegant analysis is therefore significantly poignant because it carries the implication that not all distributions, and certainly not the wholesale distribution of wealth (Hirsch uses the term 'quality of life'), contribute to our well-being. Running through his argument we find thus the suggestion that certain distributive processes (that is, Fuyuge exchanges of relational capacities) are in fact antecedent to what we have come to know as the sanctioning moments of institutional distributive justice.

*Persons*

It has become a commonplace in anthropology to describe the Melanesian model of personhood as a 'distributed' or 'fractal' person.<sup>9</sup> Hirsch's description of Fuyuge's relational exchanges of capacities, and their coercion and concentration into one visible ritual (*gab*) appearance, provides a partial illustration of this: people bringing together their relations into a unified (whole) appearance for a *gab* ritual; and, inversely, people disaggregating land relations into (partial) claims for resource compensations.

This distributed (parts and wholes) view of the person is not wholly foreign to political philosophy. The communitarian school, with its emphasis on the holistic understanding of moral and biographical agency, holds a similar view, though its analytical framework, and certainly its social theory, is very different. What both approaches have in common, however, is the underlying appreciation that if the notion of well-being carries any moral meaning whatsoever, it must in principle reflect people's ownership over its description. Well-being must be carried through persons. An analytic of well-being that does not contribute to a more robust theory of the person is therefore already lacking.

Keeping the whole of the person in view is what Wendy James reminds us about in her account of the modern discursive use of well-being in the context of development. Her critique resonates with Bernard Williams's call to historicise our liberal notions of justice. Like Williams, James finds in the current use of the rhetoric of well-being a fastidiously modernist and a-historical presumption about how individuals ought to fare in life – and like Williams, too, she finds R.G. Collingwood's philosophical conception of history instructive, especially in regard to how people construct their evolving sense of self. She reminds us, for example, of the classical Azande conception of the enhancement and protection of personal capacities via magic. Under such circumstances, she asks, how are we to make sense of the notion of 'well-being', when the capacity of agents to carry out their plans is enmeshed in complex structures of potential and hidden forces? The point echoes Hirsch's analysis of the relational coercion of capacities, and is extended to suggest that if well-being is to retain its purchase as an analytical category it needs to be mobilised into a more robust (historicised) theory of personhood.

A final aspect of James's sober argument that I would like to comment on is the distinction she makes between 'welfare' and 'well-being', and her intimation that, worked into the distinction is a heavy baggage of assumptions about the interrelations between state provision, individual enhancement and the modern political economy of liberal justice. This is a set of assumptions that we need to remain sceptical of, especially if, as her own history of ethnographic fieldwork in North East Africa attests, 'the "normal" background of people's lives [is] a theatre of conflict'. Her description of refugee camps in Ethiopia tells us of the absurdity of looking for well-being in situations where a community's historical sense of purpose has been

evacuated – where people are told, and slowly come to realise, that they will never return to their old ways of livelihood. These people, James reminds us, are surely in desperate need of welfare provision; but who will ever deliver or return to them their well-being, and how?

In her account of how three teenagers describe the hold that diabetes has over their lives, Griet Scheldeman provides a partial answer to James's question: in her ethnography, well-being emerges as the process of satisfactorily managing the incorporation (literally, into the body) of a relational complex, at the heart of which is one's sense of ownership over one's life. Scheldeman offers us an extraordinarily thick description and elucidation of how capabilities are existentially performed and brought to life; where a medical condition (diabetes) suddenly foregrounds the functioning of the body as the ultimate determinant of how life is faring for oneself, rather than how one fares in life.

For the teenagers that Scheldeman worked with, though varying in their satisfaction with the use of an insulin pump to control their affliction, *freedom* was the Aristotelian conception of the good that defined whether life (with the insulin pump) was good or not. They wanted to regain the freedom they once enjoyed (and that they saw in fellow adolescents) to do as they pleased – to do the things teenagers do, go the places teenagers go to, without an obsessive concern for the care of their bodies. Well-being became thus about the staging of the right conditions (learning to live with an insulin pump, or without one: to play with its control panel, to count calories, to think of a corresponding insulin dose and administer it) to make life itself invisible: to accomplish the transition from a situation where life itself has hold over one's freedom to one where one is freely in control of one's life.

