9   WELL-BEING IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL
     BALANCE: REMARKS ON
     PROPORTIONALITY AS POLITICAL
     IMAGINATION

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In 1691, when Johannes Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* was sold
at auction in Amsterdam, the catalogue noted: 'the charming light and dark
suggest a splendid well-being'. The idea that well-being could be a matter
of shadows and light is very distant from our twenty-first-century concern
with material and moral standings; the softness and suppleness of Vermeer's
aesthetics very far from our current economic and political preoccupations.
In this chapter I would like to suggest that there may be, however, a sense
in which well-being is still today a matter of appropriate illuminations, a
matter of finding the right balance between the visible and invisible elements
of social life. In thinking about the place of well-being in human life, I have
come to realise some of the current deficiencies of social theory. Finding an
analytical place for well-being in social theory is a two-fold provocation: a
realisation of the limits of our theoretical tools, and a call for an imaginative
way forward. For well-being throws into relief how difficult it is to talk about
social life and human virtues simultaneously. It seems that our analytical
vocabularies are good for one task or the other, but not for working on both
at once. We have not yet quite found the right proportion between social
analysis and a theory of ethics. My aim in this chapter is to volunteer one
such model of proportional ethics. In fact, I would like to suggest that one
possible way out of this ethical-cum-sociological impasse may well lie in
the idea of proportionality itself. It may turn out that proportionality, the
image of the rightful balance, may work too as an analytic of sociological
righteousness. But this first entails unpacking the kind of 'proportionality'
that has figured centrally in Western political thought. This chapter is an
attempt to sketch out such a recursive analytic, by playing off the classical
notion of proportionality as 'ethical balance' against an assessment of the
'proportions' of Euro-American social thought.

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AGGREGATION

Perhaps the single most important issue confronting economists and moral philosophers when devising indices of well-being is that of aggregation. The question of aggregation emerges at almost every juncture of the well-being problematic. It points to the fundamental question about well-being, which is about its size, and the location of this size. ('What is well-being?' is so thorny an issue that is probably best left unanswered, and in a sense is contained in the first question, as I hope to show below.) James Griffin has expressed the metric nature of well-being in the following terms: 'When speaking of well-being, we all resort to quantitative language. We speak of "more" and "less". At times we aim to "maximize" well-being' (1986: 75). Hidden in the question about the size of well-being there is also the question about its location: where is well-being to be found? Is well-being located in individual persons or in collectivities? Is it a matter of individual happiness, interpersonal relations or transcendental values? The question about the location of well-being is therefore expressly an anthropological question, for it calls for a theory of the workings of society, and indeed of the very terms that social groups employ to think of themselves. To put it bluntly: we need to know how to look for society if well-being is to be found in one or another of its expressions.

The distribution of society, that is, the mechanisms through which society becomes itself, will therefore determine the size of well-being, and its location therein. Aggregation is part and parcel of this analytic because whatever and wherever society is, well-being can only emerge as the concrete articulation of bits and pieces otherwise distributed across the social. Aggregation is the tool used to bring these bits and pieces together, which would otherwise probably not be on speaking terms with one another. Happiness and life expectancy, for instance, might both be elements of social well-being, but they refer to different moments and values of sociality, and as such are located and run along different social pathways. This diverse and plural occurrence of well-being raises the issue of scale. Social well-being is often assumed to be the sum of personal well-beings (health, happiness, freedom); and personal well-being is in turn taken to be an aggregate of plural forms of well-being, all found at the level of the individual (different people want different things from life).[1] The personal-to-the-social scale thus refers to the remit of well-being, to its location within one of many possible social worlds – this is a question about numbers, about how many units of intra and interpersonal well-beings ought to be taken into account in our calculations: one individual or one million.

But there is another way in which the concept of scale works and this is when referring to the nature of the values that are summoned in the name of well-being: happiness and life expectancy are different sort of indices, as noted above, and each makes sense within its own scale. They may both be constituents (or determinants) of well-being, but they point to different dimensions of it – this, then, is a question about orders of knowledge. Say that our society is made up of one million people. The personal-to-the-social

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scale might tell us the numbers that we have to compute (one million) to come up with an aggregate for well-being. But this kind of scale will not work very well, or will not do enough, if it turns out that what makes half our population happy makes the other half miserable. We need to know, then, not only whom to count (a question of numbers), but also on what basis to count (a question of orders of knowledge). Making different kinds of scales work together is not always easy, which is why aggregation is so important. I return to the notion of the size or scale of well-being in the conclusion.

