

Well-being Within and Beyond the Body: Towards Careful Planetary Engagements

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Wellbeing has become a focus of much anthropological attention in recent years, reflecting a pervasive and growing sense of anxiety and unease (see White 2017). On the one hand, wellbeing is often treated as an enlargement of the concept of health, in an attempt to attune to the more structural and relational aspects of living well. As such, it carries overtones of individual responsibility and contrasts with concepts such as welfare (James 2008). On the other hand, the obstacles to wellbeing and its pursuit are prominent concerns in the anthropology of ethics, articulated through themes such as suffering, violence, and the good life. This review situates wellbeing at the intersection of medical anthropology and the anthropology of ethics, but also with reference to recent work on care, ecology, and the environment. While disease has long been studied in relation to structural and environmental factors (and seen to be exacerbated by poverty, for example), the same analytical move is still incipient in the case of wellbeing.

Definitions are diverse: “‘well-being’ refers to states of mind in psychology (happiness, satisfaction, or sense of flourishing), to satisfaction of preferences in economics, to objective quality of life in development contexts, to aspects of perceived or actual health in medical research, and so on.” (Alexandrova 2017:3). In philosophy, ‘well-being is most commonly used ... to describe what is non-instrumentally or ultimately good *for* a person.’ (Adams 2008, emphasis in the original). In psychology, the focus is ‘on a state that involves some amount of evaluation: well-being is good and desirable, whereas the opposite (ill-being) is bad and undesirable. Subjective wellbeing (SWB) emphasizes that one way such an evaluation can take place is by considering the perspective of the person whose life is being evaluated.’ (Lucas 2016: 403). In one of the foundational texts on the anthropology of wellbeing, Matthews and Izquierdo (2009) define it as ‘an optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole’ (ibid.: 5).

Anthropologists have recently argued that it is now crucial to move beyond the conceptualization of wellbeing as primarily pertaining to individuals (Kavedžija 2021; see also White 2017). Such a conceptualization remains common but can have undesirable practical and political consequences. To think of wellbeing or happiness as a matter of individual responsibility or individual choice might be empowering for some, but risks overlooking the structural nature of the problems that befall many others (see also Cabanas & Illouz 2019). Even if suffering is individually experienced, it is entwined with

structural forces operating in society at large, well beyond the influence of any one individual— as illustrated by Paul Farmer’s well-known work on structural violence (2004). In this review I show how wellbeing intersects with recent work in the anthropology of ethics how it is embodied and emplaced; and how it is closely intertwined with (rather than simply opposed to) suffering. Furthermore, while experienced as embodied, wellbeing is deeply affected by the suffering of others – and not only human others. As such, it could fruitfully be understood as a form of affective common (see Kavedžija 2021). In contexts of complex environmental challenges and changes, inequality and conflict, I suggest that studies of wellbeing call for a focus on experience beyond the individual: an affective enlargement entwining forms of care, maintenance and repair.

Attending to wellbeing

The study of wellbeing took hold in anthropology towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Matthews and Izquierdo (2009:3) proposed that wellbeing is inflected by cultural and structural factors but also experienced as individual, and thus effectively combining both ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ aspects of human experience. Departing from the assumption that there is something universal to ‘pursuits of happiness’, these authors brought together in a single volume an array of diverse cases, drawing attention to the ways in which understandings of wellbeing may be culturally and historically specific.

The dynamics of constraint and freedom were at the heart of a volume on wellbeing and anthropology edited by Corsin-Jimenez (2008), whose introduction aimed to offer a foundation for ‘the social life of ethics’ (ibid.:3) by critically exploring implications of political morality in different contexts. Contributors highlighted how understandings of wellbeing must be considered in relation to understandings of personhood (Hirsch 2008, James 2008), as embedded in social relations that one can manage and navigate. They also drew attention to the delimitations of this social personhood - for instance the limits that life itself places on people with illness (see Sheldeman 2008), or the limits that persons feel compelled to place on their life in order to reduce harm to others (Laidlaw 2008).

