

# THE WELL-BEING MANDALA

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## Introduction

This paper is part of an effort, undertaken by the staff of the Tellus Institute and their collaborators, to address the issue of a Great Transition (GT).<sup>(1)</sup> A GT is one of many possible futures for humanity. Whether a GT occurs is, to a great extent, a matter of choice. “Push” (necessity, avoidance of risk/harm) and “pull” (pursuit of attractive options) will guide our collective decision. Well-being (WB) is an important pull. Our understanding of WB will, in part, shape the choices we make, individually and collectively, as we create our future. A broad, sophisticated understanding of WB is essential if we are to choose wisely.

My GT related work has focused on WB. I did not start with that focus. I began with consumption in the developed countries and its various linkages to resource and energy use, emissions and waste generation. From there I broadened to consider affluence which provides the opportunity for consumption, but also for reductions in work and increases in leisure.<sup>(2)</sup> My efforts to understand the various factors—economic, psychological, social, etc.—that shape our response to affluence, led me to WB. My goal has been to understand WB in a way that shed some light on consumption and affluence, and to explore the role that pursuit of WB might play in fostering a GT.

I have spent a considerable amount of time reading the literature on WB. As one quickly learns, the subject is vast. Its origins stretch back to ancient times. Current contributions are numerous and, in some cases, quite technical. There are, of course, various overviews available.<sup>(3)</sup> However, those that I have seen have various deficiencies:

- They do not address all the different types of WB considered in the literature.
- They do not link individual WB to conditions in the world in which we live.
- They do not provide a useful context for discussions that relate WB to the GT effort.

My need for an overview that overcomes these deficiencies arose from my experience, trying to identify and make sense of very disparate types of WB, and relating them to issues relevant to a GT. My response was the development of the WB Mandala.

The discussion of the WB Mandala in this paper has three parts: background on the development of the WB Mandala, explanation of the types of WB included in the mandala, and discussion of the linkages between individual WB and the world in which we live as shown in the mandala. My goal in writing this paper was to summarize and clarify my own

thinking about WB. Having worked on WB for a few years now, I have developed a “point of view.” Hopefully this paper makes my viewpoint clear. I see this point of view as a starting point for discussion. Thus, I welcome comments and suggestions on the presentation provided below. My hope is that such input can trigger discussion of WB, leading to the production of a chapter in the planned Tellus Institute volume on GT. I will return to this objective at the end of this paper.

## **The WB Mandala**

The term “mandala” is not part of common English usage. C.G. Jung, a psychologist interested in the mandala, provides an explanation of this somewhat obscure term:

- “The Sanskrit word *mandala* means “circle” in the ordinary sense of the word. In the sphere of religious practices and in psychology it denotes circular images, which are drawn, painted, modeled, or danced.”