Aggregation, then, appears in many guises when considering the relations of sociality to well-being. In line with the above, we would expect there to be different modalities of aggregation, and for different aggregations to play a different part in the imagination of well-being. An issue that is implied by this vision is that well-being will vary with the workings of society. That is, not with the kind of society we live in, but with the way in which we think about the social. This is the main point of this chapter and I will return to it on a number of occasions. Suffice to say now that moral philosophy and economics have favoured a consequential view of well-being, where the latter is a consequence of particular social orderings. This, in my view, is clever economics but flawed social theory, for it works uniformly with one single model of society. It sets out to measure well-being by adding or taking social bricks away from a ready-made model of society; but it makes no attempt to rethink the nature of the construction materials employed by society in the building of its own changing edifice. This means that when we set out to measure or think about well-being what we are in effect doing is measuring and reifying a particular notion of society, and of the ways in which people make themselves available to the social body. We come up with a number but lose track of the social; we end up focusing on the units that are aggregated and not on the mathematics of aggregation. Society, in sum, disappears behind the fiction of its measurement.

This is a gloomy picture and, in a sense, an unfair representation of the analytical powers of aggregation. Much recent work on the social foundations of well-being is expressly addressed at correcting this fiction and does so by enlarging our perspective on the infrastructure of well-being, looking at 'the quality of the transactions in which the individual can take part, which means taking an interest in a background of inherited possibilities' (Douglas and Ney 1998: 61–62). Mary Douglas and Steven Ney have recently reviewed these attempts at taking account of the social and institutional structures of well-being, and have in turn developed a model of the person that aims to redefine social theory around these measuring refinements. But there is another way in which the work of economists may in fact be of use to social theory, though it involves a rather imaginative application of the notion of aggregation. I want to suggest that the concept of aggregation (and its reverse, disaggregation or distribution) may have formidable analytical mileage if used as a social analytic, one that allows us to move away from

worn-out models of society and that further allows us to substantiate the political purchase of well-being. Let me explain how.

DISTRIBUTION

The question of aggregation is at the heart of an old agenda in economics, namely, social choice theory. In its programmatic form, social choice theory was laid out by Kenneth Arrow in 1951. It was motivated by the following central issue: how can it be possible to arrive at cogent aggregative judgments about, say, social welfare, collective interest, or aggregate poverty (Sen 1999b: 349)? Perplexed by these summative difficulties, Arrow's pioneering work concluded by stating the impossibility of social choice. More recently, on occasion of his Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences lecture, Amartya Sen took up the task of discussing some of the challenges and foundational problems of social choice theory and concluded on a more positive note, by advocating the need for broadening the informational basis of social choices, such as the use of interpersonal comparisons of well-being and individual advantage (Sen 1999b). In a nutshell, Sen's vision is that the predicament of well-being is best confronted if we substitute the problem of distribution for the problem of aggregation (if we 'open up' our image of society, with more information, for instance), and if we further look beyond distribution to the entitlements or capabilities that allow people to make claims on the goods to be distributed and on their own development as human persons. Let me look at this transition more closely.

A crucial starting point of social choice theory is the analytic that it employs to conjure up an image of society. Sen makes the point succinctly when asking: 'How can we judge how well *society as a whole* is doing in the light of the disparate interests of its different members?' (Sen 1999b: 350, emphasis in the original). Marilyn Strathern has brought the same question home to anthropology when arguing that:

To think of society as a thing is to think of it as a discrete entity. The theoretical task then becomes one of elucidating 'the relationship' between it and other entities. This is a mathematic, if you will, that sees the world as inherently divided into units. The significant corollary of this view is that relationships appear as extrinsic to such units: they appear as secondary ways of connecting things up. (Strathern 1990: 5)

The question of society's 'wholeness', then, raises three questions: about the idea of society as a whole or entity; about the parts that make up a whole; and about the mathematic (that is, the analytic) that we use to think about the social. The three are related, but I address them in turn.

For much of the twentieth century, welfare economics was concerned with the issue of how to make appraisals of the ordering of social states. If everybody in society A is happy and everybody in society B is not, then one ought to be able to find the factor that makes the social order in A preferable to that in B. For many years, economists and moral philosophers used *utility*

as a measure of such factor, and social states were ranked in terms of the sum-total of utilities that their respective orderings yielded. (Many measures of utility were employed. I use the term here loosely to refer to them all.) Utility, then, became a proxy for society, which thence ceased to exist as an idea and assumed the semblance of a whole number instead. This is the question of *social wholes*, where society or its proxies are imagined as numerical units and are made to work analytically as such.