Well, or good? Wellbeing and ethics

Wellbeing has become a salient idiom in which people frame questions about their place in the world today, bridging concerns surrounding the questions how to be well and how to be good. Anthropologists have produced a considerable amount of work on the good life - perhaps most notably, Michael Jackson’s (2011) moving account of ‘wellbeing in a world of want’ among Kuranko of Sierra Leone. Jackson argues that Kuranko views on wellbeing are captured by their expression ‘the name of the world is not world; its name is load’. Uncertainty is part of life, and not everyone’s hard work results in blessings; but the measure of a life well lived is not in blessings alone, but in the ability to bear this load, how one faces life: ‘it is a matter of how one responds to what befalls one in the course of one’s life’ (Jackson 2011: 179). He identifies three main existential preconditions for well-

being, drawing from his ethnography: hope for the future; a degree of freedom or agency within the constraints of the world; and ‘a sense of being-with-others’ (ibid.:184).

In a very different context - Germany and Guatemala – Edward Fischer places ideas of the good life and wellbeing into the context of the ‘moral economy’. This work is motivated by two main questions: what are people’s understandings of the good life; and how do their pursuits of wellbeing engage with the market? Fischer offers an overview of factors he deems essential, but not sufficient, for wellbeing: ‘adequate material resources (“adequate” being relatively defined), physical health and safety, and family and social relations’, to which he adds ‘three subjective domains: aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, and commitment to a larger purpose’ (Fischer 2014: 5). In tackling these existential qualities, though, he remains predominantly focused on the market, which he construes as ‘a key venue through which to pursue the good life’ (ibid.:6). Tracing the connections between wellbeing, value, and virtue, he points to moral negotiations that people engage in when participating in market exchanges (ibid.:17). For example, he points to German discourses of ‘solidarity’, and Mayan attempts to balance values of fairness with aspiring to a ‘better life’ for their families (ibid.:202). Contrasting these examples from radically different places, Fischer argues that pursuits of meaning larger than their immediate circles animate people’s attempts to live a good life. He thereby attempts to lay a foundation for a ‘positive anthropology’, as a kind of complement to the (far more prevalent) anthropological approaches that have tended to focus on critique (cf. Thin 2008). While hoping to enlarge the assessments of the good life beyond income and living standards, Fischer’s work remains primarily interested in the economic sphere and situated in the market.

For decades, according to Robbins (2013), anthropologists foregrounded ‘the suffering subject’, with trauma and suffering seen as a vital shared experience and condition of humanity. Complementing this valuable work ‘on the suffering slot’, however, Robbins identified emerging trends in anthropology focusing on hope, wellbeing, morality and care, and proposed that these could be brought together under the rubric of an ‘anthropology of the good’, focusing on ‘different ways in which people live for the good’ (Robbins 2013:459). The anthropology of the good, as described by Robbins, not only focuses on the ways people envisage ‘the good’ in their lives, but also on the differences in their understanding of value. The idiom of the good provides a transition between anthropological work on wellbeing and the anthropology of morality and ethics (Laidlaw 2017; Fassin 2014), e.g. especially around the related issues of freedom and agency. Another common theme in these two related bodies of literature has been a preoccupation with value, explored at length by Fischer and Victor (2023; see also Kavedžija and Walker 2016). Furthermore, as Mattingly and Throop (2018: 483) put it: ‘the focus on moral experience shifts attention away from readily made boundaries between individual and world, self and other, thought and thing, ego and alter. It brings us instead to an interrogation of the fluctuating processes by which and through which such distinctions are intersubjectively and intercorporeally constituted and made meaningful’. Most importantly, for the issue at hand, both the anthropology of morality

and ethics and the anthropology of wellbeing invite us to rethink the boundaries of the person - a topic to which we return in the sections that follow.

While not engaging with the ethical turn, Daniel Miller (2023) sets out to blur the lines between philosophy and anthropology in his recent volume on living well. Based on an ethnography of everyday life among (mostly) retired residents of Cuan, a small town on the coast of Ireland, he formulates an example of what he terms a ‘good enough life’ which, while not attaining the standard of an ideal, he deems as good as any. Miller’s ethnography resonates with some of Fischer’s work in Germany, especially the preoccupation with the idea of ‘enough’ (cf. Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). In fact, the ambiguous navigation of ‘enough’ or ‘good enough’ could be fruitfully contrasted with the framework of aspiration, which Amrith and her colleagues (2023) describe as a ‘process of imagining and constructing a good life’ in their work on living well in later life. Aspiration, however, need not only be understood as a form of progress or change; sometimes it refers to preserving those things one deems valuable that are already there. In one of the contributions to this volume, Julia Pauli shows that for women in a Mexican village she worked with, hopes for the future and nostalgia for the past co-exist with a wish to prolong the present, for things to stay as they are just a little longer, *un poco más*, aiming for a life of tranquillity (Pauli 2023:129, 138; see also Walker 2016). In this sense, we might conclude that wellbeing can take the form of aspiration or maintenance. The ethical potential of this becomes all the more pressing in contexts of conflict and environmental crisis, a theme to which I return in the final section. Within these fields of power, wellbeing is nevertheless primarily associated with embodied feelings of being well.

