Chris Heathwood
10 Subjective Theories of Well-Being

1. The Topic of Well-Being

Classical hedonistic utilitarianism makes the following claims: that our fundamental moral obligation is to make the world as good as we can make it (consequentialism); that the world is made better just when the creatures in it are made better off (welfarism); and that creatures are made better off just in case they receive a greater balance of pleasure over pain (hedonism). The third of these claims is essentially a theory of well-being. Other forms of utilitarianism make use of different accounts of well-being, but whatever the version of utilitarianism, well-being appears in the foundations. Thus a complete examination of utilitarianism includes a study of well-being.

We can get at our topic in more familiar ways as well, and our topic is of interest independently of the role it plays in utilitarian theory. We can get at our topic by taking note of some obvious facts: that some lives go better than others; that some things that befall us in life are good, and others bad; that certain things are harmful to people and others beneficial. Each of these facts involves the concept of well-being, or welfare, or of a life going well for the person living it. Many other familiar expressions – 'quality of life', 'a life worth living', 'the good life', 'in one's best interest', 'What's in it for me?' – involve the same notion. We thus make claims about well-being all the time. Such claims naturally give rise to a philosophical question: What is it that makes a life go well or badly for the person living it?

Our question is not the perhaps more familiar question, What sorts of things *tend to cause* people to be better or worse off? It's interesting to investigate whether people's lives are made better by, say, winning the lottery, spending less time on the internet, or having children. But these are not the sorts of questions that philosophers of well-being ask. If your life would be made better by winning the lottery, this is due to the effects that winning the lottery would have on other features of your life, such as on your ability to pay for college or on the sorts of vacations you could take (and the value of these latter things might similarly lie wholly in their effects). But in the philosophy of well-being, we are trying to figure out what things are *in themselves* in our interest to have. We are asking what things are *intrinsically* good or bad for people, as opposed to what things are merely *instrumentally* good or bad for people.

Nor is our question, What things make *the world* intrinsically better or worse? The philosophical question of welfare is the question of what things are intrinsically good *for people*, and other subjects of welfare. But we also make claims about what things are good *period*, or good "from the point of view of the Universe."[1] For example, some people believe that it is good in itself when something beautiful exists, even when no one will ever observe it. Whether or not this view is correct, philosophers of well-being aren't asking about this kind of value. But it is easy to confuse it with well-being, because the clearest example of something that makes the world better is someone's having things go better for him or her. The claim that it's good when things go well for someone is not trivial, however. The easiest way to see this is to notice that it may have exceptions. It may fail to be a good thing, for example, when wicked people are well off; perhaps it would be better if they were badly off.

Finally, our question is not, What sort of life makes for a *morally* good life? It seems that we can easily imagine someone leading a morally upstanding life that turns out to be of no benefit to her. But even if we became persuaded, through philosophical argument, that this is not possible, perhaps because moral virtue is its own reward, it still seems that being well off and being moral are distinct phenomena.

It hardly needs arguing that the question of what makes a person's life go well is important. First, the question is just inherently interesting, and worth studying in its own right, even if answering it were relevant to no other important questions. It also has obvious practical implications: most of us want to get a good life, and knowing what one is might help us get one. Aside from these direct reasons to be interested, our topic is relevant to many of the most important questions we as people face. Most obviously, it is relevant to our moral obligations. This is of course true if utilitarianism is true, but it is no less true otherwise. For on any plausible moral theory, the effects that an act would have on the welfare of people and other animals is at least one morally relevant consideration. Utilitarianism stands out in claiming that well-being is the *only* basic morally relevant factor. Well-being also matters for politics. When deciding which political systems, institutions, and laws we ought to adopt, one obviously relevant factor is how well people will fare under the possible schemes. Well-being relates also to justice. One kind of justice, for instance, involves distributing welfare according to desert. The concept of well-being is also tied up with many virtues and vices, moral and non-moral. For example, a considerate person is one who frequently considers the interests of others, while a selfish person does this insufficiently. A person who can delay gratification for the sake of her long-term interests is a prudent person (this is why 'prudential value' is yet another synonym for 'well-being'). Welfare is probably also conceptually connected to each of the following phenomena: love, empathy, care, envy, pity, dread, reward, punishment, compassion, hatred, and malice. Seeing the connections that the concept of welfare has to other concepts can even help us identify the very concept we mean to be asking about in the first place.

