

Philosophical Counseling and the Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped

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Abstract: The central goal of this article is to make the case that the *revamped version* of Michael Bishop's Network Theory of Well-being, described in his 2015 book *The Good Life: Unifying the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being*, provides a worthwhile framework for philosophical counseling endeavors, including Logic-Based Therapy. In 2017, *The Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped* emerged as a response to Bishop's theory of well-being; the revamped version was also my dissertation, which I successfully defended and published that year. By appealing to a set of counter-examples, I argue that Bishop's theory is missing an essential component; his *positive causal network* model of well-being allows for several problematic cases which, upon investigation, demonstrate positive causal networks but cannot reasonably be considered examples of well-being. In revamping Network Theory, I argue that three additional criteria are required for well-being: authenticity, a bit of morality, and some objective information. Altogether, these three criteria comprise what I call *holistic authenticity*. As such, the emergent theory of well-being declares that well-being is a matter of *instantiating a holistically authentic positive causal network*. This theory of well-being is the most reasonable notion of well-being for philosophical counseling because it is based on Network Theory's inclusive method, which requires that the philosophy of well-being join forces with the science of well-being.

Key words: well-being; ethics; counseling; philosophy of psychology; authenticity

I. Introduction

Although frequently eschewed, overlooked, and/or misunderstood, philosophy has ample potential to make positive, practical contributions to the world, including enhancing the quality of our individual and collective lives. Philosophy is an active discipline, and the practice of philosophy includes a set of diverse methods of inquiry and analysis, aimed towards truth and, ultimately, wisdom. The wise apply their conclusions and insights to the world, through their lifestyles, as well as through direct action, yet they are also open to revising their conclusions as new information surfaces. Philosophical topics of inquiry include a diverse and wide range of topics, including: ethics (questions about right and wrong, good and evil, etc.); value (what has value and on what basis?); existentialism (what is the source of meaning in our human lives?); proper political structures; theological questions; scientific methods and concepts; and more.

Philosophers who study well-being examine theories about the good life. Philosophical counselors, including Logic-Based Therapists, work for the sake of enhancing the well-being of their clients. In this essay, I argue that philosophical counselors, coaches, and consultants should seriously consider incorporating a well-researched theory of well-being into their practice methods. The theory of well-being that I recommend is the *Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped*,¹ which was published in 2017 and is based on Michael Bishop's 2015 *Network Theory*.²

In the next sections, I will provide background information about philosophical counseling, followed by an explanation of Network Theory and its revamped, superior version, which adds an additional essential component that is required for well-being. Then, I will explain how Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped can serve to enhance philosophical counseling endeavors. Finally, I will provide reasons that philosophical counselors should indeed appeal to a theory of well-being in their practices.

II. Philosophical Counseling

Philosophical counseling complements psychological counseling, with the same overall goal, which is to enhance the well-being of individuals, couples, and/or groups. Indeed, traditional psychological practices have focused on the treatment and prevention of psychological disorders, but the newer field of positive psychology, spearheaded by Martin Seligman, emphasizes “what is right about people and...the strengths of character that make the good life possible” (Peterson and Seligman 2004, pg. 4). The National Philosophical Counseling Association (NPCA) was founded in 1992, with the central premise that, “philosophical and psychological forms of counseling are complementary and mutually supportive avenues for helping people to confront their problems of living.”³ Philosophical counseling helps people to become more aware of their own thinking.⁴ When we become aware of the buried premises and

¹ Lang, Martha. 2017. *The Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped*. Tallahassee, FL: The Florida State University and ProQuest Dissertation Publishing. 1026226.

² Bishop, Michael A. 2015. *The Good Life: Unifying the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ See the National Philosophical Counseling Association's website: npcassoc.org. Accessed Jan 18, 2018.

⁴ See pg. 19 of: Cohen, Elliot D. 2003. *What Would Aristotle Do?*

underlying assumptions that lead us to act or feel in particular ways, then we can begin to overcome our irrational or destructive behaviors and feelings.