Health, wellbeing and the body

Wellbeing is often experienced as fundamentally embodied. For instance, Krzysztof Bierski (2021) describes yoga as a practice for fostering attentive movement, but also as a process of learning and exploration that people carry out alongside others. Based on his ethnographic fieldwork in a hospital, Bierski shows how yoga practice, rather than being merely a skill that alleviates specific physical concerns in the body, allows participants to attune not only to their own movements but also to the movements that surround them, intersubjectively. In cases such as this, while undoubtedly experienced as embodied, we see that wellbeing plays out very much in an intersubjective space.

Discourses of wellbeing often tend to direct attention beyond the individual body of the patient, towards their mental health and to wider social relationships. Paradoxically, these discourses are also applied in contexts where living well is understood in terms of individual responsibility and agency, figuring as a precondition for increased productivity or entangled with the neoliberal optimization of health (cf. Plancke 2012). Responsibility for pursuing and achieving health and wellbeing is placed on individuals and “[t]his new ‘will to health’ is increasingly capitalized by enterprises ranging from the pharmaceutical companies to food retailers.” (Rose 2001:7).

In these contexts of increased individual responsibility for wellbeing, bodies can increasingly become the terrain of surveillance and ‘optimization’ (English Lueck 2010). ‘Valley Productivity Rises to 2.5 Times National Average [in 2005]’: this statistic, with which English Lueck (2010) opens her ethnography of Silicon Valley workers, refers to an estimated rise in profit per worker that sets the stage for her exploration of health and wellbeing against the backdrop of the regimes of productivity and efficiency whereby bodies themselves become subject to ‘optimization’ and ‘tinkering’ (English Lueck 2010:6). The pressures in spheres as diverse as mastering technologies, parenting, and selecting healthy foods, though apparently disparate, are unified through the embodied practices of the workers themselves. English Lueck locates the body as the site of a ‘new economy’ in which individuals are increasingly responsible for their healthcare and their work lives as ‘family members, workers and well-beings’ (English Lueck 2010: 38). In a context where work is seen as the dominant sphere of life, multiple (seemingly private) ‘projects of well-being’ that individuals undertake are placed in the service of work. The individual’s health is a resource to be cultivated and protected under the surveillance of corporate employers, whose gaze encompasses ever large swathes of life (English Lueck: 194). It could even be argued that this imperative to cultivate health to perform well, in order to remain employed in an industry where jobs are considered creative and hence rewarding, leads to an increased self-surveillance.

The relationship between work and wellbeing has become another focus of attention in recent years, with increasing numbers of people in post-industrial societies reporting dissatisfaction with jobs they feel to be lacking in meaning (Graeber 2018). In contrast to both the perceived meaninglessness of the late-capitalist workplace and the alienated labour of the industrial workplace, the skilled work of the artisan, ostensibly focused on problem-solving (Marchand 2016), is often held up as an example of inherently meaningful work (Sennet 2008). Yet the creativity of skilled work is not the only, or even perhaps the main form of achieving satisfaction and wellbeing through work, according to Sanchez (2020), who argues that creativity should be perceived as a species activity of transformation ‘affecting change in the world’ (p70). Sanchez shows how metal scrap yard workers in the Indian city of Jamshedpur draw on their understanding of materials and their imagination of the potential uses for particular parts to transform discarded waste into objects and materials that can be sold, ‘effecting the transition of objects between different regimes of value’ (Sanchez 2020:82). This opens a different perspective on work satisfaction and the wellbeing of people whose lives are often precarious, performing work that is both physically demanding and dangerous.