2. Subjective vs. Objective Theories of Well-Being

2.1 The Distinction

One way to begin answering the question of what makes a person's life go well for him or her is simply to produce a list of things whose presence in our lives seems to make them better. Here is an incomplete list of some possibilities:

enjoyment
freedom
happiness
being respected
knowledge
health
achieving one's goals
friendship
getting what one wants
being a good person
being in love
creative activity
contemplating important questions
aesthetic appreciation
excelling at worthwhile activities.

Most or all of these have opposites that are intuitively bad, but to keep things simpler, we'll focus on the good things.

Something interesting about our list above is that all of the items on it are things that most people *enjoy*, and *want* in their lives. They are things we have positive attitudes towards (or, in some cases, they *just are* positive attitudes). This raises a question that is among the deepest and most central to the philosophical study of well-being: Are the things on the list above good solely in virtue of the positive attitudes that we have towards them, or do they benefit us whether or not we have these attitudes towards them? As Socrates might have put the question, Do we want these things in our lives because it is good to have them, or is it good to have them in our lives because we want them?[2] This is essentially the question of whether well-being is objective or subjective. Subjectivists maintain that something can benefit a person only if he wants it, likes it, cares about it, or it otherwise connects up in some important way with some positive attitude of his. Objectivists deny this, holding that at least some of the things that make our lives better do so independently of our particular interests, likes, and cares.

What do we mean by 'positive attitude'? We mean to include attitudes of favoring something, wanting it, caring about it, valuing it, believing it valuable, liking it, trying to get it, having it as a goal, being fond of it, being for it, having an interest in it, and the like. Philosophers call these 'pro-attitudes'.[3] Not all subjective theories of well-being hold that all the attitudes just listed are relevant to well-being. A particular subjective theory will often single out one of them as *the* pro-attitude that is required for a person to be benefitted.

In section 3, we will survey some of the particular varieties of subjective theory; in the remainder of this section, we'll look at what is perhaps the most important reason for preferring the general subjective approach as well as a central reason for preferring an objective theory. In the process of doing this, we will further clarify the distinction between subjective and objective theories of well-being.

2.2. General Considerations in Support of Subjectivism

Perhaps the main reason to think that the subjective approach is right is that there is a strong, widely-shared intuition that suggests that the subjective approach is correct. This intuition is expressed in a frequently quoted passage by the philosopher Peter Railton:

> It does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.[4]

Many share Railton's intuition. If we do, and if our evaluative intuitions are a guide to the truth about value, then this gives us reason to think that the subjective approach to well-being is the correct one. For Railton's intuition seems to be more or less just another way of putting the subjective approach.

If this sounds question-begging against the objectivist, a related way for the subjectivist to support her view is to elicit a similar intuition, but about a particular case. This might seem less question-begging. Here is such a case:

> Henry reads a philosophy book that makes an impression on him. The author defends an objective theory of well-being that includes many of the items on our sample list above. Henry wants to get a good life, and so he goes about trying to acquire these things. For example, to increase his knowledge – one of the basic, intrinsic goods of life, according to the author – Henry reads a textbook on entomology and acquires a vast knowledge of insects. Henry finds, however, that this new knowledge, as he puts it, "does nothing for me." He pursued it only because the author recommended it, and

> he can muster no enthusiasm for what he has learned, or for the fact that he has learned it. He in no way cares that he has all this new knowledge, and he never will care. It has no practical application to anything in his life, and it never will.

Now ask yourself, Was Henry benefitted by gaining this vast knowledge of entomology? The subjectivist expects that your judgment will be that, No, Henry was not benefitted. If so, this supports subjectivism over objectivism about well-being. For objectivists who affirm the intrinsic value of knowledge are committed to saying that Henry was in fact benefitted by gaining this knowledge.

Objectivists who don't include knowledge on their list avoid this particular counterexample, but they will postulate other intrinsic goods, such as, say, freedom. The subjectivist will then ask us to imagine a new case: a case of someone who dutifully increases her share of the putative good – perhaps she moves to a state with fewer laws restricting her freedom – but who finds that she just doesn't care about having this new alleged good, and that it doesn't get her anything else that she cares about, wants, or likes. Because the putative good in question is objective – i.e., it bears no necessary connection to positive attitudes on the part of a subject who has it – it will always be possible for it to leave some people cold. If we share the intuition that such people receive no benefit when they receive the alleged good, we have a counterexample to the objective theory in question.

Some putative goods on the list above are not objective. Consider happiness, or at least one kind of happiness: being happy about something in your life, such as your job. Being happy about your job does bear a necessary connection to a positive attitude of yours, because being happy about your job *is* one such attitude. Being happy about your job *can't* leave you cold, since the very attitude of being happy about your job is an attitude of finding something to some degree compelling or attractive. Thus we cannot construct a case analogous to the case of Henry about the putative good of being happy. This won't help objectivists, of course, since a theory that claims that the single, fundamental human good is *being happy* is a subjective rather than an objective theory.