It is at this juncture that the 'quality of life' discourse takes over. What does it mean to make the conditions of life invisible, to hide them behind the veil of freedom? (Is the veil of freedom not what Rawls invited us to think with when placing us behind a 'veil of ignorance'?) This is no rhetorical question. Quality of life in the Scottish city of C, where Scheldeman carried out her fieldwork, is hardly something one can turn a blind eye to. Characterised by 'financial hardship, third-generation unemployment, teenage pregnancies, violence, broken families, [and] unhealthy diets', the notion of 'empowering' adolescents to live the life they want to live takes a rather disconcerting turn. Scheldeman's chapter invites us to reflect about our own existential categories, and to seriously reconsider how and where (in which social contexts) we decide to place them when conjuring the notion of well-being.

Another richly ethnographic description of the emplacement and living of well-being in action is to be found in Nigel Rapport's many-layered account of 'professional well-being' amongst a group of hospital porters at Constance Hospital in Easterneuk, Scotland. I can hardly do justice to the ethnography with a brief summary here. What I would like to draw attention to is Rapport's insistence on the need to open our analyses to the 'aesthetics' of people's ongoing appropriations of their selves and their life-

worlds; or, as he gracefully puts it, the need to constantly actualise 'the connection between the rhythms of selfhood and the shapes and forms of its environments'. This is of course a holistic enterprise, although for different people we can attempt to discern the different aspects of its institutional, social and personal manifestations. Rapport does this by focusing on four aspects of the life-rhythms of porters' professional lives: movements around the hospital site; movements between the hospital and the outside world; moving between being a porter and a patient; and the existential fragility of the life-rhythm itself, thrown into relief by the maximal antithesis of what well-being is, namely, death. Central to Rapport's rich experiential analysis of how porters take on the rhythmic thrusts of every one of these existential and environmental pressures is the notion of proportion or balance. At various points he observes that the porters' sense of well-being evinced in a feeling of balance: 'Just as well-being called for a balance or proportion to be achieved between work and play, health and sickness, and so on, so there was a proper proportion to the way the claims one staked should be recognized.' The balancing metaphor should not, however, be interpreted for what it has of stability or repose. Rapport's focus on 'movements' is in this sense a crucial analytical insight: to be well one needs an appreciation of the 'proportionate movement' through which one becomes and grows into a person. This is the 'aesthetics' of which he speaks in his introduction: well-being as the artful covering-up of our future remainders.

*Proportionalities: the remaindering movement of life*

When people give themselves to others, and to themselves, in different distributive guises, we can describe such efforts in terms of proportional give-aways. We have seen an example in Rapport's account of the rhythmic accommodations of porters' life-projects to their institutional surroundings. Proportionality has of course long been a dominant metaphor and explanatory paradigm in philosophical descriptions of moral reasoning and theories of ethics at large. One need only recall the image of Dike, the Greek goddess of Justice, holding level the scales of justice in her hand. My own chapter in this volume takes up this issue of the image and ideology of proportionality in our ethical thought, tracing some of its earlier uses in economic and political thinking, and attempting to unpack some of the analytical consequences that are borne out from making the idea of proportionality explicit in and to our social theory.

There is an echo here with Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic philosophy (for example, Žižek 2006). Although Žižek has not directly addressed the question of well-being, he develops an interesting and analogous position with regard to the concept of 'human rights' (Žižek 2005). Žižek argues that what the rhetoric of human rights accomplishes is to cover-up the elision that universal human rights proclamations effect over concrete political economic conditions. What is interesting is thus not what is universal and what is

particular, but the political movement through which this 'gap' is opened up in the first place. What we ought to be paying attention to instead, then, is how political interventions remainder our communities into particulars (parts) and universals (wholes). In other words, how we re-proportion our social thought.