In China, where the body is seen as a locus of social and political transformations and tensions, ‘bodies and embodiment practices are often structured in dialogic relation to the state’ (Chen 2001: 166-7). This can be seen in collective wellbeing pursuits like qigong or traditional dancing in the parks and streets, or what Huang (2017) refers to as the ‘congregational dancing’ favoured by older urban residents. While the latter practice is still mostly choreographed centrally and under the watchful eye of the state, older residents take it as an opportunity for individual self-realization and refashioning relations of care (Huang forthcoming). Most prominently, the dynamic between the state and the

individual takes the form of 'therapeutic governing' (Zhang 2020), or the incorporation of psychotherapeutic practices and techniques into organizations and daily life (p152), relying on both the increased influence and authority of experts in the fields of psychology and mental health, as well as the proactive approach of the subjects themselves.

While psychotherapeutic interventions are at times, without a doubt, co-opted by states or organizations, the way these interventions operate cannot be reduced to the capacity for alignment with hegemonic interests (Matza 2018:8). Writing about a different post-communist context - namely post-soviet Russia - Matza argues that psychotherapy as a form of care remains 'incommensurable' with biopolitics and the dominant norms of the market, insofar as certain aspects cannot be reduced to neoliberal governmentality (Matza 2018:229) due to the way they open up spaces for reflection on ethical and existential questions, in a context of a rapid social and economic change.

More broadly, wellbeing demands renewed attention to the paradigms of embodiment and biopolitics (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987; Krieger 2004; Lock 2017), in ways that might allow for a rethinking of these core ideas, and for moving beyond 'body-focused orientations to health' (Yates-Doerr 2017). Departing from the case of women with diabetes in Guatemala, Yates-Doerr shows that while health might not necessarily or universally be located in the body, it is treated as such by many health practitioners. At the same time, for the women whose bodies are subjected to the latter's nutritional regimes, health has more to do with their ability to care for their families than with their own individual bodies. In a different context, Whitaker (2021:90) argues that shamanic bodily transformations, as practices which move 'beyond the body', exemplify local pursuits of well-being among Awacaipu in Guyana. Wellbeing and health pertain to individual bodies in some ways, but are not restricted to them.

Emplaced wellbeing

More recently, anthropologists have begun to turn their attention to place. Ferraro and Sarmiento Barletti (2017) offer a place-based critique of wellbeing, in an attempt to move beyond measurement (prevalent in most policy-oriented wellbeing discussions): 'An ethnographic attention to both culture and place reveals the problems of trying to measure well-being, as concentrating on universal indexes, [which] may be done in detriment of other ways of knowing and understanding human wellbeing practices' (p:2). In this emerging literature, place is understood as a capacious term that need not be construed as something static or physical. It can involve movement - as in the case of Japanese tourists and backpackers seeking alternatives spaces for their wellbeing on the move (Aoyama 2016). Place can also be digital, as in the case of Aboriginal and Torres strait Queer communities (Coe 2023), or the Italian women going through menopause (Walton 2021:121), for whom connections with others who share their experiences open up new pathways to wellbeing.

Stammet and Toivannen's (2022) recent edited volume meanwhile aims to contribute an Arctic perspective to theories of wellbeing. Adams and colleagues (2022) describe the

wellbeing pursuits of young people in so-called ‘atomic towns’ in Finland and Russia, arguing that while eudemonic wellbeing (focused on meaning-making) is often emphasized by researchers, young people’s conceptions of wellbeing in these contexts are rather more hedonic. In my view, this opens up a number of interesting questions concerning class, educational background, and life course: for instance, how and why might a focus on enjoyment or hedonism become particularly salient among certain groups of people, or particular age groups?

Class, gender and the importance of place also emerged from another notable recent volume (Grønseth and Skinner 2021), which brought together perspectives from the anthropology of migration and medical anthropology in exploring mobilities across both geographical borders and various scales of movement. Movement and its inhibitions come to the fore here as key factors in health and wellbeing, but also reveal wellbeing as itself in motion: a process of ‘wishful becoming’ (Grønseth and Skinner 2021: xxii), referring to the various projects that people undertake or the various ways in which humans move through life. Migration itself unfolds against a temporal horizon, allowing for and often encouraging a comparison of circumstances before and after the move (Gardner 2015). A similar point is notable in MacMichael and Maderson’s (2014) ethnography of Somali women migrants to Australia. These women, they argue, situate the importance of their social ties as central to wellbeing against the backdrop of complex networks of social interconnections prior to the move.