Other putative goods on the list above are clearly objective. Knowledge, if an intrinsic welfare good, is an objective one because it need not connect up in any way with our pro-attitudes. Note that this is true even though knowledge is (at least in part) a mental state. Thus it is a mistake to understand the objective/subjective distinction as it is used in the philosophy of well-being as involving merely the distinction between states of the world and states of mind. To be a subjectivist about well-being, it is not enough to hold that well-being is wholly determined by subjective states, or mental states. It has to be the right kind of subjective state – a "pro" or "con" mental state.

2.3. Further Clarification of the Distinction

It is worth making a further clarification about subjectivism. As we noted earlier, a Socratic way to think of subjectivism about well-being is as the view that things are good for people in virtue of the pro-attitudes they take towards those things. We also said that the theory that happiness is the good is a subjective theory. But consider someone who, while very happy about many things, never stops to consider her own happiness, and so never takes up any pro- or con-attitudes towards it. If the Socratic way of understanding subjectivism is literally correct, then the happiness theory will count as a form of objectivism! For, as this example illustrates, it's possible on this theory for something (namely, being happy) to be good for someone without her taking up any pro-attitudes towards that thing.

One way to try to handle this is to reject the Socratic understanding of subjectivism as too narrow, and to hold that

> a theory is subjective just in case it implies the following: that something is intrinsically good for someone just in case either (i) she has a certain pro-attitude towards it, or (ii) it itself involves a certain pro-attitude of hers towards something.

This criterion counts the happiness theory as a subjective theory because, on the happiness theory, the only thing that is intrinsically good for people is a thing – their being happy about something – that itself involves their own pro-attitudes towards something (their being happy about something *just is* a pro-attitude towards something). This will be our official understanding of subjectivism about well-being. Objectivism about well-being is the view that at least one fundamental, intrinsic human good does not involve any pro-attitudes on the part of the subject.

2.4. General Considerations in Support of Objectivism

One motivation for being an objectivist about well-being is that it just sounds plausible to say that things like freedom, respect, knowledge, health, and love make our lives better. But we have to be careful. Subjectivists can agree with this plausible thought, since they know that most people have pro-attitudes towards these things, or at least that these things cause most people to have pro-attitudes (such as happiness or enjoyment) towards other things. Thus when these people get the things on the list above, their lives will be made better even according to subjectivism. To put it another way, subjectivists hold that the things on this list are typically *instrumentally* good for us to have, and hope to fully account for their intuitive value in this way.

However, some objectivists will continue to insist that the value of at least some such items is intrinsic and attitude-independent. In support of this, they might offer the following kind of argument against subjectivism. It begins by imagining someone who has bizarre interests, or, perhaps more effectively, base or immoral interests. Thus, John Rawls "imagine[s] someone whose only pleasure is to count blades of grass in … park squares and well-trimmed lawns."[5] G.E. Moore compares "the state of mind of a drunkard, when he is intensely pleased with breaking crockery" to "that of a man who is fully realising all that is exquisite in the tragedy of King Lear."[6] As an example of a morally corrupt interest, we can imagine a pedophile engaging in the immoral activities he very much wants to be engaging in. Finally, Thomas Nagel has us "[s]uppose an intelligent person receives a brain injury that reduces him to the mental condition of a contented infant, and that such desires as remain to him are satisfied by a custodian, so that he is free from care." Nagel claims that "[s]uch a development would be widely regarded as a severe misfortune, not only for his friends and relations, or for society, but also, and primarily, for the person himself. … He is the one we pity, though of course he does not mind his condition. . . ."[7]

According to the objection, subjective theories are committed to the following: that Rawls' grass-counter can get a great life by doing nothing more than counting blades of grass all day; that, so long as the amount of pleasure is the same between the two cases, it is just as well, in terms of how good it makes your life, to break crockery while drunk as it is to appreciate great art; that it is, at least considered in itself, a great good for the pedophile when he molests children; and that the brain injury victim has in fact suffered no misfortune, so long as the desires that remain to him are well enough satisfied. But, the argument continues, surely claims such as these are absurd. One kind of evidence for this may be that we would not want someone we love, such as our own child, to live a life like any of the lives imagined here. We can avoid these putatively implausible claims by including objective elements into our theory of well-being, such as that exposure to great art is intrinsically good for people or that engaging in immoral activities is intrinsically bad for people.