Elliot Cohen explains the process of overcoming our problematic behaviors, which lead to decreases in our well-being, in terms of applying philosophical antidotes.⁵ An individual applies a philosophical antidote to their faulty reasoning, which the philosophical counselor teases out of the client's description of his or her life problem(s) during active listening. For example, if a person is feeling angry and forlorn because she keeps falling short of her long list of personal and professional goals, then Cohen would likely highlight her tendency to demand perfection of herself and the world. Demanding perfection is a fallacy; it is irrational. Nobody is perfect. One of the antidotes to demanding perfection is to more fully embrace the fact that we are each fallible, or imperfect and that ruminating on our short-comings does not help⁶. Instead, we should remember, honor, and develop our strengths, while acknowledging that we could improve in certain areas and accepting that we are all prone to mistakes here and there. Cohen might prescribe some bibliotherapy, which consists of reading and discussing philosophical writings that would likely resonate with the client with regard to her fallacy and the accompanying antidote.

Cohen's method of philosophical counseling is called Logic-Based Therapy and is described in his 2007 book *The New Rational Therapy: Thinking Your Way to Serenity, Success, and Profound Happiness*. Cohen provides and explains eight antidotes to the fallacy of demanding perfection and likewise provides multiple antidotes to additional common fallacies, including: awfulizing; behavioral can'tstipation; lack of authenticity or failure to be oneself; egocentric thinking; and more.

Each philosophical counselor, coach, and consultant brings their unique expertise and perspective to their practice, and their credentialing would reasonably entail a master's degree and/or doctorate in philosophy. The NPCA, in conjunction with the Institute of Critical Thinking, developed a certification program in philosophical counseling for individuals who hold such credentials. Philosophical counseling is a growing field with tremendous potential to help people philosophize their way to greater well-being. But what exactly is meant by well-being? I will

⁵ See Cohen 2003 and 2007.

⁶ See Cohen 2007, pg. 28.

now share my argument about the most reasonable theory of well-being, which is Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped.

III. The Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped

In my dissertation, entitled *The Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped*, I argue that Michael Bishop's 2015 *Network Theory of Well-Being* is the best, most reasonable *starting point* for a theory of well-being, but I insist that his theory falls short in vitally important ways, thus requiring that it be revamped with an additional feature. Indeed, after thoroughly reading and responding to my dissertation as my advisor, Bishop ultimately agrees with my view on this matter. I explain my argument below, followed by a description of the revamped theory. In the next section, I show how the revamped theory of well-being serves to undergird philosophical counseling and other endeavors that seek to cultivate, maintain, and/or enhance well-being.

I argued that Bishop's theory was the most reasonable starting point because of his inclusive method: he insists that philosophers investigating well-being should incorporate the *science* of well-being into their research endeavors, which is revolutionary for the philosophical study of well-being, given the typical or traditional armchair methods of theory-building.⁷ Bishop includes the science of well-being in a substantial way, by bringing studies from positive psychology to the table. Bishop articulates that, when people's lives are going well, they tend to have a greater percentage of positive feelings, positive attitudes, and positive interactions in the world, compared to negative ones, and that these positive experiences tend to be self-perpetuating, thus creating a causal network that is overall positive, instead of negative. As such, Bishop's original rendition of Network Theory states that *well-being is a matter of being enmeshed in a positive causal network*.

In contrast, the *Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped* insists that well-being is a matter of *instantiating a holistically authentic positive causal network*. My inclusion of *holistic authenticity* is based on numerous reasons, which I will describe shortly; I should also note that holistic authenticity is a *revamped version of authenticity*, which combines the traditional notion

⁷ Traditionally-derived philosophical theories of well-being include: Aristotle's notion of flourishing; Crisp's hedonism, Griffin's informed desire account; and Sumner's subjective authentic happiness theory. See Bishop 2015 and Lang 2017 for more on these theories, along with critiques of them.

of subjective authenticity with a few objective factors. My definition of holistic authenticity will be provided after I share the reasons for its inclusion.

One reason that holistic authenticity is added is because, without it, people who are engaged in horrific acts but who nevertheless experience positive emotions, attitudes, and reinforcing applause from other immoral people in their networks would, according to Bishop's theory, be demonstrating well-being, despite the fact that we would usually call such people psychopaths, mentally ill, etc. For example, I provide the counter-example of Sadistic Soldiers in the dissertation, including US soldiers who were part of Charlie Company in Vietnam. They killed about five hundred innocent civilians in My Lai, many of them delighting in their "success," which was reinforced upon receiving praise from their Sergeant.⁸ Historians and laypersons view their murderous acts as horrific indicators of a lack of well-being. In another section, I provide examples of Merry Murderers - serial killers who likewise demonstrate positive causal networks but who cannot reasonably be classified as individuals with well-being.⁹ Given these counter-examples, it is clear that a moral component is needed. As such, I insist that, in order to have well-being, individuals cannot be blatantly and obviously immoral. This is much weaker than insisting that they be morally exemplar or altruistic; indeed there are some clear cases where morality is absent, including the intentional murder of innocent people, rape, and enslavement.