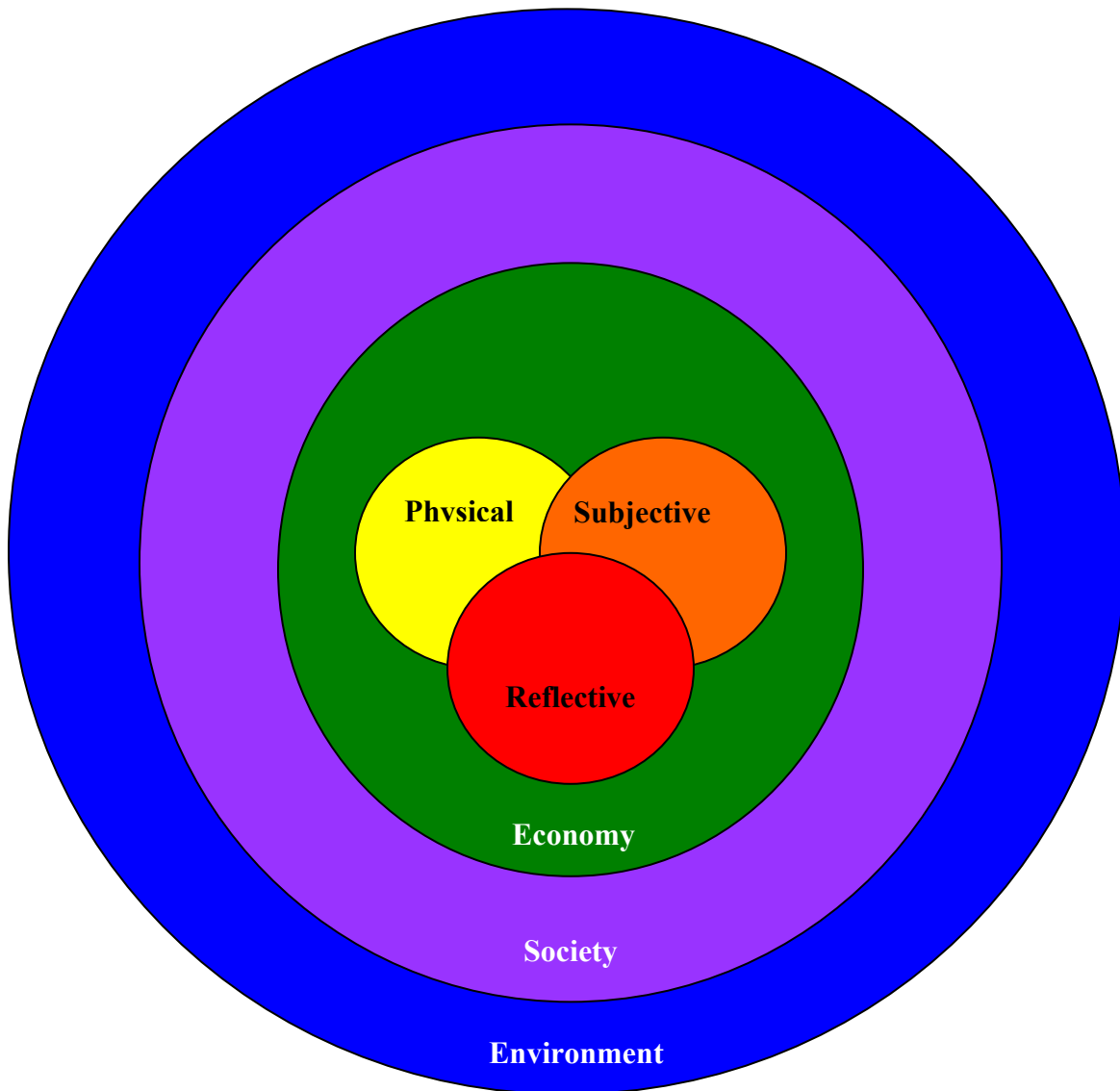
Jung goes on to describe the purpose for mandala development, explaining that “...they often represent very bold attempts to see and put together apparently irreconcilable opposites and bridge over apparently hopeless splits.” As the preface to the volume containing Jung’s work on mandalas points out, Jung began to draw mandalas himself when he was in the throes of such an effort. Success in mandala development, as described by Jung, meets the perceived need: “At all events they (mandalas) express order, balance and wholeness.”<sup>(4)</sup>

My attempt at “order, balance and wholeness” in the consideration of WB resulted in the WB Mandala shown below. The structure of the mandala is quite simple. At the center are three small, overlapping circles. These represent three types of individual WB. Providing the background against which the small circles rest are three larger, concentric circles. These represent the way in which our WB individual is related to the world in which we live. The structure of the mandala is intended to convey two simple ideas:

- There are different types of WB. It is useful to treat them as distinct, and to consider them in the order suggested by the overlaps.
- While WB refers to an individual, understanding it requires consideration of the individual in relation to an economy which in turn is a part of a society that exists within the physical environment.

The colors—hot, high-contrast for the types of WB, and cool, low-contrast for the background— were chosen to help convey these ideas. If one glances at the mandala, one’s eye is drawn initially to the center, taking in immediately the captions on the small circles and their overlap. Then, as one looks a bit longer, the circles in the background and their captions emerge. My hope is that, after a bit of explanation, a viewer can “see” the view of WB I have described in the design of the mandala.