To these objections, some subjectivists (including Rawls himself) "bite the bullet." They think that, on reflection, such lives in fact can be good *for the people living them*. After all, these activities are just the sorts of activities they want to be doing, and like doing. This may be easier to swallow when we remind ourselves that accepting such a claim does not commit one to the view that these lives are *morally good*, or that they manifest *excellence*, or that they are good in other ways that are distinct from their being beneficial to those living them.

One's ultimate view concerning such cases, and concerning the considerations above in support of subjectivism, will determine where one stands on this most important philosophical question of well-being: whether to accept a subjective or an objective theory.

Before discussing specific kinds of subjective theory, it is worth mentioning a third option, one we won't have space to explore here: a hybrid of subjectivism and objectivism. According to *the hybrid theory*, well-being consists in receiving things that (i) the subject has some pro-attitude towards (or that otherwise involve pro-attitudes on the part of the subject), and that (ii) have some value, or special status, independent of these attitudes. One's life goes better not simply when one gets what one wants or likes, but when one is wanting or liking, and getting, *the right things*. These might include some of the things on our list above. It is very much worth investigating the extent to which the arguments and considerations discussed in this essay apply to hybrid theories of well-being.[8]

3. Varieties of Subjectivism

On one popular taxonomy, there are three main kinds of theory of well-being:

hedonism, according to which pleasure or enjoyment is the only thing that ultimately makes a life worth living;

the desire theory, according to which what is ultimately in a person's interest is getting what he wants, whatever it is; and

objectivism, according to which at least some of what intrinsically makes our lives better does so whether or not we enjoy it or want it.[9]

We have already discussed objectivism (and it is discussed in greater depth in the next chapter). The desire theory is the paradigmatic version of the subjective theory of well-being. Hedonism is often also classified as a subjective theory, though, as we will see, the issue is somewhat complicated. In what remains, we'll introduce and briefly explore hedonism, including how to classify it, and conclude with a lengthier treatment of the desire theory of welfare. Along the way, we'll briefly discuss two kinds of subjective theory that may or may not be covered by the above taxonomy: *eudaimonism*, the view, often associated with hedonism, that well-being consists in happiness; and *the aim achievement theory*, the view, often associated with the desire theory, that successfully achieving our aims is what makes our lives go well.

3.1 Hedonism

Hedonism is among the oldest of philosophical doctrines still discussed and defended today, dating back to the Indian philosopher Cārvāka around 600 B.C.E. and the Greek philosopher Aristippus around 400 B.C.E.[10] The notions that suffering is bad for the one suffering and enjoyment good for the one getting it are intuitive raw data that any plausible theory of well-being must accommodate. Hedonism is controversial largely because it claims that *nothing else* is of fundamental intrinsic significance to how well our lives go.

In ordinary language, the term 'hedonist' connotes a decadent, self-indulgent devotion to the gratification of sensual and gastronomic desires. But it is no part of the philosophical doctrine of hedonism that this is the way to live. Hedonism is not the egoistic view that only one's own pleasures and pains should concern one, and hedonists often emphasize the greater reliability, permanence, and freedom from painful side-effects of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral pleasures.

The most popular argument, historically speaking, for hedonism about well-being appeals to a theory of human motivation known as *psychological hedonism*.[11] According to psychological hedonism, the only thing that anyone ever desires for its own sake is his own pleasure (ignoring pain here for brevity). Thus, whenever a person desires something other than his own pleasure, he desires it as a means to his own pleasure. The argument from psychological hedonism uses this psychological claim as a premise in establishing the conclusion that the only thing that is intrinsically good for someone is his own pleasure. To move from this premise to this conclusion, the argument requires the additional, often suppressed premise that only what a person desires for its own sake is intrinsically good for him.

This argument is almost universally rejected nowadays, even by hedonists.[12] Not only does the sweeping generalization of psychological hedonism seem too simplistic, the second premise – that only what a person desires for its own sake is intrinsically good for him – is evidently an abandonment of hedonism as the fundamental truth about well-being and a move to the desire theory.

This raises the question of just what relation pleasure has to our pro-attitudes, and this, in turn, bears on the question of whether hedonism should count as an objective or a subjective theory. There are two main views of the nature of pleasure. On the *felt-quality theory*, pleasure is a single, uniform sensation or feeling, in the same general category as itch sensations or nauseous feelings (only pleasant!). On the *attitudinal theory*, pleasure fundamentally is, or involves, an attitude – a pro-attitude that we can take up towards other mental states, like itches and nauseous feelings, or states of the world.