Economists and philosophers know as well as anthropologists that 'wholes' are useful fictions. They serve a purpose, though they are also very murky analytical tools. Take the infamous case of 'society': where does a society start and end? In a friendship, a generation or an economic stream of inter-generations? What counts as a whole is a question whose pragmatics will bounce back with a vengeance – however we count, we are bound to leave some people out, or take people in for the wrong reasons (that is, reasons that are not the same for all). Now economists have tended to deal with the complications of wholes by means of the concept of 'distribution'. In relation to well-being, Partha Dasgupta explains it thus:

> To speak of social well-being is to speak in aggregate terms. There is, however, a danger that by an 'aggregate' one understands some sort of *average*. This isn't the way I am using the term here. The kind of aggregate I have in mind reflects a comprehensive notion of aggregate well-being, including as it does not only average well-being, but also other features of the distribution of well-being, such as its variance, skewness, and so forth. In common parlance, features other than the average of the distribution of a thing are called the 'distributional features' of that thing. (Dasgupta 2001: 19)

Distribution is a useful notion because, although it preserves the fiction of wholes, it inflects the latter with a sense of heterogeneous weights, thus observing that not all wholes have the same make-up. (Two societies may have identical measurements of well-being, but whereas in one society one person is the sole contributor to social well-being, the others being destitute, in another society well-being is evenly distributed amongst all its members.) The heterogeneity to which distribution is a remedy has two moments: an allocational or institutional one, and a social one.

Allocational distribution is what economists have largely been concerned with: coming up with weights that make up for the inequalities of society. There are many such weights, some focusing on the commodity *determinants* of well-being (potable water, food, education, etc.), some on its *constituents* (health, freedom, happiness). A distributional weight may point and aim to correct my lack of access to food; but it will not be of much effect if does not call out at the same time my inability to vote out of office the people who are deliberately keeping the food away from me in the first place. The latter points to the question of 'negative freedom': freedom from arbitrary interference, and is the trademark of Dasgupta's important refinement to Sen's deservedly famous capabilities approach to well-being (Dasgupta 1993; Sen, 1999a). Allocational distribution, then, has nothing or very little to say about society;

it is solely concerned with the institutional mechanisms that make sure that society works fine, and with making sure that people feel comfortable with such working arrangements. In allocational models, society is in place, and one allocates and makes decisions *against* it.

My larger point here is that allocational distribution must be a variant of social distribution, which antecedes and informs it. When economists make up for ill-distributed well-being what they are in effect doing is compensating for a social distribution already in place; that is, they are re-distributing the social. Society comes into being in distributive episodes, one of which is awakening to the fact that we should rethink our social distribution. An early anthropological advocate of this vision was Stephen Gudeman (1978). Though his approach at the time was essentially allocational, looking at the question of the origin and use of a society's 'surplus value' or 'output allocation', it is still the case that for him distribution operates relationally: 'distribution as a meaningful system, distribution in light of social forces, and distribution as a structure' (Gudeman 1978: 374) – that is, a structure of social choices and social values, or a reflection of how, in its distributive episodes, a society stretches and branches out as it chooses its future image.

The idea of social distribution, or of the distribution of the social, is perhaps best presented in the work of Marilyn Strathern (for example, Strathern 1988). Most famously, the language of distribution takes form in her notion of 'distributed personhood', where persons emerge as social beings in moments of relational efficacy, like when they make themselves available to others in acts of ceremonial gift-giving. This is why in a book aimed to engage an economic audience, Mary Douglas has observed that 'When Strathern says... that for "person" one could write "gift," she is not being flippant.' (Douglas and Ney 1998: 9) If persons emerge as moments of distribution – distribution of themselves in others and others in themselves – then what we need to look out for are the values or idioms through which a society decides to conduct its own branching-out. This is where the idea of the distributed person meets the theory of economy, and in particular of moral economy. If the person becomes an element in, or even the carrier of society's distributional base (Gudeman 2001), then it is only legitimate to suggest that persons make the social good (that is, well-being) available to others in their capacity of distributing themselves in a certain fashion (Strathern 1981). How they become available is therefore a matter of the quality of the relations that they set up with others.

This introduces us to the second question about the wholeness of a society: the relationship of the parts to the whole, or what Dasgupta, in the quote above, calls the 'distributional features' of things. Our habit of aggregating parts into wholes is emblematic of what linguists call a partonomic mode of classification. John Davis has observed that partonomies are just one way in which people establish links with other people and things, other ways being pairing and taxonomic classifications (Davis 1992: 34–37). What appears to be distinctive about partonomies, however, is that they are very good at

making explicit the logic behind material transactions. Davis's own examples capture it nicely:

Gifts between friends should more or less balance; gifts exchanged between parents and hildren should be unequal. Altruists should expect no return, while alms-givers may quite legitimately hope for a supernatural reward. All these are different appropriate relations between income and outgo.… In summary, an intended exchange is a balance of two partonomies. (avis 1992: 40–1)

Note the language in which Davis explains the relations between transacting partners: 'balance', 'return', 'equality', 'appropriateness'. Exchange relations are qualified by a controlled give-and-take, a measured equilibrium that makes sure that things do not get out of proportion, as they do in potlatch ceremonies, for instance. As Mary Douglas has noted, a 'community works because the transactions *balance out*' (1986: 74, emphasis added).What is brought into balance is a measure of the portion of society that we want to make available to others; and so the gift, by obviation, signals also the size of society that is not available for distribution. The part that we give is an indication of the whole that is not given – what you see (the gift) is what you do not get (the larger social whole). Gift-giving is thus an expression and effect of proportionality.