In this literature, then, place refers to the social and cultural context within which various pursuits and understandings of wellbeing acquire meaning. However, it also refers to a certain emplaced quality of living within the complex web of social relationships that comprise a particular place. Moreover, the anthropological literature on wellbeing points to an expanded understanding of the social or cultural qualities of wellbeing overall. Specifically, while it is undoubtedly true that the quality of social relationships and interactions in one’s daily life affects one’s wellbeing, the social qualities of wellbeing extend far beyond ‘sociability’ and social support. Ethnographic work in this field points to more fundamental ways in which wellbeing could be understood as social and cultural (see Kavedžija 2021).

Wellbeing and suffering

Some of the social qualities discussed above emerge as central in Brazilian A’uwẽ notions of wellbeing (Welch 2020), not only in the sense of it being socially constructed, or dependent on social ties, but as unfolding with others, as life situations and experiences are shared. This includes both difficult and joyful moments alike. In fact, Welch (2023:20) describes situations of shared suffering as the very basis of wellbeing: if the loss of loved ones might be inevitable, the shared social quality of those moments lays a foundation for living well. Furthermore, while health is closely related to wellbeing, it is not equivalent to it. For example, when a much-loved village elder became paralysed and unable to speak following a stroke, he nonetheless enjoyed spending time with fellow villagers and his extended family (Welch 2023:11): ‘Antônio demonstrated the irreducibility and ambiguous nature of well-being when individual health and the social experience of

wellness might be at odds with one another (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009).’ (Welch 2023:25). Examples such as this one problematize the relationship between health and wellbeing, just as they trouble the lines between wellbeing and suffering. In another example, Throop describes numerous efforts of women, responsible for meals in their households, caring for family members with diabetes and chronic illness. They referred to their work in terms of suffering, but also considered it to be vital (Throop 2017: 206). The moral qualities of their suffering underpin their pursuit of wellbeing, for themselves and for others.

Tine Gammeltoft (2006) traces ‘the underside of suffering’, as she locates hope and a modicum of choice in the narratives of young women in Vietnam. While these stories focused on constraining social forces and fate, they nonetheless revealed a sense of agency: for example, ‘in order to realize her dreams of a morally respectable and economically viable family life, Trang was willing to undergo the physical and emotional suffering that termination of pregnancy entailed.’ (Gammeltoft 2006:599). The life stories of older Japanese, even those recalling hardship, hunger and war, were often ended or punctuated with reflections of gratitude for having lived a life that offered opportunities to learn, and in which they had much to owe to the good will of others (Kavedžija 2020). The notions of agency revealed through these narratives - which made no attempt to obscure suffering - is not straightforward, for they tend to encompass many other persons or agents capable of affecting or channelling the flow of one’s life.

Ecologies of wellbeing and (more-than-human) suffering

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the fragility and interconnectedness of health on the planet more apparent, while bringing issues of inequality and suffering to the fore (Lynch, Sturm and Webster 2021; Lang 2022). Anthropologists have long pointed out inequalities in the context of ‘global health’ (Yates-Doerr and Maes 2019). The concept of environmental health highlights the unexpected and often unpredictable ways that environmental changes produced by human activities can impact human health, as in the emergence of Lyme disease (Singer 2017). It also refers to the ‘health of the environment’ and the complex interplay of these factors (Kopnina and Keune 2013; Singer 2017:345). Health problems are understood as deeply affected by social, economic and – increasingly – global or planetary and environmental concerns (Gaudillière et al 2022; Horton et al 2014; Singer 2017).

Reflecting on the recent proposal to name the geological era following the Holocene as the Anthropocene, alongside recent developments in epigenetics, Margaret Lock (2017) suggests rethinking body and mind in the context of the environment, returning to her influential idea of ‘local biologies’. She first developed this idea in relation to contrasting experiences of menopause in the US and Japan (Lock 1987), but is keen to resist simplistic applications of the term to the mere discovery of biological differences worldwide. Instead, ‘the notion of local biologies refers to the manner in which biological and social processes are permanently entangled throughout life, ensuring a degree of biological

difference among humans everywhere that typically has little or no significance but at times bears profoundly on well-being.’ (2017:8).