It would seem that whether hedonism qualifies as an objective or a subjective theory depends on which general approach to the nature of pleasure is correct. If a felt-quality theory is true, and pleasure is just one feeling among others, a feeling one may or may not care about, want, or like, then pleasure, if good, would seem to be an objective good, and hedonism an objective theory of well-being. But if pleasure is instead a pro-attitude, or essentially involves some pro-attitude, then pleasure, if good, would seem to be a subjective good, and hedonism a subjective theory of well-being. It's important to recognize that the issue here isn't merely one of taxonomy. If hedonism is an objective theory, then it, like other objective theories, is committed to the perhaps counterintuitive idea that something some people may find in no way attractive, or that in no way connects to any positive attitudes of theirs, is nonetheless of benefit to them. If hedonism is a subjective theory, it avoids this implication.

If hedonism is a subjective theory, due to pleasure's being explainable in terms of some pro-attitude, does it remain a distinctive theory, or does it instead become a version of whatever kind of theory enshrines this pro-attitude? It depends upon which pro-attitude pleasure is ultimately explained in terms of. According to the contemporary hedonist Fred Feldman, all pleasure is ultimately explained in terms of the pro-attitude of *being pleased* that something is the case.[13] Since, according to Feldman, this hedonic pro-attitude cannot, in turn, be explained in terms of any other, non-hedonic attitude, Feldman's theory of pleasure allows hedonism to remain a distinctive theory. Other attitudinal theories of pleasure reduce pleasure to other kinds of attitude, most commonly desire.[14] If the desire theory of pleasure is true, then a theory claiming that pleasure is the good might be best classified as a form of the desire theory of well-being.[15] The attitudinal theory of pleasure thus holds promise for hedonism – allowing it to avoid the problems of objectivism – as well as risk – the risk that it would cease to be a distinctive theory of well-being.

Interestingly, even if hedonism turns out to be an objective theory, it still faces some of the problems of subjectivism. For whatever pleasure turns out to be, people can get it from sources pointless, base, immoral, or unfitting (see section 2.4 above). John Stuart Mill believes that hedonists can answer these objections by assigning value to pleasures on the basis not only of their intensity and duration, but their *quality* as well. He holds that intellectual, moral, and aesthetic pleasures, for example, have "a much higher value" than bodily pleasures of equal intensity and duration.[16] Thus a life full of the pleasures of studying Shakespeare could be a better life than one devoted to breaking crockery while drunk, even if the latter contains a greater *quantity* of pleasure. Mill bases his assessment of the greater value of these "higher" pleasures on the contention that people who are acquainted with both higher and lower pleasure invariably prefer the higher (though again this raises the specter of hedonism's collapse into the desire theory). Some critics charge that Mill's appeal to quality is in fact an abandonment of hedonism.[17]

Hedonism, whether it turns out to be an objective or a subjective theory, also faces an objection that is more or less distinctive to it – avoided by competing theories, subjective and objective alike. The objection exploits the fact that pleasure is a mental state, and so that on hedonism, how well one's life goes is directly determined solely by one's mental states, and not by the way the external world is. The most vivid and well-known version of this objection is based on a thought experiment by Robert Nozick:

> Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? … [W]hile in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening. … Would you plug in?[18]

If you wouldn't plug in, and if one reason you wouldn't plug in is that you think you would fare less well in such a life than in your actual, less pleasurable life, then this may show that you reject hedonism.[19]

Let us turn briefly to eudaimonism, the truistic-sounding theory that the good life is the happy life. This is in fact no truism (assuming of course that by 'a happy life' we don't simply *mean* a good life). For it, too, faces the experience machine objection as well as the problems of subjectivism more generally. In fact, given one leading theory of happiness – the view that to be happy is to have a favorable balance of pleasure over pain – hedonism and eudaimonism amount to the same view. According to a rival theory of happiness, to be happy is to be satisfied with one's life as a whole. This conception of happiness yields a different version of eudaimonism, one that comes apart from hedonism, since it is possible to be dissatisfied with a pleasant life.[20]

3.2. The Desire Theory

A person living her life on an experience machine will, unbeknownst to her, get little of what she wants. While some of our desires concern our experiences (we desire the taste of some food, or for some itch to be gone), many of our desires concern states of the external world (we desire to climb some mountain, or to be loved by someone). These latter kinds of desire will go unsatisfied on the experience machine (although unbeknownst to the subject). According to the desire or preference satisfaction theory of welfare, well-being consists in getting what one wants. On this theory, a life on the experience machine will be in many ways worse than an ordinary life, in which many desires about the external world are satisfied. The desire theory of welfare thus evidently avoids the experience machine objection.