Another reason that holistic authenticity is needed is that someone might enjoy a positive causal network, but their positive attitudes and emotions overreach into the realm of dangerous activities. For example, George might be super-stoked about his new job and colleagues, who are enthusiastic, high achievers. Things seem to be going so well. One night George and his new buddies have a spectacular party; they are making tasty mixed drinks, dancing, singing, and loving it. Then Robert arrives, and he is thrilled to share a bag of white powder with the crew, which they all snort. George had never desired to try cocaine, but he decided to just go for it. George gets ultra-high and coked up, feeling extreme positivity for a while, until he has a heart attack. His PCN got the best of him. He either lacked information about the dangers of cocaine, lacked information about his health, or he had the information but failed to act in accordance with it. If we fail to act in accordance with our values or with pertinent information, then we are

⁸ See Lang 2017, section 3.2.1.

⁹ See Lang 2017, section 3.2.2

not being authentic in those situations. If we consistently fail to act in accordance with our values or with pertinent information, then we are consistently inauthentic.

If George was simply unaware of the serious dangers of synthetic drugs like cocaine and heroin, then his lack of authenticity was based on a deficiency of information – an objective factor in the holistic authenticity schema. If George was aware of the dangers but decided to act contrarily to what was best for him, then his lack of authenticity was based on subjective factors – either his lack of will or an unfortunate mishap of integrity. Indeed, some mistakes are more easily overcome than others! Someone could argue that George was in fact being subjectively authentic when he did cocaine because he loves to try new things. I definitely agree with that, and we'd have to talk to George to find out; nonetheless, George's experience with cocaine ended up being a bad idea. His well-being decreased significantly due to the heart attack, which was caused by his lack of authenticity when we view authenticity as being comprised of both subjective and objective factors.

What emerges from the counter-examples is a) the fact that, in order for well-being to be present, we need more than just a positive causal network and b) subjective authenticity is not sufficient. Well-being requires *holistic authenticity*, which I define as:

S is holistically authentic if and only if:

- a) the value commitments relevant to S's central life projects are not blatantly immoral; and*
- b) under full/fuller information, S would endorse S's actions and central life projects as maximally coherent with S's value commitments.¹⁰*

Our *central life projects* include, “our main pursuits in life, including work, career, family events, hobbies, and other primary activities.”¹¹ In the dissertation, I provide a possible basis for the morality requirement in terms of Peter Railton's *moral point of view*, which requires that we view our actions not just in terms of how we will individually be affected but from a “social point of view.”¹² Railton argues that we should take seriously the basic needs, or non-moral goods, as he calls them, of other people. We should at least not destroy the basic needs of others; we should not take their lives, inflict serious bodily harm, or prevent them from having clean

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 81

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 82

¹² Railton 1986, pg. 190.

water, healthy food, healthcare, shelter, and individual freedoms. Safeguarding the basic needs of everyone will go a long way in avoiding blatantly immoral behavior. If someone's livelihood, as a central life project, relies on the exploitation of, or other kind of harm towards others, then he lacks holistic authenticity, as well as well-being.

If a person is not morally problematic in any obvious way but keeps failing to align her behaviors with her values, then she lacks holistic authenticity and probably feels less than happy about it. Her lack of authenticity leads to a lack of positive emotions. Imagine Jennifer, a teacher who treats everyone with kindness and respect. She is committed to her students and does a great job teaching them, so she is authentic in that regard. However, she keeps suffering from a lack of will with certain behaviors, thus thwarting her goals to get healthy. She keeps smoking cigarettes and drinks too much during the weekends, despite her desire to avoid toxins, gain clarity, and start exercising. Because her behaviors consistently fail to be consistent with the values she endorses for herself based on objective information and personal goals, she lacks holistic authenticity. This does not mean that she is fully inauthentic as a human being, but her lack of authenticity is significant enough that her well-being suffers. We can view the decrease in her well-being in terms of a decrease in her positive affect, lack of holistic authenticity, and a decrease in her positive interactions with the world (as consistent failure to act as desired).