Proportionality, however, is also an indigenous category. What gets balanced and taken 'into account' is always a matter to be elucidated ethnographically. Michael Lambek, for instance, explores in his chapter how the notion of well-being, as a political and experiential category, is evinced through the fragile and not always easy *balancing* of social and personal alternatives. He offers us a profound reflection on the possibilities of anthropology as ethical practice; that is, on the contribution that ethnographic description can make to what he calls, with Alexander Nehamas, the 'art of living': the internal variations in people's practical engagement and evaluation of the lives they are living. Staging a dialogue between C.B. Macpherson's notion of human capacities and Sen's capability approach, and exploring the purchase of the Aristotelian conception of virtue ethics as practical moral development, Lambek draws some important conclusions about the liberalist habit of economising the process and practice of living. Of the many important points he makes, I would like to draw attention to two that relate directly to what has been said in this introduction. The first is his intimation that whatever well-being is, we always need to remember that, once summoned, the concept will come with its own social context. Echoing Bernard Williams's criticism of scale-free liberal political theory, Lambek reminds us that 'the well-being of any given social unit ... must always be contextualized with reference to the well-being of the social unit at the next levels of inclusion'. There are thus two outsides to well-being: an outside to its scale (outside its level of inclusion) and an outside to the concept itself. This relates to the second of Lambek's points that I would like to mark here. Throughout the chapter, Lambek observes that the idea of well-being appears to be inherently escapist: communities change and, with them, the generational perception of social well-being; values and goods once internal to life become commoditised and externalised, turned into objects of consumption rather than of self-realisation; the passions that once animated these aspirations become routinised or suppressed into our unconscious. Happiness and unhappiness emerge thus as mutually determinative, forever displacing each other in a continuous reversible movement (Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2006). Or, echoing Lear, whom Lambek cites, forever remaindering each other out.

Happiness is the topic of Neil Thin's chapter. Thin offers us a comprehensive review of anthropology's astonishing silence in matters of happiness, despite the discipline's avowed commitment to the holistic understanding of indigenous worldviews. Emphatically, he insists throughout that not engaging with the study of happiness is irresponsible, because it is an indirect way of endorsing a non-evaluative stance on human conditions: anthropology needs to outgrow its relativist frame, and to define a new political space for itself.

In a beautiful book called *La espera y la esperanza: historia y teoría del esperar humano* (Wait and Hope: The History and Theory of Human Expectations) published in 1957, Spanish philosopher Pedro Laín Entralgo wrote a reconsideration of Heidegger's philosophical anthropology by using as his point of existential departure, not *angst* as Heidegger had done, but *hope* (Laín Entralgo 1957). Although by no means a political manifesto, the exercise proved illuminating because it cast in a new light the politics of possibility in Franco's Spain: an anthropology of hope opens up very different political spaces to one that is based on anxiety, let alone violence or revolutionary struggle (cf. Miyazaki 2004). (I recall here Arendt's description of the political as the space of *hopeful* or miraculous appearances.) In his chapter, Thin criticises those studies of the existential condition of humanity that have a preference for focusing on what he calls 'negative minimalisms', to wit, suffering, violence, deprivation, destitution, etc. In this sense, I believe Thin would converge with Laín Entralgo in thinking that our conceptual point of departure for describing human experiences is fundamentally determinative of how we allow people to represent to themselves their own capacities for action. This is why I take it to be that both negative minimalisms and (let us call them) hopeful maximalisms work in fact as *political limits* (Triás 2005): they delimit the social theory that is built around them, re-proportioning in their wake the size of the political. It is for this reason intriguing that our politics today is constructed out of the minimum common denominator of 'sheer survival' and 'bare life'. In this perspective, it would seem that the only hope for the good life today would be to press against its *minima moralia*, to stand as liminal morality. For as Adorno put it, 'Exuberant health is always, as such, sickness also. Its antidote is a sickness aware of what it is, a *curbing of life itself*' (2005 [1951]: 77, emphasis added)

The question of the curbing and delimitations of life is elucidated in James Laidlaw's chapter on the contemporary redistributive practices of diasporic Jains, where he explains how Jainism's social ethic is today shifting from a commitment to virtuous self-fashioning to an utilitarian (aggregate) conception of well-being in terms of the alleviation of suffering.