Perhaps the earliest discussion of the desire theory of any depth is found in Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*, though it may have been endorsed centuries earlier by Thomas Hobbes and also Baruch Spinoza.[21] It gained prominence in the twentieth century with the rise of welfare economics and decision theory, where preference theories of well-being or utility are often simply assumed. Economists may be motivated to assume the theory because it is thought to make well-being more easily measurable than it would be on hedonism, since our desires are thought to be revealed through our choices, especially in free markets. Others have been motivated to accept the desire theory rather than an objective theory because they believe the former to fit better with a naturalistic worldview. Objective theories that posit more than one basic good also face a problem concerning how to compare goods of very different kinds. Monistic theories like the desire theory avoid this. Today the desire theory is often regarded as the leading theory of well-being, especially among utilitarians.[22]

Another putative attraction of the desire theory is that it very straightforwardly conforms to the intuition, introduced earlier, that what is intrinsically good for a person must be something he or she finds to some degree compelling or attractive. For to desire something, whatever else it is, is surely to find it to some degree compelling or attractive. As the theory that most clearly conforms to this intuition and as the theory that makes use of what is perhaps *the* fundamental pro-attitude, the desire theory is the paradigmatic subjective theory of well-being.

The simplest version of the desire theory of welfare claims that the satisfaction of *any* of one's *actual* desires is intrinsically good for one. This unrestricted, actualist theory is seldom defended. Perhaps the most common departure from it counts only the satisfaction of *intrinsic* desires, or desires for things for their own sakes, rather than for what they might lead to.[23] When we get what we merely instrumentally want, it's natural to suppose that this is, at best, of mere instrumental value.

Philosophers have considered many other restrictions, such as restrictions to *self-regarding desires* (or desires about oneself),[24] *global desires* (or desires about one's whole life),[25] and *second-order desires* (or desires about one's desires).[26] Some of these will come up when we discuss objections to the desire approach, to which we now turn.

If what's good for us is what we want, then whatever we want is good for us. But surely we sometimes want things that turn out to be no good for us. The most common kind of case involves ignorance. For example, I might have a desire to eat some food, not knowing that it will cause a severe allergic reaction in me, or I might want to see some band perform in concert, not knowing that they will perform terribly. The desire theory seems to imply, mistakenly, that satisfying these ill-informed desires is in my interests.

The lesson that many philosophers draw from such cases is that well-being is connected not to our actual desires but to our *idealized* desires.[27] These are the desires we would have if we knew all the relevant facts, were appreciating them vividly, were making no mistakes in reasoning, and the like. The idealized desire theory of well-being can claim that it is no benefit to me to eat the allergenic food or attend the bad concert because I would not have wanted these things it if I knew all the relevant facts, were appreciating them vividly, and the like. For on this theory, only satisfying my idealized wants benefits me.

Some may hold out hope that the move to idealized desires can solve other problems as well. Perhaps it can provide a solution not only to cases of desires based on mistaken beliefs and the like, but to other sorts of putatively defective desire. Recall the earlier cases of the people who desire to count blades of grass, to break crockery while drunk, or to abuse children. Some desire theorists might be tempted to claim that satisfying these desires is of no benefit because no one who knew all the relevant facts, was appreciating them vividly, was making no mistakes in reasoning, etc. would desire such things. But one has to be careful. This move runs the risk of turning the desire theory into an objective theory of well-being in subjectivist clothing. It is not open to idealized desire theorists to claim that part of what it is to be idealized is to desire *the right things*, that is, the things it is good to get no matter your desires. That is closet objectivism. The conditions of idealization must be stated in value-neutral terms, and without reference to things that were identified via a belief in their objective welfare value.

Returning to the original objection of putatively defective desires, it is actually not obvious that it succeeds in the first place.[28] Consider the case of the allergenic food. I desire to eat it, not knowing that it will make me sick. The objection claims that the actualist desire theory is committed to saying that it is nonetheless in my interests to satisfy this desire. But consider two things we might have in mind when we say that it is in my interests to satisfy some desire. We might mean that it is in my interests *all things considered* – that is, taking all the effects of satisfying the desire into account. Or we might mean merely that it is good in itself – intrinsically good – to satisfy the desire. The objection assumes, plausibly, that it is not in my interests *all things considered* to satisfy my desire to eat the food. But it seems that the actualist desire theory can accommodate this. For if I satisfy my desire to eat the food, this will cause many of my other actual desires – desires not to be in pain, desires to play golf, etc. – to be frustrated. All that the actualist desire theory is committed to is the claim that it is good *in itself* for me to satisfy my desire to eat the food. But this claim is not implausible. Intuitively, ignoring the effects, it *is* good for me to get to eat this food I very much want to eat.