Additionally, Bishop's theory of well-being pinpoints a set of well-being *dynamics*, as he calls them, beyond the PCN model. He mentions *pre-requisites* for well-being; *essentials*; *enhancers*; and *promoters*. Pre-requisites include basic needs, which my theory accounts for in terms of holistic authenticity; if one's actions do not include getting his basic need met, then either: he lacks sufficient information; he has the information but fails to comply with the most basic central life project of survival, which involves basic requirements for remaining alive; or there is something wrong with the social or natural structure that prevents the meeting of basic needs. Group dynamics and socio-political influences within the revamped network model of well-being are a worthwhile research endeavor for a future project.

Essentials for well-being include those things or pursuits which an individual views as necessary for his or her particular life, beyond basic needs. For example, Jon's banjo-playing hobby is essential for Jon, while Jamie's farm work is essential for Jamie's life. Enhancers are not essential, but they tend to increase well-being for an individual. For Jon, going kayaking enhances his well-being but is not essential for it; for Carmen, kayaking is essential, since it is

part of her current livelihood, but watching the sunset is an enhancer and not an essential part of the experience.

My revamped version accounts for essentials in terms of the central life projects within holistic authenticity, and there is likewise room for enhancers within the overall theory of well-being: *holistically authentic positive causal networks*. Enhancers add to positivity and could be included as positive interactions. Promoters are larger organizational structures that tend to promote overall well-being. For example, a nation-state could be a promoter of well-being if basic needs are safeguarded and organized through collective work, in which everyone has a role, and if all people are given the freedom to pursue their own central life projects ways that do not infringe upon the rights and basic needs of others. A university could be a promoter, as well as a monastery, a city, or a well-planned intentional community. As I write this, I am thankful to be residing at a well-being promoter called Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. Basic needs are provided, community work is conducted by all residents, and there is time for individual creativity and freedom, all within the framework of moral precepts, including: no killing; no stealing; no deceit or lying; no sexual misconduct; and no alcohol or intoxicating drugs. The central point I intend to make here is that all of the well-being *dynamics* pinpointed by Bishop are accounted for in the revamped version of the theory, given the information embedded within holistic authenticity, as well as the fact that individual preferences are taken seriously within the context of morally acceptable social parameters, where people refrain from preventing others from having their basic needs met.

In the end, the *Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped*, with its insistence on adding holistic authenticity to the model of well-being, is the most reasonable theory of well-being that counselors, coaches, and consultants should draw upon, if their goal is to enhance wellness. Indeed, public policy officials and reformers should likewise refer to a viable theory of well-being when crafting laws and policies, and I recommend the holistically authentic positive causal network platform to them as well.

IV. Philosophical Counseling and the Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped

If the goal of philosophical counselors is to help their clients work towards increased well-being, then philosophical counselors should adopt a reasonable, well-researched theory of

well-being, to serve as a model towards which to strive. I assume that philosophical counselors do indeed wish to cultivate and/or enhance well-being for their clients. Therefore, they should appeal to a reasonable theory of well-being to do so. Doing so provides an objective towards which the client and counselor may strive. The *Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped* is presently the only philosophical theory of well-being that is both inclusively science-based and grounded in an objectively-and-morally-informed notion of *holistic authenticity*. As such, it is reasonable, reason-loving, and practical. At the same time, it recognizes individual differences among clients and works to help those clients express themselves and their unique attributes.

Authenticity is already a substantial theme within philosophical counseling, so it will not be too much of a leap to incorporate the *holistically authentic positive causal network* model of well-being into philosophy-based therapeutic practices. As explained by Cohen, authenticity is an antidote to *bandwagon thinking*, and it also helps with *can'tsipation*, which happens when a person is paralyzed by negative thinking. Cohen writes that, “authenticity is being your own person. This means autonomously and freely living according to your own creative lights as opposed to losing yourself on a bandwagon of social conformity.”¹³ Cohen’s definition of authenticity is specifically subjective, which, as I explained previously, is part of holistic authenticity, but it is tempered by the objectively-derived morality and information criteria, which I discuss in much further detail elsewhere.¹⁴ My point here is simply that Logic-Based Therapy and philosophical counseling in general are historically geared towards authenticity, but the additional, objective factors in the holistic rendition of authenticity will serve to safeguard individuals against problematic actions that would be contrary to well-being.