Economic proportionality can be useful to think about other forms of sociality too. The imagery is for instance at the heart of Marilyn Strathern and Roy Wagner's writings on fractality, where relations self-replicate across different orders of magnitude. The paradigmatic case here is the individual vs. society dichotomy, for however we define society, individuals will always be seen as a fraction or proportion of the social whole (Strathern 1992a, 1992b). But individuality itself is of course also subject to fractal partitioning, as in the image of the pregnant woman or, for that matter, in the potential for future relations that all people carry within. Fractality is thus not unlike Davis's partonomic model of classification, except that in the former parts and wholes work across and within different scales, so that there will always be a scale where any part will figure as a whole and any whole will stand as a part (Strathern 1991, 1995). To pursue a flippant analogy: if a gift signals the invisible size of society, an individual works as a proportional 'remainder', as was noted in the Introduction to the volume. That is, individuals are what Euro-Americans give away to keep their social wholes (that is, 'society') at home.

This may all sound of little empirical relevance to the problem of well-being were it not for the question with which I opened this chapter: where is well-being located? We saw that, to be fair to the distribution of well-being in society, we first had to disaggregate the concept and look to its emergence in distributive episodes. These were in turn defined by the qualities of relations, which came together in the carrying capacities of persons. But these carrying capacities work differently at different orders or scales of sociality. Individuals may be good carriers of society and thus a good place where to locate well-

being. However, we ought to remember that individuals are just proportional factors of society, and that for some purposes, or in some circumstances, a society will afford a much fairer and even distribution of well-being if it uses a different proportional model. Take the case of intergenerational well-being. If we use the individual as the site and carrier of well-being, the soon-to-be-born child of a pregnant woman – let alone the child's child – will not be factored into our calculations of social wealth – future generations are not part of an individual's whole. In order to take future generations into account we need to modify our aggregational and distributional model. And so it is that one is tempted to locate well-being not in wholes but in proportions, for it is ultimately in a proportional manner that we decide what to factor in and what to leave out (Strathern 1996). This brings me to the last question about the wholeness of society, namely, the type of mathematic that we use to think about the social.

PROPORTIONS

The use of terms like 'individual choice', 'subjective' and 'objective' measures of well-being, or even the use of market frameworks as models of social interaction, belies the relational analytic that underpins current work on the measurement of well-being, such as Amartya Sen's capability approach or Partha Dasgupta's generation-relative ethics (see also Offer 1996). Their focus on interpersonal comparisons, intergenerational streams of wealth and sustainable development, shows that theirs is not a mathematic of social wholes but of relations, even if their descriptive language suggests otherwise. True, their use of relations is methodological, not analytic – it informs their efforts at measuring well-being, not their social theory. But decades of work on the problem of well-being by economists and political philosophers has shown that aggregation and the ensuing problem of distribution are factorial in how one thinks about the social good. So integral is their resolution to the question of well-being that one is tempted to think that they may in fact be part and parcel (part and whole) of the very workings of society – that is, the very way in which the social apportions itself.

Social apportionments are of course distributive episodes, and as such are informed by a relational analytic. But unlike relations, which only tell you *how* to disaggregate, apportionments tell you *what* to disaggregate into. Apportionments are relations of magnitude and thus carry with them a value judgement (cf. Griffin 1996). The relational work they do is inflected by this magnitude and shows up in the final allocation. In other words, the apportionment is the form the relation takes when it emerges as a consequence; or to say it somewhat differently, when it works as a proportion (Corsín Jiménez 2003). I go back to the problem of disaggregating intergenerational well-being. Parents care for the well-being of their children, so it is in their own interest to make the necessary provisions to pass on to them a 'good-enough world'. The question is, good enough for whom? For it is clear

that eventually their children will face the same concern, and so will their grandchildren, and so on. Good-enough-for-whom, then, entails a decision on how many futures will the current generation discount when making up their minds on the current valuation of well-being. Not only that, but also whether all futures are worth the same or some are worth more than others. Accounting for the well-being of the 400th generation down from ours may not only be burdensome but of little avail altogether, for there are just too many imponderables getting in the way of our predictions. So a concern with intergenerational well-being presupposes a relational analytic, but this is ultimately of little help in understanding how people work out their life-projects. People care a lot for their children, yes; but they might find it just a little too difficult to take account of the care for their great-great-grandchildren. Relationships, then, are not worked out linearly but proportionately, and it is towards the elucidation of a proportional model of sociality that we should strive.

PROPORTIONAL SOCIALITY

A model of the workings of society based on the idea of proportional distribution may look like an unlikely pill to swallow. Unlike individuals, or even relations, proportions are difficult to visualise, or so it would seem. This may simply be a matter of perspective, however. I would like to suggest that not only are there good analytical reasons to take up the model, but that there are also firm historical foundations to support it, which have also, in the process, inflected our theories of political ethics. It may be that history has kept its perspective on proportions hidden from view, a point recently raised by Jonathan Israel (2001) *apropos* the contribution of Spinoza's geometrical thought to the fashioning of philosophical modernity.