Jainism is a religious tradition of renunciatory asceticism. The world, for Jains, is a space of relational predation, where all living organisms are continuously exercising violence on all others. We kill the creatures that inhabit the water we drink, when we drink it and when we take a bath; we kill the food that we eat, when we eat it and when we cook it; we kill the creatures that populate our surroundings, when we take a walk or when we roll over in our sleep. The world is tensed with immanent violence. Jainism thus cultivates a pedagogy of negation, what Laidlaw calls an 'ethic of quarantine': disciplining the self into a regime of renunciation, learning not to harm the world by separating one's own being from the world, and devaluing one's own being.

Now the ideology of renunciation remains at some level a canonical representation of Jainism's ascetic soteriology; it is not an ethnographic description



of how Jain communities live their everyday lives. But, Laidlaw observes, it does provide an ethical and aesthetic counterpoint to quotidian affairs. In this sense, the ideal of renunciation provides a point of reference against which Jains re-proportionate their own understanding of what, at different junctures, is appropriately austere or opulent. 'Well-being and the ascetic pursuit of release', Laidlaw writes, 'are contrasting but mutually supporting.'

The imagery of 'juxtaposition and movement' between self-destructive temptation and disciplined asceticism conjures its own forms of existential *limitation*, its own coordinates for what Adorno called the *curbing of life*. In particular, the image of life as liminally tensed in a fragile and proportionate accomplishment is thrown vividly into relief if we attend to Laidlaw's comparison of Jainism's soteriological tradition with modern diasporic re-interpretations of non-violence.

Traditional Jain emphasis on non-violence and the potential interconnectedness of all life forms, Laidlaw tells us, has found a cohort of friendly contemporary interlocutors in the environmental and animal rights movements. Laidlaw observes how some commentators, especially among Jain diasporic communities, are presenting Jainism as an ancient precursor of these movements. These eco-reinterpretations of Jain philosophy have, however, profoundly distorted the original ethical orientation of Jainism. In the tradition of renunciatory Jainism, ethical consciousness emerges from one's realisation of the world's inherently disgusting nature. Here asceticism's capacity for ethical conduct is cultivated through the virtue and praxis of world-distanctiation, where ascetics' striving for release from their bondage to the world is held as the highest aspiration. This is profoundly different from eco-Jainism's novel sympathetic appreciation of nature. Violence and suffering, far from being intrinsic qualities of the world, qualities that should indeed be conducive to our self-motivated worldly-cum-ethical liberation, are instead seen here as inductive to further engagement with the world. Eco-Jains build on their conceptualisation of the connectedness of all life forms to advocate the proactive alleviation of suffering as a way to improve the aggregate, collective well-being of us all. However, as Laidlaw boldly observes, such a reorientation of Jainism towards ecological ethics works only insofar as it effects a profound hollowing out of the terms of relational violence that made Jainism eco-friendly in the first place. Violence and sympathy are not equivalent reversibles in traditional Jainism. Only non-violence, that is to say, non-worldliness, is conducive to ethics.

An ethics predicated on the absence of life, or on a life that is the existential precipitate of disciplined renunciations, renunciations that use the *limits of the world* (Trías 1985) to curb life's virtuousness; such a life casts its own sense of magnitude-in-the-world in terms that are disproportionately different from the eco-Jains' vision of the world as an integrated and holistic totality. How people delimit the world for themselves and for others – how, that is, they re-proportion their sociological imagination<sup>10</sup> – thus becomes a central question for understanding the making of collective and personal

