

# Welfare

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## 1. The Question of Welfare, and Its Importance

Things go better for some people than they do for other people. Some people's lives are quite good; if someone we cared about were to live such a life, this would please us. Other lives are not worth living at all; if there is no prospect for improvement in such a life, it may be rational for the person living it to end it. In virtue of what are such things true? What makes a life a good or a bad life for the person living it? What must we get in life if things are to go well for us? What does welfare or well-being consist in? What makes for quality of life? What things is it ultimately in our interest to get? These are different ways of asking the philosophical question of welfare.

Our question is not the question of what things *cause* a person's life to be going well. Psychologists, economists, and self-help books often offer advice on this question. They might tell us that things are likely to go better for us if we are married, get regular exercise, and stay in touch with friends. This may be good advice, but it does not answer the question that interests philosophers. If these things are good for us, this is due to their effects, but philosophers of welfare want to know what things are good in themselves for a person, independent of any effects. They want to know, in other words, what things are *intrinsically good* (or bad), as opposed to merely *instrumentally good* (or bad), for a person. These philosophical questions are more fundamental than the causal question; a complete justification of a claim of instrumental value must eventually appeal to some claim of intrinsic value, but not vice versa.

Nor is our question the question of what makes a situation better, or makes things go better, or makes the world a better place. In other words, the question of what things are intrinsically good *for a person* is not the question of what things are intrinsically good *period*. To illustrate, it may be that some people deserve to be badly off, and that their being badly off is a good thing. What makes such a person's life go worse for him makes the world better. Or it may be that beauty is intrinsically good, in that the existence of something beautiful, even when no one will ever enjoy it, is itself a good thing. It is easy to fail to distinguish the question of what things are intrinsically good for a person from the question of what things are intrinsically good because when someone is getting something that is intrinsically good for her, this is usually an intrinsically

good thing. According to *welfarism*, it is the only thing that makes a situation a good one.

Finally, the question of welfare is not the question of what makes a life a *morally good* life. For surely it is possible for bad things to happen to good people, for the wicked to prosper, and for nice guys to finish last. Even if we became persuaded, as many ancient philosophers were, that there is some necessary connection between moral virtue and well-being, it would still not follow that *what it is* to be a good person is the same thing as what it is to get a good life.

The question of welfare is inherently interesting and important, and worth our attention in its own right. But the concept of welfare plays important roles in moral and evaluative thought, and deserves our interest for this reason, too. The two most intuitively plausible principles of conduct – those of *beneficence* and *non-maleficence* – instruct us, respectively, to benefit others (raise their welfare) and to refrain from harming others (from diminishing their welfare). Principles of *justice* that enjoin us to distribute according to desert, often enjoin us to distribute *welfare* according to desert. In similar fashion, welfare will play a role in explicating the *personal virtues* of benevolence and justice, not to mention compassion, kindness, mercy, and prudence. Welfare is often thought to be the *object of moral consideration*, in that, when we are taking someone (or something, such as an animal) into account morally, it is her (or its) welfare we are looking after. The promotion of our own welfare is what *rational self-interest* demands, and the promotion of the general welfare is what, according to *utilitarianism*, morality demands. When we want to *reward* or *punish* a person, it is his welfare that we ultimately want to affect. When we *envy* a person, we envy the good things in his life. Finally, a person's welfare is what those who *care* about him will look after. We cannot hope to have a full understanding of any of these important topics or concepts in ethics without an understanding of the nature of welfare. Furthermore, appreciating the ties the notion of welfare has to these central concepts in our moral thinking helps us to identify in the first place the notion that this essay is about.

## 2. The Main Kinds of Answer

A reasonable way to begin answering the question of welfare may be to produce a list of initially plausible intrinsic goods and bads, the presence of which seems to make a life more or less desirable to live. A first pass at a list of goods might include happiness, knowledge, friendship, freedom, rational activity, creative activity, and being respected (cf. the lists in Ross 1930: 134-41 and Frankena 1973: 87-8). It seems sensible to want such things in our lives. This

pluralistic (partial) theory of welfare is an instance of the *objective list theory*, so-called because the items on the list are put forth as good for a person independently of her particular predilections (Parfit 1984: 4).

One concern for objective list theories, at least if they are pluralistic, is that of comparability between the different goods on the list. A complete theory of welfare should include principles specifying how the value of a whole life is determined by the values of the various goods in the life. This seems to require that all the goods in life be measurable on a single scale so that, for instance, the knowledge acquired from reading some newspaper article might have the same intrinsic value for the person in question as the freedom gained each day when speed limits are raised. Even if we put aside the question of how we might come to know the relative values of such goods, some philosophers doubt whether there is even any fact of the matter here to be known.

