Notes on the “Good Life Concepts” diagram

To get a clearer sense of the relationships among the various concepts discussed in the literature on happiness and well-being, I put together a diagram depicting the relations among the main concepts in this area.

The diagram is meant to be as uncontroversial as possible, and should apply to most approaches to value. It involves no attempt to depict the relative weights of the various values, and any given ethical theory may recognize only some of the goods pictured. Hedonistic egoists, for instance, might think that one’s own happiness, understood in hedonistic terms, is the only thing that ultimately matters for well-being or a good life. If morality enters in at all, it is only instrumentally, as a means to well-being. The diagram is neutral about whether the goods listed matter intrinsically for the good life or in some other way.

Note also that the diagram leaves open the exact relationship between the various values. Aristotelians, for instance, will think that one achieves well-being by exercising virtue, so that the well-being and virtue aspects of the good life are in fact inseparable. But they can still grant that these are distinct concepts, and so the diagram should not offend them.

Finally, note that the chart is divided between “evaluative” and “descriptive” concepts. This way of segmenting matters is not without controversy, but there seems to be an important divide here. In particular, concepts above the line, evaluative concepts, rest squarely within the domain of ethical or value inquiry. “Normative” theories of their subject matter, such as the theories of well-being depicted, straightforwardly entail value judgments about what matters, is good, or we have reason to do. Such questions have traditionally been thought beyond the reach of empirical research. Science tells us what is, not what ought to be. The “descriptive” concepts below the line seem not to involve values in this way. The nature of a psychological state like excitement or liking seems an empirical matter, not an ethical question. (Health is a trickier case and a matter of ongoing dispute. It illustrates how the fact/value divide may not be entirely firm.)

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1 From Chapter 1, The Pursuit of Unhappiness