## The Well-Being Mandala



### Types of Well-Being

The WB Mandala shows three types of WB: Physical, Subjective, and Reflective.<sup>(5)</sup> These types can be distinguished on the basis of two considerations. The first is what I call their **Characteristics**, that is the features an individual would look for as an indication of each type of WB. The second is what I refer to as their **Framework**, that is the collection of disciplines and methodological approaches by means of which each type of WB has been studied. For two of the types—Physical and Subjective—the Framework includes a **Metric** which is generally accepted and used as a rough measure of that type of well-being. This being said, the types are as follows:

- **Physical WB** is roughly synonymous with health. It is what one considers if asked whether they are “well.” The Framework for addressing Physical WB is provided by the medical sciences. Lifespan is the Metric. The Body Mass Index is often used as well, as an indicator of likely lifespan.
- **Subjective WB** focuses on one’s contentment with one’s life. It is what one considers when asked, “How have things gone for you?” The Framework for addressing Subjective WB is provided by experiments and survey research conducted primarily by psychologists, and by analyses of the survey results produced by economists. Scores developed from the responses to a few standard questions asked world-wide over the past 50 years provided the Metric.
- **Reflective WB** refers to our degree of comfort with the choices we have made and the actions we have taken. It is what one considers when asked “Have you lived the way you feel you should?” Philosophy and religion provide the Framework within which this type of WB is addressed. There is no commonly accepted Metric.

It is easy to see the difference between Physical and Subjective WB. One can easily imagine “scoring high” on either one and low on the other. Clearly, a long and contented life should be part of any notion of well-being, so both types are needed to get the full picture. It is a bit more difficult to justify Reflective WB as an additional separate type. There are various arguments for accepting it. The simplest involve the construction of examples which illustrate the distinction being made. A long, healthy life which was satisfying to an individual as she lived it might, upon reflection, lack much that in the end she feels “should” have been there. One can also imagine “good” lives which, unfortunately, are neither long and healthy nor satisfying to live. There are also differences in the actions one might undertake to produce these two types of WB. Whatever the merit one sees in these arguments, differences in the Frameworks—psychological studies vs. philosophical/religious reflection—may alone be enough to justify separate treatment.<sup>(6)</sup>

My view, that well-being is not a unitary notion, is not the common position. In the literature, there are various attempts at what one might call “well-being imperialism”; that is, efforts to subsume all discussion of well-being within one of my three types, or to treat all of these types as adjuncts to another category, such as prosperity.<sup>(7)</sup> While I understand the motivation for such attempts, I have not found them helpful. What has been helpful has been to set the types “side by side,” to see what they have in common and how they differ. For me, the differences have been most surprising and enlightening, particularly the rather different factors that have been shown to contribute to each type of well-being. I will turn to that point in the next section when I discuss the Background. First, however, I want to say a few words about the “overlap” of the WB types shown in the mandala.

When I constructed the WB Mandala, I decided to show overlap to suggest an order in which I found it useful to begin to “think through” the types of WB in relation to various theories of human needs. As one moves up through Maslow’s hierarchy of “needs,” one is led to address Physical, Subjective and Reflective WB. However, I want to make it clear that the overlap is not meant to suggest hierarchy, as in Maslow’s theory. Rather, in my view,

once one has thought things through for a bit, one sees a wide variety of connections among the types of WB, just as the Doyal-Gough theory produces a complex web of connections among various sorts of needs.<sup>(8)</sup>

## **The Background**

The WB Mandala places the types of individual WB against a Background consisting of Economy, Society and Environment. The Background provides a simplified representation of the world in which we live. The choice of what is in the foreground (i.e., what is labeled as a type of WB) and what is in the Background, was important. One could add Material WB, various types of Social WB, and/or Environmental WB to the list of types. However, in my view, it is consistent with the literature and, more importantly, analytically most useful to focus on the three types included in the mandala, and to leave the rest in the Background. To put things somewhat crudely, I tend to think of Economy, Society and Environment as “independent variables” which, along with other factors such as hereditary, explain the extent to which we experience the various types of WB. They are “independent” in the sense that humankind could choose to address them through policy development, with the goal of enhancing WB. This view is “crude” because, in addition to influencing WB, Economy, Society and Environment are affected by our pursuit of WB. Further, as I will explain, beneficial shifts in economic, social and environmental policy may be fostered by identifying those shifts as actions which will enhance WB.