Thus, moving to an idealized theory may be less well-motivated than it originally appears. It also brings with it new problems. One family of problems concerns the concept and process of idealization.[29] Another problem is that it is possible for what I would want under ideal conditions to be totally uninteresting, or even repugnant, to me as I actually am. But idealized theories of well-being are supposed to tell us what's good for us as we actually are.[30]

The second objection that we'll consider has been called the "scope problem" for desire theories.[31] The following example by Derek Parfit illustrates the problem:

> Suppose that I meet a stranger who has what is believed to be a fatal disease. My sympathy is aroused, and I strongly want this stranger to be cured. We never meet again. Later, unknown to me, this stranger is cured. On the Unrestricted Desire-Fulfilment Theory, this event is good for me, and makes my life go better. This is not plausible. We should reject this theory.[32]

James Griffin offers a diagnosis:

> The breadth of the [desire] account, which is its attraction, is also its greatest flaw. ... It allows my utility to be determined by things that … do not affect my life in any way at all. The trouble is that one's desires spread themselves so widely over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one's well-being.[33]

A common response to this problem is thus that the desire theory should be restricted to count only desires that are about one's own life, or about oneself.[34] According to another proposal, we should count only those desires that are also among our *aims* or *goals* (thus the *aim achievement theory*).[35] Both of these proposals seem to handle Parfit's case. Parfit's desire that the stranger be cured is not about Parfit or his life. Nor is it an aim of his, since he takes no steps to try to achieve it. Thus each theory agrees that Parfit's life is made no better when the stranger is cured.

But these restrictions may exclude too much. Consider the common desire that one's team win. I don't mean a team one plays for – desires about such a team might count as desires about one's own life, and may qualify as aims – but a team one roots for from a distance. Such desires are certainly not about oneself, and presumably not about one's own life either. And that one's team win is not typically among one's aims or goals; most of us know we have no power over whether our team wins. Thus theories that exclude non-self-regarding desires and desires that are not aims imply, implausibly, that people receive no benefit when their desire that their team win is satisfied.

An alternative solution to the scope problem takes its cue from the detail that Parfit's stranger is cured *unbeknownst to him*. Perhaps the proper scope of the desire theory excludes desires the satisfaction of which we are unaware.[36] This theory gets the right result both in Parfit's case and concerning the desire that one's team win. But it's not clear that it gets to the heart of the initial worry. Here is how T.M. Scanlon presents it:

> Someone might have a desire about the chemical composition of some star, about whether blue was Napoleon's favorite color, or about whether Julius Caesar was an honest man. But it would be odd to suggest that the well-being of a person who has such desires is affected by these facts themselves.[37]

Scanlon thinks that satisfying such desires is of no benefit even when one is aware that the desires are satisfied. I leave it to the reader to decide whether this is right. Readers may also wish to reconsider the original objection. Some desire theorists maintain that the best reply is to "bite the bullet" in the first place, and maintain that Parfit's life *is* made better when the stranger is cured, even if only a little bit.[38]

The third and final problem for desire theories that we'll consider is the problem of changing desires. Our desires change over time. When the desires concern what's going on at the time of the desire, this may be no problem. Each night of the week, I want something different for dinner. In this case of changing desires, the desire theory implies that what's good for me is to get the different meal I want each evening. But some of our changing desires concern what goes on at a single time. Suppose I want, for years, to go skydiving on my 40th birthday. But as the day approaches, my interests change, and I become strongly averse to doing this.

Probably the most common reaction to this case is that it is in my interest to satisfy my *present* desire *not* to go skydiving on my 40th birthday at the expense of frustrating my past desires to go skydiving. (This is assuming that I won't later regret not having gone skydiving – that I won't have persistent desires in the future to have done it). And this reaction seems right no matter how long held and strong the past desires to go skydiving were. This suggests that, to determine what benefits a person, we ignore her past desires.[39]

However, other cases might suggest that we *should* take into account past desires. We tend to think that we ought to respect the wishes of the dead – for example concerning whether and where they will be buried. One natural view is that we do this *for their sake* – that is, for their benefit. If that's right, then the desire theory should count at least some past desires. On the other hand, many find it absurd that a person can be benefitted or harmed after he is dead. If that's right, then we must find another explanation for why we should respect the wishes of the dead, assuming that we should.