Increasing the occurrence of positive emotions and positive attitudes are surely also already part of philosophical counseling’s goals. Damnation is a fallacy rooted in irrational thinking, but changing one’s thoughts and perspective to let compassion, respect, and appreciation shine through will help clients feel better, and, with practice and habituation, will lead to an enhancement in overall well-being, all things considered.¹⁵ Appealing to the goal of *instantiating a holistically authentic positive causal network*, even if doing so is just from the counselor’s perspective, given the philosophical jargon, can help to organize the therapeutic process for the counselor.

¹³ Cohen 2007, pg. 17

¹⁴ See Lang 2017

¹⁵ See Cohen 2007 Chapter 3, for a discussion on damnation and building respect

The *information requirement of holistic authenticity* could arguably include information about fallacies, including logical fallacies and the fallacies of emotional reasoning, as well as information about antidotes. Information about nutrition, water quality, toxins, one's workplace, and even about the people in one's network, can all be valuable in understanding the causes that lead to decreased well-being for a client. Critical Thinking is part of the overall picture for well-being, and philosophical counselors can assist with gathering and/or evaluating the information that clients bring into their lives and which either supports or hinders well-being.

The network model itself is useful for philosophical counseling because investigating one's network can provide helpful insights about the quality of the people, places, and things that play into a person's life. We are each a network comprised of physical bodies (and networked organs, veins, neurons, etc), as well as our emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, but we are connected to many other networks on a daily basis, including other people. We add new things to our self-networks daily, from the food we eat and the beverages we consume, to the news and other images or ideas that we take into our minds, and the interactions we have with others and the environment.

Philosophical counselors can begin to utilize network theory by listing the network factors in each client's life, including people, as well as the client's central life projects; clients and counselors can keep track of emotions, attitudes, and the quality of interactions with others, with oneself, and with one's work and other projects. Trends and habits can be identified and changes can be initiated where warranted and with reason: to enhance well-being according to a reasonable theory of well-being that is based on the very natural phenomenon of causal networks. Causal networks exist whether an individual realizes it or not. We are each a causal network, connected to other causal networks, within larger causal networks.

When well-being is ascertained and evaluated, it is important to define the central causal network for the individual-at-hand. Doing so becomes a process of self-inquiry for the client. The philosophical counselor can help provide objectivity, as well as various philosophical antidotes to problematic behavior and negative emotions or attitudes. For the sake of holistic authenticity and its information requirement, it may be prudent to call upon additional experts when certain questions arise, such as questions about nutrition. Of course, clients should always consult with their primary care physician, as well as their mental healthcare practitioner, first and foremost. Indeed, given the current state of the healthcare system in the USA, I would

recommend that the full information and morality requirements be applied in that realm, too, but I digress.

V. Conclusion

I have argued that philosophical counselors should appeal to a theory of well-being when practicing philosophical counseling. I have also argued that the best theory of well-being, currently, is the *Network Theory of Well-Being, Revamped* because it makes strong appeals to the science of well-being while also incorporating *holistic authenticity* into the picture.¹⁶ Philosophical Counseling is recognized by the American Philosophical Association and is growing in popularity, yet philosophical counselors, despite their advanced education, certification, and client success, are, as of yet, barred from being able to accept insurance; however, it is my hope that, with more information and enhanced well-being, the situation will become more just for all parties. Indeed, philosophical counselors, coaches, and consultants are poised to help people overcome addictions, anxiety, and other ailments, in conjunction with medical professionals. Cultivating holistically authentic positive causal networks is something we can all work on, by checking ourselves for positive or negative emotions, attitudes, and interactions with others, as well as making sure our central projects do not directly or indirectly harm the basic needs of others, and getting in touch with our true selves. It is a process; cultivating and enhancing well-being is a process. Philosophical counselors can assist with this process, but first they, along with more conventional counselors, should get clearer on what well-being is. Then we can all work together, with a common vision for our collective well-being.

¹⁶ For much more on the science of well-being, please see Bishop 2015; Lang 2017; Peterson and Seligman 2004; and diverse studies cited within those works.

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