The WB Mandala situates WB directly within the circle labeled Economy. This reflects the common view. In particular, prosperity is generally closely linked to well-being. The most common measure of prosperity—national average GDP per capita—is often used as a proxy for well-being. This proxy is so well accepted that, in many instances, use of a proxy is not mentioned and likely not even considered. One sees this sort of forgetfulness quite often when one reads *The Economist*. The WB Mandala addresses the economy the way economists do in their more reflective moments: the economy depends on the existence of social relations such as trust, institutions such as functioning courts, and other crucial features of a society. Going a bit further, the WB Mandala adopts the viewpoint of ecological economics, placing society and its economy explicitly within the environment.<sup>(9)</sup>

Discussion of the prosperity/well-being linkages leads one to “move out,” from the economy to society as a whole. One sees this movement in the Frameworks, particularly in efforts to identify the determinants of Physical and Subjective WB. However, in order to get to Society, one must “unpack” the notion of prosperity, considering both income and wealth and, in each of these categories, addressing a range of components. Thus, for example, the discussion of wealth needs to include discussion of human, social, and natural capital. For both income and wealth, what is usually monetized and what is often not needs to be addressed. Various indices including GDP per capita but also the misery index (inflation plus unemployment rates), Genuine Progress, etc. need to be part of the discussion.<sup>(10)</sup>

Once one has unpacked the concept of prosperity, one can examine the various features of prosperous societies with an eye to identifying the determinants of the various types of well-being. Typically this work begins with the assumption that prosperity, as indicated by GDP per capita, is an important explanatory variable. However, analysis tends to circumscribe and diminish its importance. The greater importance of the misery index

compared to GDP per capita as determinants of Subjective WB is generally acknowledged. So are the importance of public health measures as well as growth in GDP per capita in explaining long-term trends in Physical WB as shown in anthropometric data.<sup>(11)</sup>

From explanation it is a short step to policy formation and justification. The following two examples address this linkage:<sup>(12)</sup>

- Governments routinely set economic policy with an eye to promoting or sustaining economic growth. The justification is that such growth contributes to WB. Analysis of the actual determinants of WB has led to calls for change in policy formation, de-emphasizing economic growth in favor of policies that are better able to foster Subjective WB.
- Reflective WB plays an important role in individual change. Various movements—voluntary simplicity, “slowness,” etc.—have as one of their hallmarks a departure from the notion that economic growth at the individual level (i.e., growth in real individual or household income) is the best route to increased WB. In the future those in the voluntary simplicity and slowness movements may begin to address government policy as well as individual choice.

In the WB Mandala, the part of the Background placed furthest from the types of individual WB is Environment. We all know that it is Environment upon which the viability of Economy and Society ultimately rest. However, as we live our lives day to day, and as many of our leaders make economic and social policy for us, the focus is generally on more immediate concerns. There are various ways to bridge this gap. The WB Mandala, by facilitating discussion of the determinants of the three types of WB, leads to a number of approaches<sup>(13)</sup>

- Physical WB research suggests actions—such as a shift in diet, more walking, etc.—that dovetail with environmental concerns (i.e., resource use and emissions associated with food production and transport).
- Subjective WB research supports the adoption of policies that de-emphasize economic growth and the accompanying consumption in the countries of the “North.” Such policies create the possibility of a “double dividend”—greater WB with less environmental impact in the North, providing environmental space for consumption in the “South” to grow. Such changes may also reduce the “imitation effect” seen now among consumers in the South.
- Reflective WB invites us all to ask and answer questions that lead one to move in the directions suggested by work in ecological economics.

There is, of course, much more to be said about the Background against which WB can best be situated and understood. There is also the important discussion of the relationship of the WB Mandala to other approaches to the analysis of WB, such as the Capability

Approach devised by Sen and elaborated by Nussbaum and others.<sup>(14)</sup> These will all have to wait for another day.