A second issue is a challenge to explain why just these items are the ones that belong on the list. What makes them so special? The most satisfying answer would involve a criterion for inclusion on the list. Such a principle would reveal in virtue of what the things that are good for us are good for us. It would also give the theory a kind of unity it otherwise lacks. Although it is worth trying to meet this challenge, we should be open to the possibility that there are just several basic human goods whose status as goods cannot be explained in terms of any overarching principle.

One kind of objective list theory that answers this challenge is *perfectionism*, which contends (on some versions) that what is fundamentally good for us is to cultivate those features essential to and/or distinctive of human beings (Hurka 1993). On one reading of Aristotle, the very best human life is a life of contemplation, and this is so because the ability to engage in intellectual contemplation is a central facet of human nature.

A deeper problem for objective theories of well-being arises when we consider people who haven't the slightest interest in the items on the objective list, and seem, when they receive these things, to get nothing out of it. Imagine a person who finds the highest forms of intellectual activity completely hollow. He is much happier doing carpentry, which he does for a living, and playing softball, which he does after work. It is hard to believe that such a person gets a life that is in any way better *for him* if he goes through the motions and studies organic chemistry for its own sake. It doesn't seem that those who love him and are concerned about his quality of life would encourage him to do this.

Another way to get at this point is to consider the notions of punishment and reward, which seem bound up with the notions of harm and benefit. If an objective list theory is true, then although one way to reward a person may be to

give him something he would love (since an objective list can include the subjective good of getting something one loves, so long as it also includes objective goods), another perfectly good way to reward a person is to give him an objective good he couldn't care less about. But this is not how we go about rewarding people.

This objection to the objective list theory of welfare should not be confused with analogous objections to objective theories of other phenomena in ethics, such as impersonal value, or moral obligation. If, for example, it is an intrinsically good thing for there to be people who are morally virtuous, the fact that some person would not regard his own virtue as any kind of reward is no objection to this view. It very well may be no reward for him, but this is no objection to the view that it is an intrinsically good thing, impersonally speaking, that he be virtuous. The problem arises for objective theories of welfare because welfare is a subject-relative kind of value: it is value *for* some subject. For this reason, it seems plausible that something can contribute to a person's well-being only if it bears some connection to what the person cares about.

One of the most popular arguments, historically, concerning welfare is the argument from psychological hedonism. Psychological hedonism is the doctrine that the only thing human beings ever desire or care about for its own sake ("intrinsically desire") is their own pleasure, and the only thing to which human beings are ever intrinsically averse is their own pain. This empirical thesis is to be contrasted with the evaluative thesis of *welfare hedonism*, the view that the only thing that is fundamentally intrinsically good for us is our own pleasure and the only thing intrinsically bad for us is our own pain. The great historical hedonists – Epicurus, Bentham, Mill – believe that the psychological claim establishes the evaluative claim: the fact that our own pleasure is the sole object of our intrinsic desire shows that our own pleasure is our sole intrinsic good (Bentham 1789: 1-2; Mill 1863: 35-6).

The argument from psychological hedonism seems to rely on the criterion that whatever a person intrinsically desires is intrinsically good for that person. This thought fits naturally with (perhaps it just is) the thought that motivated the main problem above for objective list theories, which is the idea that what is good for a person must connect up in some important way with her particular interests.

Hedonism is one of the simplest, oldest, and historically most popular answers to the question of what makes a person's life go well for him or her. In its simplest form, it holds

- that all pleasures are intrinsically good and all pains intrinsically bad for the person experiencing them;

- that the value of an episode of pleasure or pain for the person experiencing it is a function of the intensity and duration of the pleasure or pain; and
- that how good a life is for the person who lives it is equal to the balance of pleasure over pain in the life (Feldman 2004: 25-30).

Because it is a form of monism about welfare, hedonism is a satisfyingly unified theory. Hedonists can account for the apparent plurality of goods in life (such as appear on the sample objective list above) by appeal to the instrumental value of these things. Knowledge, friendship, freedom, etc. are good because it makes us happy to have these things. But, the hedonist will insist, for the rare individuals who derive no pleasure from such things, they are worthless.

Also because hedonism is a form of monism, there is less of a problem of comparability between goods. We can compare the value for some person of gaining some piece of knowledge with the value of gaining some amount of freedom by determining the effect of each on the person's pleasure and pain. Although such determinations are difficult in practice, fewer people doubt that there are facts of the matter here to be discovered.