I realise that this is of course no place where to sketch a history of the idea of proportional sociality; but I would nevertheless like to point to some historical uses of the image of the proportion, for I believe it can illuminate some aspects of the current political purchase of the concept of well-being in liberal societies. In a nutshell, my argument is that social theory is strongly geometrical (that is, proportional) and that it is important to acknowledge the mechanical principles of our theoretical toolkit if we are to put our models to full and good use. Not to do so is to fall for a political conception of social well-being that is disembedded from how people relate to one another. It is to look for well-being where it is not, and to demand social responsibilities where they do not apply.

In one sense, the idea of proportionality is as old as political thought itself. It is for instance a fundamental premise of Greek political theory, for it is to be found at work within its metaphysic, from where it informs much of its cosmology and politics. This is particularly evident in the thought of Plato. Like all classical Greek thought, Plato's political vision is founded on principles of cosmological correspondence: political relations grow out of the

application of the same rules that organise the cosmos, which hence figures as the all-encompassing scale. All relations have a place in the cosmos and nest within it in varying orders of hierarchy. Nature, man and society are to be 'adjusted' (*dike*) in one ethical and cosmic relation, and if carried out properly (if relations are properly apportioned) this justification produces *nómos* or custom. In a state of tradition or equilibrium, the virtues of man mirror the virtues of the *politeia*, though each is worked out on a different scale and the cosmic principle of 'just apportionments' (*dike*) is what keeps the correspondence in place. One may call this order of correspondence a fractal ordering, for all relations contain within themselves the wider cosmological equilibrium towards which they contribute. The notion of fractality was, however, foreign to Greek thought; but proportionality, of which fractality is a more sophisticated expression, was not, and in this light the model may be seen as one of cosmological proportionality (or just apportionment).

There is another way in which the imagery of proportionality was at work in classical Greek thought, one that addresses directly the analytical tools that we use in economic anthropology. This is Aristotle's metaphysic of exchange relations. Upon confronting the problem of exchange, Aristotle's underlying aim was of course to remain faithful to the model of cosmological correspondence (which is why his discussions of exchange are to be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*). But as soon as he starts to work on the problem of exchange, he is struck by the mystery of commensurability: how can things that are by nature of a different kind be brought into exchange equations? How can shoes be exchanged for houses? Aristotle was of course the first to make the distinction between use and exchange values, and in his mind the problem of commensurability is the problem of the transformation of value: of one thing being exchanged, and therefore changed, for another. Scott Meikle has studied Aristotle's economic thought and has uncovered the proportional imagery that guides his understanding of this transformation:

Aristotle takes the first step towards defining the particular form of reciprocity that is appropriate in the context of exchange. He says it is 'reciprocity ... on the basis of proportion, not on the basis of equality'. The reciprocity must be of proportions of things, not the 'simple reciprocity' of Rhadamanthys, which would mean giving one thing for one thing. It would not be fair for a builder and a shoemaker to exchange one house for one shoe, because a house is too great or too much to give for a shoe. So they must exchange in proportions, so many shoes to a house. (Meikle 1995: 10)

Aristotle never quite resolved the paradox of proportional commensurability. He studied the logic of barter and the development of money, but in the end was incapable of explaining satisfactorily how use values become exchange values. The problem, however, remained crucial to him, for he thought that it was on the basis of reciprocal relations that larger political associations flourished. Whatever it was that brought people to exchange, proportional reciprocity enabled the 'holding together' of the polis (Meikle 1995: 35–37).

Aristotle worked within the horizon of the good life. Proportional commensurability and the 'holding together' of society were foundational bricks of the good life, which was accomplished if and only if there was a proper distribution of relations in the polis – that is, if the relations of exchange, and the relations of political obligation that were built upon these, were allowed to develop into and assume their natural *telos*. The good life was a metaphysical possibility of the good society, which was in turn a metaphysical development of fair exchange. Fairness was a metaphysical postulate of Aristotle's political theory.