If embodied experiences of health and wellbeing are at once subjective and social, they also – crucially - open out into environments. Zoanni (2020) writes about mental ecologies in Uganda, where certain ‘bodyminds’ are understood as disabled in the context of their wider social world. Here, the ‘processes of disablement’...[are] located not within the singular person or individual brain but within a broader environment’ (Zoanni 2020: 169). Similarly, others write about ‘food ecologies’ and ecological citizenship (Roe and Buser 2016), and even ‘spirit ecologies’ (Palmer 2015), referring to the spiritual and political relations people have with their environment: ‘This term refers to the localised ritual interpretations of the environment and the role of spiritual agents within it, allowing [Palmer] to examine how such perceptions affect people’s engagement with the world and management of resources that surround them.’ (Bovensiepen 2017:15-16). In the context of Timor-Leste, spirit ecologies have political implications, as well as implications for well-being, insofar as humans are required to cultivate various forms of obligation to repay debts to the spirits and other non-human entities with whom they share their environment (ibid.:16). Palmer and McWilliam (2019) refer to spirit ecologies in conjunction with ‘intergenerational wellbeing’ to elucidate forms of local governance. In a context where landscape is seen to belong to the spirits and ancestors, rituals and intergenerational obligations offer a basis for relating to the land that is often adopted by local governments.

One way of thinking about the highly interconnected nature of wellbeing is offered by the Japanese concept of *kyosei*, denoting symbiosis or conviviality and integrating social, political and biological forms of coexistence (Fuse 2011: 226). While this term has been used and co-opted for different political purposes (Fuse 2011), *Kyosei* Studies scholars emphasise the ways in which it denotes a form of co-existence that does not rely on homogenization, but rather allows a space for heterogeneity (Fuse 2011:227) and alterity (see also Shimizu et al. 2020). Not all forms of conviviality and coexistence are positive or neat; some emerge in dirty or messy circumstances of decay. Mohácsi, using gardening as a ‘lateral method’ explores *kyosei* in the context of medicinal gardening, both in Japan (2020) and in Vietnam (2021). In gardens, toxic pollutants, plants and non-human animals co-exist and collaborate in complex configurations. Similarly, in vermiculture, which involves cultivating compost requires providing a suitable environment for the worms, which does not always proceed smoothly and without a problem (Abrahamsson and Bertoni 2014), it is a messy endeavour.

More-than-human conviviality is ever more important in the current context of the Anthropocene. People in all cultural settings have incorporated a broad range of practices for living with others into their daily lives, ranging from giving thanks and showing respect to attending to the places from which they receive their food, nourishment, and shelter (e.g. Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Locke 2017; Reinert 2016). Indeed, humans themselves are multispecies communities, ‘holobionts’ (Fuentes 2019; Lorimer 2019) that encompass entire ecosystems of microorganisms. Entanglements at this scale would imply that those

working at the intersections of multispecies ethnographies and medical anthropology are fundamentally concerned with the ‘biopolitics of care and health’ (ibid.:159, cf. Rock 2017). Yet others, like Kopnina (2017), call for a more radical departure from multispecies ethnographies, towards more direct action with regard to animal suffering.

The suffering of non-human animals has far-reaching consequences, not least in terms of our understanding of appropriate ways of relating to others more broadly speaking. Racism and speciesism are related, as Ghassan Hage (2017) argues in his book on racism as an environmental threat. The environments of decay, abandonment and pollution have ill effects for all that inhabit it. Hage opens his book with a description of a garbage disposal crisis in Lebanon in 2015. What started out as a problem of disposal due to political friction led to a widespread atmosphere of distress and decay, as entire areas became polluted and uninhabitable. The garbage problem ‘became constitutive of the entire social atmosphere. It affected the way people worked, their mood, where children played, what could be eaten and where one could eat, how and where one could exercise, and more...It is this all-encompassing quality that defines the “environmental crisis” we are facing globally today’ (Hage 2017:1).

It is plausible that our current mental health crisis - demonstrated by the proliferation of various forms of mental health concerns - is deeply intertwined with our collective witnessing of large-scale suffering, neglect, disrespect, and abandonment among the humans and nonhumans around us. Recent discussions of ‘neuroecosociality’ (Rose et al 2022) would seem to support this connection, again revealing the limitations of approaching mental health as an internal problem, or as pertaining to the individual, while at the same time bringing into focus a more expansive understanding of the affective ecologies of health.