In the popular imagination, hedonists are people devoted to sensual pleasures and instant gratification. But the philosophical doctrine of hedonism does not imply that we ought to live this way. Most hedonists believe that we ought to look out for the welfare of others in addition to our own. Furthermore, it is far from clear that a dedication to instant bodily gratification is the best way to maximize, in the long run, the balance of pleasure over pain in one's life. Hedonists emphasize the greater reliability of intellectual pleasures, as well as the tendency of bodily indulgence to bring with it hangovers, bellyaches, addiction, and other sources of suffering. Some hedonists have even maintained that intellectual pleasures are *intrinsically* more valuable than bodily pleasures of equal intensity and duration (Mill 1863: 7-11), though critics have doubted whether such a claim is in fact consistent with hedonism (Moore 1903: §48).

We should distinguish hedonism, the view that the good life is the pleasurable life, from *eudaimonism*, the view that the good life is the happy life. If to be happy just is to have a favorable balance of pleasure over pain, then hedonism and eudaimonism are equivalent (Mill 1863: 7). But on another popular theory of the nature of happiness, to be happy is to be satisfied with one's life as whole (Sumner 1996: 145-146). If this or another non-hedonistic theory of happiness is true, hedonism and eudaimonism about welfare diverge.

One of the oldest objections to hedonism is the argument from base pleasures (Aristotle c. 330 BCE: 253). Imagine the pleasure received by a member of the Ku Klux Klan during a lynching or a child molester during a rape. Such pleasures

seem positively bad. Hedonists may reply, however, that while such pleasures are reprehensible morally speaking, and come with horrific causes and effects, this is compatible with the pleasure, just considered in itself, being good for the person experiencing it. Furthermore, the view that such pleasures are good for the person experiencing them may actually help explain why these cases are so offensive: the person is receiving a *good* he doesn't deserve.

Another problem for hedonism has been made vivid with a science-fiction device called an experience machine, which gives its users perfect replicas of real-life experiences (Nozick 1974: 42-5). Consider some fine human life, replete with real relationships, real achievements, and a real awareness of what is going on. Compare it to a life on the experience machine that is indistinguishable "from the inside." Which life would you prefer to lead, just taking yourself into account? Which life would you prefer your child to lead? Although the lives are on a par hedonically, many people believe the first life to be preferable to the second. This intuition is not universal, however; some insist that "what you don't know can't hurt you," and that our intuitions may here be distorted by the fact that if one knew one was on the experience machine, one would be upset, and this would make one's life worse (as hedonism of course recognizes). Critics reply, however, that hedonists are unable to explain why such a discovery *should* make us upset (Nagel 1970: 76).

The final problem for hedonism we will discuss is a version of the main problem we discussed for objective list theories. Imagine a person who has little interest in pleasure, and who is prepared to forgo it for the sake of the things she really wants in life. Suppose, for example, she wants to climb all of the tallest peaks in the world. It seems plausible that how well things go for this person is a function not of how much pleasure and pain her life contains – she doesn't care about that – but of the extent to which she achieves this and other goals. The original complaint against objective list theories – that it fails to respect people's differing interests in life – may therefore be a double-edged sword for hedonists. If it moves us from an objective theory to hedonism, shouldn't it also move us away from hedonism, since it is possible for people to be interested in things other than pleasure (the argument from psychological hedonism notwithstanding)?

Recall the criterion that the argument from psychological hedonism assumes: that whatever a person intrinsically desires is intrinsically good for that person. Some hedonists believe this claim helps establish hedonism. But if such a claim is true, it seems we should instead maintain that welfare has to do most fundamentally with desire rather than with pleasure. Even if psychological hedonism is true, surely this is just a contingent fact about our psychology, making welfare hedonism a contingent truth at best. The deep truth about

welfare would still be that welfare consists in getting what one wants. This is *preferentism* about welfare.

Preferentism is emphatically not the view that welfare consists in the feelings of satisfaction one has when one gets what one wants. For a desire to be satisfied, all that need happen is that the state of affairs desired in fact comes about. When a desire is satisfied, this often gives rise to feelings of satisfaction, and we often prefer to experience such feelings rather than not. So this will be a further good according to preferentism. But such feelings will have no value in themselves, apart from being desired.

Preferentism epitomizes the idea we have been discussing that one's good must be connected to what one cares about. It thus avoids the objection that applies to both hedonism and the objective list theory. Preferentism also nicely handles the experience machine problem. It does not imply that the two lives considered above in connection with this case are equally good, for the life on the machine contains far less desire satisfaction. This person will have desires for real relationships and really to do certain things, but, hooked up the machine, these desires will go unsatisfied. Preferentism has also been attractive to empirically-minded theorists of welfare, such as economists, who seek a theory that makes welfare amenable to measurement. The thought is that one's preferences, unlike private feelings of pleasure and pain, are observable relatively directly, through one's choices.