It is important to keep in mind the metaphysical assumptions behind Aristotle's political theory, and in particular his metaphysic of exchange relations or proportional commensurability, for it is these assumptions that were viciously attacked by Hobbes in the wake of the seventeenth century's scientific revolution. Hobbes, unlike Aristotle, saw no reason why one should emphasize the distributive fairness of relationships. The nature of exchange, he argued, was arithmetic, not geometric; there were no good reasons for upholding proportional equivalences in exchange. A shoe is a fair exchange item for a house, if people want it to be so. What Hobbes was in effect saying was that the terms of political association should not be qualified by a fictitious distinction between 'ought' and 'is' (Macpherson 1962: 70–87): what people do is what ought to be done, and contractual agreements entered into freely by free, desirous agents are exemplary of fair justice:

> Justice of Actions, is by Writers divided into *Commutative* and *Distributive*: and the former they say consisteth in proportion Arithmeticall; the latter in proportion Geometricall. Commutative therefore, they place in the equality of value of the things contracted for; And Distributive, in the distribution of equal benefit, to men of equall merit. As if it were Injustice to sell dearer that we buy; or to give more to a man than he merits. The value of all things contracted for, is measured by the Appetite of the Contractors: and therefore the just value, is that which they be contented to give. (Hobbes 1991 [1651]: 105)

Hobbes's critique of distributive justice was part of the post-Reformation and anti-Aristotelian movement that culminated in the birth of the *nuova scientia* in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Hobbesian political thought was itself the foundation of what C.B. Macpherson (1962) has called 'possessive individualism', a theory of political organisation that sees the individual as the proprietor of his own person and capacities, and that is at the root of modern liberal-democratic theory. My reading of Hobbes is somewhat different, however, and although I have no contention with Macpherson's lucid diagnosis of the origins of possessive individualism, I would like to suggest that, despite his best efforts at repudiating Aristotelian metaphysics, Hobbes remained faithful to the model of proportional sociality that informed Aristotle's politics. Working tacitly or explicitly within the Hobbesian and Aristotelian models, the lubricant of social organisation is always a mechanism of proportional sociality.

The source of Hobbes's proportionalism is to be found in his Galilean baggage, what, following Peter Machamer (1998b), I call his Archimedean vision of the workings of the world. Machamer has argued that Galileo's work and scientific orientation was premised on a model of intelligibility based on the image of the Archimedean balance: 'The principle to be noted is that for Galileo the whole schema of intelligibility becomes putting a question in the form of an equilibrium problem: What is the cause of (or force that causes) something becoming unbalanced? Where is the balance point?' (Machamer 1998a: 60). In order to solve such problems of equilibrium, seventeenth-century scientists turned to the construction of mechanical models. These mechanical models fulfilled their aspirations for 'demonstrative proof', which, as Hobbes put it, 'was understood by them for that sort of ratiocination that placed the thing they were to prove, as it were before mens eyes' (cited in Machamer 1998b: 15). Perhaps more significantly, the preferred form of such representations was taken to be spatial displays, and in particular those based on proportional geometry, which replicated the workings of the world as being founded on the balance of magnitudes and the general relational measurement (ratios) of things. In the writings of Galileo this concern with proportionality is even used as a metaphor for clear thought, as when he writes that: 'Human understanding or reason (ragione) is having the correct measure (ratio) for things' (cited in Machamer 1998a: 63). For seventeenth-century scientists, then, the mechanics of the world were proportional, and both the epistemology and method of our enquiries were supposed to mirror these mechanics of ratiocination.[2]

It is to this proportional natural philosophy that Hobbes bowed. His theory of man and social relationships was a theory of motion, of the balance of forces that moved people to associate or fight with one another. For Hobbes, men were 'automated machines', 'self-moving' and 'self-directing' (Macpherson 1962: 31). He explained everything, from free will to social interaction, by resorting to a mechanics of pressure and bodily push: perception, for instance, had its origin in the diffusion of species that foreign bodies emitted and their pressing on the eye of the observer. Likewise, motivation and action were the outcome of excitement and the pressure of the appetites, or their aversion, towards different objects. Man, in sum, was an arithmetical creature: 'the whole *summe* of Desires, Aversions, Hopes and Fears, continued till the thing be either done, or thought impossible, is that we call DELIBERATION' (Hobbes 1991: 44, emphasis added). This is why J.W.N. Watkins called *The Leviathan* 'the political expression of the Galilean theory of motion' (1955: 129), a thought that finds its echo in Hobbes's own capitulatory expression, 'Life it selfe is but Motion' (1991: 46).

It is well known that Hobbes's model of possessive individualism became the standard formulation of liberal-democratic society (Macpherson 1962), and in this sense his mathematics of society, based on the arithmetic of individual volitions, has become common stock in social theory, and especially so in economic theory. The model did not remain unchallenged, of course, and

perhaps the most famous of the neo-Aristotelians was Marx himself (see, for example Meikle 1994). Neo-Aristotelianism is another word for a mathematic of society that comes to terms with its own aggregative structure, with its own varying shapes and 'geometric justice': that is, a model of social interaction that takes stock of, and makes the effort of actualising itself through, the distribution of its 'parts'.