life-projects, including the delineation of projects of well-being. Stephan Feuchtwang (2006), in a recent article on the interlacing of political and cultural idioms of the exceptional (*pace* Agamben) and the ambivalent in the realisation of the imagery of the 'sub-human', has made an interesting observation to this effect. For Feuchtwang, the political condition of the sub-human finds a fitting resource for its imagination in the language of *asymmetries* and *imbalances*, for example, cannibalism, sacrifice, bestiality or exorcism, images all of 'extreme forms of imbalance or blockage of bodily intakes and flows' (2006: 259). In this context, he opts to exemplify the political governance of the spaces of humanity through the image of the 'king at death: the asymmetry between the power of life and the powerlessness of the body that is almost a corpse. It is the sovereign power over life and the power to abandon life to death' (2006: 268). Here the human as a political project – the king and his royal purchase over life and death – casts its own shadow as an effect of the disproportionate: of excess and surplus, of self-consumption and exhaustion, of the 'limits of the world' that circumscribe the human condition as, in the words of Castoriadis, a figure of the thinkable (2002 [1999]). It is not life or death, then, biology or eschatology, that singles out and determines what well-being is, but the various sizes of the political worlds that we inhabit and that furnish our human condition with a sense of our own proportionate possibilities.

\* \* \*

I conclude with a brief word about the conceptual purchase of the notions of the 'limit' and the 'proportion' for social theory.

My use of the concept of the limit takes inspiration from the work of Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías (1983 [1969], 1985, 1991, 1999, 2005). Over the years, Trías has developed an ontological programme for understanding the human condition as a liminal condition, where the moment of openness to the creativity of action, as Arendt would put it, is given by our inhabiting the threshold of meaning. Here the world that we know reveals itself as a moment of tension, where the order and organisation of our place-in-the-world is provided for by a fragile and extreme alignment of ontological happenings. By signalling the place where our world exhausts itself, where the alignment is evinced and the world reaches its end, the concept of the limit thus further helps to break up and displace the world for us.

It is this facility to bring into focus or identify the *displaceable* that I take to be the limit's potentially valuable contribution to social theory. In this perspective, limits are useful to think with, because they signpost society's own model of self-consciousness: how society redistributes its own social moments. They mark the cleavage point at which one social proportion remains itself away from another, thus casting a shadow over the social body – and giving the social body a 'size'. 'Individuals' and 'society' are the

classic example: their size is given by their own remaindering-away from their opposite.

Using the imagery of the *gigantic*, James Weiner has recently appealed to a similar conceptualisation of the limits and proportionate remainders of life in the following terms:

What is gigantic in human life? If we consider nature itself as only a social construction, we lose the sense of a domain that lies *beyond the power and limits of the human* and that is therefore large in comparison to it. We might then want to ask, what confronts human life with something that exceeds it? What lies beyond human life but nevertheless exerts an influence on it? (Weiner 2001: 163–64, emphasis added)

Following Weiner's call for an anthropological imagination of the *gigantic*, we can start to think of well-being as a liminal category: a holder of limits. What existential pressures induce the curbing of life? When and how does life start to displace and resize itself: when does it become larger-than-life, and when does it contract its own powers, become something disgusting or embarrassing? Where, in sum, does the *gigantic* lie for different people: how do people re-proportion their life-projects, and how do they cement and put limits to them?

Using an epistemology of the *gigantic*, of limits and proportions, the anthropology of well-being could thus be re-described as the anthropology of residual politics: a theoretical vision for political theory that works with an idea of society as a remaindering polity; a social theory that looks for the *politeia* or community in the movements through which it outgrows itself, pressing its own limits, gaining a sense of its own proportions. A theory, then, that keeps its own social objects of description (society, ethics, politics, well-being) within purview – at a variable and yet proportionate distance.

This is of course a project for comparative social theory, for all limits are Janus-faced, constraining on one side, expansive on the other; and a proportion is by definition a relation of magnitude, a relation to something of a different order than itself. It is thus a project that reaffirms ethnography's unique analytical value. Only through the insights gained from ethnographic comparison can we open up social theory to new forms of what Williams called realist or platitudinous politics. Seen in this light, it makes of course all the sense in the world that Evans-Pritchard decided to focus on cattle as the idiom through which to re-describe the Nuer's political organisation of well-being. For it was relations established through cattle that held in proportion Nuer political life.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Michael Lambek for reading a first draft of the text and asking some pertinent but crucial questions regarding its clarity. The conclusion has also greatly benefited from James Weiner's comments, who kindly contrasted my argument against his own interests in the generation of social knowledge

in a generous email exchange, making in passing some most pertinent observations about the irrelevance of anthropology for some important questions of political theory. Karen Sykes and Stef Jansen read the paper, provided encouragement, and helped tighten its structure at a time when it was close to running wild; my warmest thanks to them.