If past desires can be ignored, this suggests the view that the desire theory count only desires for what goes on at the time of the desire. As R.M. Hare, a proponent of this view, puts it, the theory "admits only now-for-now and then-for-then preferences," to the exclusion of any now-for-then or then-for-now preferences.[40]

But, as before, this might seem to exclude too much. For suppose that I do in fact strongly regret, for years, not having gone skydiving on my 40th birthday. If so, perhaps it was in my interests to force myself to go skydiving, despite my strong aversion to it at the time, for the sake of satisfying the "then-for-now" desires I would come to have. If that's right, this suggests a surprising asymmetry: the desire theory of well-being should ignore future-directed desires but count present- and past-directed desires. However the problem of changing desires is ultimately resolved, it poses questions that any subjective theory of well-being must grapple with.

* * * * *

The notion of well-being plays some part in answering most, and perhaps even literally all, moral questions. Yet there is no consensus among philosophers concerning which general kind of theory of well-being is correct, or which specific version of any general kind is best. Fortunately, we don't have to know which theory of well-being is correct in order to come to responsible answers to many of the moral questions that involve well-being. For certain kinds of act are harmful and others beneficial on all of the theories of well-being that we have considered. We can thus know that such acts are wrong or right on these bases without having to know precisely in what well-being consists. Still, a full accounting of the act's moral status would require the correct account of well-being.[41]

NOTES

---

[1] Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 420.

[2] Cf. Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a.

[3] Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, pp. 111–13.

[4] Railton, "Facts and Values," p. 9.

[5] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 432.

[6] Moore, *Ethics*, pp. 237–8.

[7] Nagel, "Death," p. 77.

[8] On hybrid theories, see Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 501–2; Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good"; and Heathwood, "Welfare," pp. 652–53.

[9] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 493.

---

[10] Mādhava Āchārya, *Sarva-Darśana-Samgraha*, pp. 2–11; Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions*, pp. 81–96.

[11] See Epicurus, *Extant Remains;* Bentham, *IMPL*, ch. 1; and Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2. See also Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, Bk. X, ch. 2; and Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions*, pp. 89–90.

[12] See Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Bk. I Ch. IV §§1–2.

[13] Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, ch. 4.

[14] Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, §125; Brandt, *Theory of the Good and the Right*, p. 38; Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire."

[15] Heathwood, "Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism."

[16] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2.

[17] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §47.

[18] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 44–45.

[19] See Railton, "Naturalism and Prescriptivity," p. 170; Crisp, "Hedonism Reconsidered," §5; and Feldman, "What We Learn from the Experience Machine" for discussions of and/or replies to the experience machine objection.

[20] Feldman, *What Is This Thing Called Happiness?* criticizes life-satisfaction theories of happiness and defends a hedonistic theory, as well as criticizes and defends, respectively, the corresponding versions of eudaimonism. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, ch. 6 defends a life-satisfaction account of happiness and a corresponding eudaimonistic theory of welfare. See also Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*.

[21] Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. IX., §3; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 30; Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. IX.

[22] See Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, p. 113; Shaw, *Contemporary Ethics*, p. 53; Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, p. 3.

[23] Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 109; von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness*, pp. 103–4.

[24] Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 112; Overvold, "Self-Interest and Getting What You Want."

[25] Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, pp. 111–2; Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 497–8; Carson, *Value and the Good Life*, pp. 73–4.

[26] Railton, "Facts and Values," p. 16; Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good," p. 40.

[27] Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, pp. 110–11; Brandt, *Theory of the Good and the Right*, p. 247.

[28] Heathwood, "The Problem of Defective Desires," pp. 491–3.

[29] Sobel, "Full-Information Accounts of Well-Being,"; Rosati, "Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of the Good."

[30] Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 11; see Railton, "Facts and Values," p. 16 for a possible solution.

[31] Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, p. 135.

[32] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 494.

[33] Griffin, *Well-Being*, pp. 16–7.

[34] Overvold, "Self-Interest and Getting What You Want"; Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 494.

[35] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 119–21.

[36] Heathwood, "Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism," pp. 547–51; Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, pp. 127–8.

[37] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 114.

[38] Lukas, "Desire Satisfactionism and the Problem of Irrelevant Desires."

[39] Brandt, *Theory of the Good and the Right*, pp. 247–53.

[40] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, pp. 101–3.

[41] Thanks to Paul Bowman, Ben Bradley, Ben Eggleston, and Dale Miller for helpful feedback on earlier drafts.