It is this history also, the history of the idea of social justice as an expression of proportionality, that Derrida (1995) has recently resurrected in his reading of Heidegger's philosophy of justice. Following Heidegger, Derrida (1995: 37) recognises the analytical purchase – and yet problematic nature – of the original Greek term *dike* (the image of proportionality and balance; the principle of 'just apportionment') for re-centring and making the political rest on the dynamic of gift relationships. Echoing Hamlet's famous sentence, 'The time is out of joint', Derrida ascribes a quality of 'out-of-jointness' to all social life, and thus to the very possibility of human justice. For Derrida, gift-giving and debt-honouring are both paradigmatic expressions of the necessary asynchrony of human sociality (1995: 40). They are both indicative of a form of life that is always, existentially, out-of-synch with itself: a shadow of its own condition. In this view, social life is always falling short of itself, gesturing towards its own disproportion, because of its own phenomenology as a process of becoming. With Derrida, then, I want to suggest that it is the irresolvable nature of this asynchrony – the paradox of proportional incommensurability – that works as the engine of social life everywhere. It is the confusion of not knowing how and which orders of knowledge have to be made commensurable, or the realisation that commensurability, when accomplished, is frail and temporary, that makes social life continuously re-dimension itself.[3]

CONCLUSION

Earlier in the chapter I used the expression 'social mathematic' to point to the ways in which we think about the social. We have seen that different authors use different categories to build their images of society. The word 'society' itself is strongly associated with a mathematic of wholes, for once we talk about society it is difficult not to reify it as an entity. Economists in particular have had much difficulty resisting the temptation of working arithmetically with these wholes. Much of the recent work on the problem of well-being by Amartya Sen or Partha Dasgupta may be read as a heroic effort to refashion the economic corpus with the use of geometric models of society. The analytics of aggregation and distribution, for instance, are tools devised to help economists move away from a social theory that takes society for granted. They allow economists and moral philosophers to de-objectify the social and work with its moments of articulation instead.

Anthropologists, on the other hand, have long had an interest in these moments of articulation, to which we have traditionally referred to as 'social

relationships'. But I think it is fair to say that we have now arrived at a point where anthropology is close to fetishising its own analytic, doing with social relationships what economists once did with the 'individual' and 'society'. In drawing attention to the different analytical vocabularies of economists and anthropologists, my aim has been to emphasise the importance of rethinking our conceptual imaginaries, a task to which I dare say some economists have been dedicating themselves with far greater passion and urge than most anthropologists. Of particular interest are the methodological efforts that economists have made to disaggregate society. In this chapter I have singled out two such tools: aggregation and distribution. I have suggested that both methodologies may be put to formidable analytical use if applied to help us disentangle the workings of social forms. I believe that, if used as analytical categories, aggregation and distribution can tell us a great deal about how people relate to one another; in particular, they can help us qualify our traditional relational analytic, pointing us to the forms that relationships take. That is, they can tell us how a relationship becomes a proportion.

In the language of classical political theory, a proportional model of sociality is neo-Aristotelian[4] and geometric: it discusses how people measure and distribute their choices, and how the possibility of choice refashions and resizes people's self-conceptions. It shows that all choices, even the choices made by a Hobbesian automated agent, are proportional choices: a measure of the capacity of 'society' to make itself available to its members through certain forms of proportional distribution. Put somewhat differently, proportionality tells us the effort that people have to make, to extract their own self-image as distributive and capable agents.[5]

In the Hobbesian model of liberal self-extraction, the effort people have to make is scant: it affects only them, for they are the sole yardstick of their measured actions – the ratio of the proportion is a flat zero. It is not, then, that there is no proportionality at work, but rather that it has been bracketed off: the part and the whole are one and the same thing; the individual is the measure of society.

In contrast, in, say, Melanesian societies, where personhood takes a distributive fashion, the pain that people have to go to is considerable, for it stretches out from, and has sources of agency outside, the individuated person: People are what their relations to others makes them be (for example, Strathern 1988). Now, the trouble with the Melanesian model is that although proportionality is not zero, it is nevertheless a constant, and it is therefore assumed that people always relate in the *same* fashion – a relation is a relation is a relation. But:

... [o]ne person cannot suffice as the measure of another, but reflects only that part which is invested in the relationship in question. Thus from others one ever only gets a partial perspective on oneself. In the same way, one's own external presentation remains *out of proportion* to one's internal disposition. (Strathern 1992a: 132)

A full model of proportional sociality, then, is one that takes into account the different ways in which people inflect and qualify their relationships. Proportional sociality tells us the factors by which the stretching out of the social takes place. It talks about how people re-scale their biographical projects.

This brings me to the question with which I opened the chapter, about the location and the size of well-being. It is clear that if different people factor their relationships in different and varying proportions, the size of their social interactions will vary; that is, the kind of sociality they set in motion will have different weights or dimensions. The consequence of this is rather obvious, and that is that not everything that people do is directed towards the enhancement of their well-being. Heidegger once said that the crucial ontological question was: 'Why is there Being, and not simply Nothing?' The same could be said about well-being. A notion of well-being is by default a notion of a lack – of something that there is, but not quite in the proportion that we would like it there to be. This is of course why the economic idea of *measuring* well-being is not entirely a misguided notion, for if social life had reached its full potential (call it happiness, well-being, virtue, whatever), then there would be nothing to measure well-being against – indeed, the very idea of well-being would be incomprehensible. My larger point is that the project of an anthropology of well-being demands inexorably a model of proportional sociality, for however we define well-being, it will always need to be something less than perfect social life: it will always entail a 'remaindering of life' (Lear 2000). It will always therefore have a size and will always need to be expressed in one kind of social scale or another[6] – and the location of this size and scale will always be the person.