Wellbeing in crisis?

The contemporary moment has been described as a ‘polycrisis’, a complex entanglement of events unfolding simultaneously. Polycrisis, according to Henig and Knight (2023) is a term launched into contemporary discussion by economic historian Adam Tooze (2022). Henig and Knight argue the term ‘offers a bold new conceptualization for linking our era’s unfolding and cascading risks, challenges, uncertainties and transformations’, and adds a new dimension to understandings of the current moment as a form of ‘knotted eventedness’ (Henig and Knight 2023:4). Henig and Knight warn against the potential for oversimplification in narratives of polycrisis, paradoxically obscured by the label of ‘complexity’. At the same time, it may be a useful way of drawing attention to multiple interconnected problems the world is facing, while orienting attention towards potential solutions in the face of adversity and to other ways of world-making.

If a crisis is understood as a rupture, it can be contrasted with the everyday or ordinary. The foreshortened temporal horizon of crisis narratives, focused on the acute disturbance of the present, might obscure the need for long-term historical contextualization, as argued by Cabot (2019) with reference to migration in Europe. Yet the crisis itself can turn

out to be long-standing, protracted or chronic, rather than ‘temporary abnormality’: ‘For many people around the world – the chronically ill, the structurally violated, socially marginalised and poor – the world is not characterised by peace, prosperity and order but by the presence and possibility of conflict, poverty and disorder.’ (Vigh 2008:7). Furthermore, Vigh argues, the ‘slow’ crises that people experience, personal and social, often compound one another, resulting in the further thinning out of social relations of support (Vigh 2022: 531, 533).

This complex relationship between extraordinary circumstances and responses to them in a space of ‘volatile potentiality’ features in Cabot’s (2014) work on asylum and citizenship in Greece. Cabot draws attention to the dual meaning of the Greek word *krisis*, as ‘both an event of rupture and critique or judgement’, where circumstances and meaning-making are brought to bear on one another in unpredictable ways. This interplay can at times be productive, but it can also be violent and terrifying (Cabot 2023:14). Similar conditions of an enduring ‘state of emergency’ have been described in Brazilian shantytowns by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2008), and the pandemic-affected African-American communities by Cheryl Mattingly (2022). Following Gail Weiss (2022), Mattingly argues that ‘a crisis is a moment when the ground called “ordinary life” is interrupted in such a way that it no longer functions as an out-of-awareness backdrop but itself becomes the visible figure. But what happens when the ground is already permeated by crises, large and small?’ (Mattingly 2022: 47). In both cases, the authors show how people find ways to continue living, whether it is through their ‘knack’ for life (Scheper-Hughes 2008:25) or practices of ‘making way out of “no way”’ (Mattingly 2002: 50) or reframing what is considered possible.

How, then, should we think about well-being today, against a backdrop of acute, but also protracted, enduring, entwined and compounding crises? Knight (2023) describes the experiences of Greek citizens in the context of enduring crisis as a sense of captivity, or in the words of one of his interlocutors, Aphrodite: being held ‘hostage to great forces that are too abstract to fight ... we have adapted and learned to survive’ (Knight 2023:11). The ‘atmosphere of captivity’, to which people grew accustomed, prevents them from thinking about a future beyond the crisis. This sense of captivity can be contrasted with the sense of enjoyment or *jouissance* in the chaotic context of Beirut, described by Hage (2018) as unfolding against the backdrop of conflict, pollution, unpredictability and absence of stability and rules. He elaborates *jouissance* as a complex feeling of exasperation and exhilaration with the state of affairs, relying on the ethos of *shatara*, or skilful navigation of rules and that which lies outside them (Hage 2018: 98), while being aware of the others involved in the same process: moving within or outside the rules in a form of sociality that Hage refers to as ‘negotiated being’. If feeling stuck or captive is detrimental, then, finding ways to manoeuvre, negotiate or navigate an uncertain terrain (Vigh 2009) appears to be crucial for wellbeing.