#### NOTES

1. Anthropologist Michael Blim has recently written a very elegant book arguing for a view of human well-being in terms of the value of (political, economic and social) 'equality' (Blim 2005). Blim's conception of equality is broad enough to accommodate social and cultural differences, although I think I do justice to his account if I say that his interest is not *social theory*. His challenge is how to arrive to a robust enough conception of equality that will allow its endorsement as a global value.
2. This a limitation of theory, because people are of course known for giving different reasons for pursuing one and the same action; some reasons may be rendered as 'utilitarian', some 'communitarian', some 'existential', etc.: some are accounted for in terms of desires, preferences, even behavioural inclinations or instinctual predispositions. It is at this level that political philosophy is at its analytical messiest. On 'kinds of persons', and the implications of different categorisations and classifications of personhood for policy-making, see Hacking (2002, 2006).
3. On the category of the person, see, for example, Bird-David (1999), Carrithers et al. (1985), Collins (1982), Corsín Jiménez (2003), Douglas and Ney (1998) and Strathern (2004); on the distribution and entitlements of agency, see for instance Gell (1998), Hann (1998), Strathern (1999), Verdery and Humphrey (2004) and Wilson and Mitchell (2003); on the anthropology of the state, classic and recent contributions include Cohen and Service (1978), Ferguson and Gupta (2002), Geertz (1980), Navaro-Yashin (2002) and Taussig (1997); on the place of solidarity, obligation and debt in the making of moral communities, the list is as extensive as the discipline itself; some classic references include Fortes (2004 [1969]), Mauss (2002) and Mauss and Hubert (1964); for some recent scholarship see Godelier (1999), Komter (2005), Laidlaw (2000), Strathern (1988) and Sykes (2005).
4. A caveat is in order: the following critique of Sen's social theory applies to economic theory at large (see also Gudeman 1986). In all truth, Sen has probably done more than any other scholar to make both his economic modelling and his social theory sensitive to one other. (Partha Dasgupta's efforts in this regard are also worthy of praise [1993, 2001].) The question remains, though, whether there is an inherent limit to how much social theory economics can take into account. I do not mean to be flippant: the problem is how to design *institutional models of resource allocation* that are reflexive and thus responsive to *sociality's own redistributive orientations*; for economics needs to pre-empt sociality's own redistributive moments for its institutional allocations to take effect.
5. On parts and wholes configurations, see Strathern (1991, 1992) and James (this volume).
6. There is no 'sociological' thought in Aristotle, as we have come to understand the term today. The closest he comes to developing a 'sociology' is in his *Politics*, but even here he produces an analysis of the *politeia* as 'community life' (Marías 1951: xlix). The point is important because it gives a sense of the extent to which 'ethics' and 'the good life' were conceptualised within the political, but never within society. On the relation between 'the political' and 'community', and the evacuation of the former from the latter in modern social life, see Esposito (2003 [1998]) and note 7, below.
7. A point that echoes Roberto Esposito's argument that modern political thought is organised around the 'immunisation' of life (2003 [1998], 2005 [2002]). For Esposito,

the modern conception of a political *community* depends crucially on the disassembling of the social into 'immunised' individuals. Thus, there is no social life proper in modern politics: *immunitas* is the basic condition for all associative life, a diagnosis that situates Shklar and Williams's 'liberalism of fear' in harrowing historical perspective.

8. However, institutions can be seen too as redistributive movements; see Corsín Jiménez (2007) for an outline of a theory of redistributive institutional life; see also Douglas (1986).
9. Marilyn Strathern's work is the classical referent here; a recent exposition of her thought in relation to the topic of medical health (well-being) is Strathern (2004)
10. 'If there is any value in carrying the discussion forward,' Marilyn Strathern has written of social theory's prospects, 'it is because the question of *proportionate description* remains in the anthropological account' (1991: 53–54, emphasis added)

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