Our awareness of topological re-dimensioning, of social forms continuously changing size and effects (that is, of their inherent re-scaling properties), provides us with an extraordinary tool with which to enhance our category of the person. It allows for a novel and stronger theory of personhood, where people emerge as the proportional factors and carriers of social life. Mary Douglas and Steven Ney (1998) have recently pointed out the extent to which the social sciences have taken the person for granted. Social life has been seen to work upon persons, or from them, but not *through* them, as their own sizing projects. An analytic of social life that focuses on the *size* of sociality, however, will necessarily have to point, too, to the shape that human life takes in the form of biographical and historical projects. Persons are not simply agents, or actors, or rational decision-makers. They are the site where social life becomes strong because it becomes their own. Persons are social life writ small, expressed in emerging forms of proportional (that is, biographical) sociality.

To conclude, my aim in this chapter has been to sketch the foundations of a social theory that will live up to the efforts that moral philosophers and economists have invested into tackling the problem of the estimation of well-being. I have tried to show that an analytic that accommodates some of their

very important contributions requires us to reformulate our social theory, and in particular that it requires us to rethink some of the basic categories through which we make up our images of the social. I have suggested that one such model of sociality may be founded on the idea of proportional sociality, for the notion of proportional relationships seems to have underpinned the political thought of scholars from the Classical period to our age. Perhaps more importantly, the notion of proportional sociality appears well suited to the task of addressing the problem of well-being because it accommodates itself to the distributional and aggregational tactics of economic models. It learns from economics, but it also points to where the social theory of economists has gone wrong. Last, a model of proportional sociality allows us to make a case for a stronger theory of personhood, where people become themselves so long as they have the capacity to hold and envision their own projects of virtue ethics. And it is perhaps in the nature of such intellectual engagements (between economics, moral philosophy and anthropology, between the factual and the possible) that an enquiry into the nature of a problem as intractable as that of well-being may obtain new and refreshing sources of impetus.

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NOTES

1. This is debatable, although the literature tends to be unanimous on this point; Dasgupta is representative: 'Not only is the socio-economic personal, the political is personal too: it is the individual that matters' (2001: 13).
2. Cohen has observed how the application of the imagery and vocabulary of the natural sciences to the social sciences reached a dead end with the development of Newtonian natural philosophy:

    > The reason is that the Newtonian system of the world, the application of Newtonian rational mechanics, does not lend itself to a mechanical model or visualization in the human mind that can easily be transferred to an image of society at large or to economics. (Cohen 1994: 61)

    This may be why most social theory works within a Galilean paradigm, and why recent innovations in our sociological vocabulary echo those of topological mathematics, whose development finally allowed overcoming the intractability of the three body problem in (Newtonian) physics. Examples of the use of topological metaphors in sociology can be found in the work of John Law (for example 1999), and in actor-network theory more widely (Law and Hassard 1999). An early anthropological use can be found in Leach (1961).
3. I thank Marilyn Strathern for prompting me to think about the different origins of perspectives (orders of knowledge/reality) and their reconciliation, or not, in proportional encounters.

4. I use the term incautiously, almost provocatively. But I still find it appropriate, especially on two fronts. First, an Aristotelian model of sociality points to the extent to which social life emerges in distributive episodes, and in particular to the structure of these episodes as moments of proportional equivalence, however frail and transient these equivalences may be (see note 2, above). Second, it is strongly ethical, envisioning social life through the lens of robust projects of virtue ethics played out *at the level of the person* (for example, Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1985; Nussbaum 1996). As it happens, this ethical tradition is congenial with Amartya Sen's capability approach (Nussbaum 1988) and, I believe, offers wonderful new opportunities for anthropological theory.

5. My vocabulary is not gratuitous: the Latin etymology for 'choice' is traced to the word *elegire*, which was originally used to denote the capacity to cultivate and extract whatever the fertility of the land could afford. The imagery of *extraction* is of course also present in Roy Wagner's (1975) account of the forms that the emergence of social life takes.

6. I use the term 'scale' in a double sense: scale as size and scale as idiom . The image is, once again, Archimedean: one category presses and gets translated into another category, and the translation brings forth its own effects. If the natural environment is the modern scale of well-being, then environmentalism will necessarily have to change the size of society. The environment can only be factored into society, if society is re-proportioned and changes size. Scales are therefore orders of knowledge that carry forth their own magnitudinal effects. This may be why 'the global' is Euro-American society's current proportional self-descriptor.

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