Rappaport also draws attention to movement in the understanding of wellbeing of hospital porters, arguing that wellbeing can be best understood as ‘a moral system based on what are perceived to be appropriate rhythms and movement’ (2007:95). Among the porters, always on the move in the hospital, life, too is understood in terms of a trajectory, always ongoing and in becoming (Rappaport 2007: 95). In precarious

conditions wellbeing itself is best located in a transitory space (Rappaport 2007:96), and relies on an ongoing balancing of different tensions, which makes it uncertain and fragile (Rappaport 2007: 104). This emphasis on movement resonates with recent theorising of wellbeing as processual rather than as achieved (Kavedžija 2021). It also recalls the idea of well-faring, coined by Langer and Hjørund (2011) in their introduction to a special issue on the anthropology of welfare, in which they ask the reader to imagine welfare less as an obtainable ‘state’, objective and measurable, ‘but instead as daily practice and ethical orientation’ (Langer and Hjørund 2011:2). They build on Tim Ingold’s work on lines and wayfaring, which drew a distinction between the directness and purposiveness of transit and the mutually constitutive qualities of wayfaring, in which both the environment and the wayfarer are transformed. Langer and Hjørund argue that ‘faring well, like wayfaring, does not begin with a blank slate but proceeds through constant engagement with and movement through an environment that is both naturally and culturally shaped. It always implies a definition of what is and what should be, about different kinds of agents and about rights and obligations. Faring well is therefore both pragmatic and moral.’ (Langer and Hjørund 2011:2). These reflections require us to think of well-being as unfolding on uncertain terrain, requiring negotiation and movement.

While some degree of constraint and structure is not necessarily unwelcome as a scaffolding, it thus appears that a degree of *movement* is crucial. The capacity to act matters; or in the words of Jackson (2011:184), ‘a sense that one is able to act on the situation that is acting on you’. This might be described in terms of freedom, choice or agency, as we have seen above. For many, the structural constraints and limitations are considerable, but a degree of capacity to act remains important: ‘To live with insecurity, the urban poor must find ‘little ways’ to circumvent the rules and other obstacles to wellbeing,’ (Moore 2020). One term that emerged from my own work in Japan is that of ‘leeway’, which implies some structure or constraint, but also some ‘slack’, in terms of time, capacity, resources (Kavedžija 2021). In contrast to strain, leeway brings together the capacity to act with the sentiment of movement.

Maintenance, care and repair

Certain recent developments in the anthropology of ethics have sought to pay specific attention to the subjective experience of a subject who is always already enmeshed in relations with others (see Mattingly and Throop 2018:482). In this way they resemble some important discussions in the anthropology of care: the relational nature of wellbeing can be positive or supportive, but also challenging or cruel, much as care is not necessarily positive; it too can be unstable and morally ambiguous (Cook and Trundle 2020). But it might also offer a basis for reconfiguring politics and ethics in the Anthropocene (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Chatzidakis et al. 2020).

When the world becomes increasingly ‘unbearable’, dwelling can be supplanted by ‘abiding’, as a particular form of being-in-the world (Throop 2023). Under such circumstances, we could add, hope for the future takes a particular form, recognizing that discourses of growth, expansion and progress are no longer appropriate (and may be outright dangerous and delusional), while stagnation and stasis might also not be

possible. In this context, it might be more appropriate to think of wellbeing, like care, as a form of maintenance of the world, or a kind of repair. Wellbeing can sometimes be framed as an aspiration, but also, as we have seen, as a desire for things to stay as they are for just a little longer (Amrith et al. 2023; Pauli 2023). Maintenance ‘reminds us that a state of well-being is not so much accomplished as continually worked at and towards. Put another way, to maintain is not only to keep things as they are but also to keep them going’ (Hall and Smith 2011: 34). Living with others requires effort and maintenance, not least in more-than-human contexts (Abrahamsson and Bertoni 2014). ‘Humans also shape and are shaped by our caretaking, consumption, manipulation, destruction of, and compassion for, other beings.’ (Fuentes 2019: 156).

As these works illustrate, wellbeing is deeply impacted by the way we relate to the world around us. The elements of maintenance and care in these relations could therefore be understood as the very foundation of wellbeing, which can therefore no longer be seen as an individual pursuit, or as a property of a separate body. If wellbeing is sometimes seen as akin to a hard-to afford luxury in a war-torn world engulfed by crises and economic recession, these concerns could easily slip further from view. In a climate of conflict, inequality and environmental distress, wellbeing offers an important idiom for thinking through how best to live well both for oneself and for others: how to co-exist and inhabit the troubled world jointly.

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