### **WB as Part of a GT**

My view of the role of WB as part of a GT can perhaps best be explained by glancing again at the WB Mandala. By choice of colors and placement, individual WB is the initial focus. However, after a bit, the world within which individual WB has to be achieved becomes part of the picture. This, hopefully, leads to a “back and forth,” or perhaps it would better to say an “in and out” movement between individual WB and the world in which we live. It is this movement that provides one linkage between WB and the other facets of the GT proposal such as work on the structure of a GT economy and, in particular, the role of corporations in that economy. Other linkages will arise from the incorporation of the Capability Theory with its well-known links to development issues, and through the exploration of the linkage between WB, needs and values. All of this is, in my view, part of a broader “back and forth” which I hope discussion of the WB mandala will initiate.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The basic document describing the GT project is Paul Raskin et al., *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (2002). For a discussion of the Tellus Institute and its work leading up to the GT see Tellus Institute (2002), *Halfway to the Future: Reflections on the Global Condition*.
2. My current thinking about the choice between consumption and leisure, and its linkage to WB, is provided in a recent conference paper, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren: Progress and Prospects After 75 Years" (2005), presented at the Rethinking Development Conference, Saint Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. <http://www.gpiatlantic.org/conference/program.htm>.
3. In this paper I distinguished three types of WB: Physical, Subjective and Reflective. A recent review article by Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape: A Review Essay on Fogel's The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700-2100*, National Bureau of Economic Research (2005), provides an overview of the first type. The second and third types are addressed in the articles on "happiness" in *Daedalus*, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (Spring 2004). See, in particular, the article by Biswas-Diener et al. on Subjective WB, and those by Annas and Nussbaum on what I refer to as Reflective WB.
4. The basic reference for Jung's discussion of mandalas is C.G. Jung, *Mandala Symbolism*, Princeton University Press (1959). The text cite appears on pages 3, 5 and 77 in that volume.
5. Use of the term "Subjective Well-Being" is well established in the literature. I selected the terms for the other two types. They correspond to what, in the essay by Kenney in Stuart McCready, ed. "*The Discovery of Happiness*" SourceBooks, Inc., Naperville, Illinois (2001), are called Welfare and Dignity. The term "Physical" seems quite apt. "Reflective" is admittedly less satisfactory.
6. The sources cited in 3. provide for a discussion of what I have referred to as Characteristics, Framework, and Metrics. See Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics*, Princeton University Press (2002), for a discussion of the "economic" approach to Subjective WB. The essay by Seligman in the *Daedalus* volume cited in 3. provides a discussion of actions leading to different types of WB.
7. The essay by Kenney cited in 5. does argue for separate types similar to those I discuss. Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, New York: The Penguin Press (2005), provides an example of a thorough going attempt to reduce everything to Subjective Well-Being. William W. Lewis, "The Power of Productivity," *The McKinsey Quarterly*, No. 2 (2004), provides a classic example of the argument that "all is prosperity."
8. Chapter 6 of Steve Rayner and Elizabeth L. Malone, eds., *Human Choices & Climate Change: Volume I – The Societal Framework*, Battelle Press (1998), provides an



overview of needs theory. The “complex web” is shown in Figure 1 in Ian Gough, *Lists and Thresholds: Comparing the Doyal-Gough Theory of Human Need with Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach* (2003).

9. Elhanan Helpman, *The Mystery of Economic Growth*, Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (2004), provides a survey of the various “social factors” found by economists to be relevant to economic growth. I use the term ecological rather than environmental economics because the latter often simply involves attempts to apply economic technologies to environmental issues, rather than an attempt to position the Economy (and Society) with Environment. (See, for example, Thomas Sterner, *Policy Instruments for Environmental and Natural Resource Management* (2003). What I have in mind is more along the lines of recent attempts to understand long-term economic and social developments by linking them to changes in the environment. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1999), and Brian Fagan, *The Long Summer: How Climate Changed Civilization* (2004), provide recent examples of this type of analysis.
10. The essay by Offer in Paul A. David and Mark Thomas, eds., *The Economic Future in Historical Perspective*, Oxford University Press (2003), provides an overview of indices and their relationship to WB.
11. The volume by Frey and Stutzer cited in 6. surveys much of the effort to “explain” Subjective WB. John F. Helliwell, *Globalization and Well-Being* (2002), provides an account of recent research by one of the leaders in the field. The review essay by Deaton cited in 3. provides a survey of key efforts related to Physical WB.
12. The movement from an analysis of the determinants of Subjective WB to policy recommendations is best illustrated by the book by Layard cited in 7. On voluntary simplicity and slowness see Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (1993); and Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (2004), respectively. The notion that voluntary simplicity is related to the search for WB is supported by studies such as those discussed by Zvestoski in Maurice J. Cohen, and Joseph Murphy, eds., *Exploring Sustainable Consumption: Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences* (2001).
13. Work using the Body Mass Index, as well as more detailed studies such as those linking calories from fat to average national income (i.e., GDP per capita) support the first point. See the review article cited in 3. For a discussion of the “double dividend” see the paper by Jackson in Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, Volume 9 Number 1-2, Winter/Spring (2005), as well as my paper cited in 2. I plan to address the third point in a subsequent paper.
14. For a description of Sen’s theory, see his essay in Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life*, New York: Oxford University Press (1993). Nussbaum’s work is described in this volume and in the paper by Gough cited in 8.