But preferentism faces problems, too. One problem is that we have desires for things so remote from our lives that it seems implausible to hold that having them satisfied makes any difference to how well our lives go (Parfit 1984: 494; Griffin 1986: 16-17). Consider some random person, past, present, or future, who will remain forever unknown to you, and ask which you prefer: that he suffers from migraine headaches, or that he doesn't. I assume you prefer that he doesn't. Suppose, as a matter of fact, the person you picked doesn't suffer in this way. Preferentism implies that this fact is good *for you* and makes *your* life go better, but that is hard to believe. Some preferentists believe this shows that the theory should be restricted to count only those preferences that are about our own lives, or are "self-regarding" (Overvold 1982; Parfit 1986: 494-5). But when Red Sox fans got their heart's desire as their team won the World Series, surely this was a good thing in these fans' lives, even though the desire involved – that the Red Sox win – was not self-regarding.

A different solution holds that it is of no value to us when the stranger avoids migraines because, although we prefer that he doesn't, it is no *goal* or *aim* of ours that he not suffer in this way. This is in fact not a preferentist solution – it is a move to a different, albeit similar, theory: *aim achievementism* (Scanlon 1998: 118-23). This theory holds that welfare consists not in satisfying one's desires but in

achieving one's aims. Aim achievementism seems particularly well-suited to respect our intuitions about what would make things turn out well for the rock climber we imagined earlier.

Aim achievementism, however, may face the Red Sox objection just discussed, since it doesn't seem correct to say that it is an aim or goal of Red Sox fans that the Red Sox win – it is just a very strong desire. Aim achievementists also seem poorly suited to accommodate a certain datum concerning welfare: that suffering is bad for those who suffer. Hedonism obviously accommodates this datum. Preferentists can, too, by appealing to the desire theory of the nature of pleasure and pain, according to which, roughly, for an experience to be a painful experience is for it to be one its subject has a desire not to be having. Since, given this view, pain and suffering always involve desire frustration, preferentists can accommodate, and even explain, the badness of suffering. But since it doesn't seem that suffering typically constitutively involves the frustration of aims, aim achievementism may be unable to make room for the seemingly undeniable truth that suffering is intrinsically bad for those who suffer. It should be noted that neither of these objections to aim achievementism is an objection to the more modest thesis that the achievement of aims is merely *one of* the intrinsic personal goods.

Returning to preferentism, another problem for preferentists concerns desires based on false beliefs or on failures to appreciate properly the objects of one desires. Suppose I have a desire to drink the stuff in the glass before me. I believe it to be water, but in fact it is sulfuric acid. Surely satisfying this desire would not be good for me. The most common way preferentists deal with this problem is by modifying the theory to count only the desires one would have if one were fully informed, thinking clearly, vividly appreciating the relevant facts, and in other ways idealized. This modification brings with it a new problem, however. My ideal self, with his otherworldly powers of appreciation, might prefer things – caviar, experimental music – that my actual self hates. Surely it is of no benefit to me as I actually am to receive such things (Griffin 1986: 11).

A third problem for preferentism mirrors a problem for hedonism. If base pleasures don't make us better off, then neither should the satisfaction of base desires. Preferentists may be tempted to appeal again to the idealization strategy to avoid this problem. They may want to say that no one who was thinking clearly and appreciating the relevant facts would have racist or pedophilic desires. They might further add that those who appreciate matters aright want things like knowledge, friendship, creative activity, etc. Two problems arise here. First, one of the main motivations for preferentism – that what is good for us must be connected to what we actually care about – has evidently been abandoned. Second, one can't help but suspect that purveyors of such theories

are just closet objective list theorists. Driving their view about when a desire is ideal may be intuitions about when what is desired would be a good thing to get.

We have thus come full circle, back to the objective list theory. One way we can stop the dialectic from repeating itself is to introduce yet another option, *the hybrid theory*, which combines objective and subjective elements (Parfit 1984: 501-2; Adams 1999: 93-101; Darwall 1999: 176-96; Feldman 2004: 119-22). On this approach, things are going well for us when we are enjoying (or having some other specified attitude towards) things that have some value independent of this attitude. The hybrid theorist cannot say, as a pure objective list theorist will say, that the items on her objective list are the things that are intrinsically good for the people who get them. But she might instead say that the items on her objective list are the things that are, say, inherently worthy of being enjoyed. Combine something inherently worthy of being enjoyed with enjoyment of it, and this is a good thing for the person doing the enjoying.

Evaluating the hybrid theory involves, among other things, assessing to what degree it is open to any of the original objections against the theories it is hybridizing. Two concerns for pure objective list theories – comparability between items on the list and criteria for inclusion on the list – remain. The third problem we discussed for objective list theories – the one concerning the plausible connection between what is good for one and what one cares about – is certainly mitigated in the hybrid theory. But it may not be eliminated entirely. Imagine a hybrid theory according to which the music of Miles Davis is most worthy of being enjoyed while the music of Madonna is only somewhat worthy. Suppose that we want to reward a friend for some favor, and that our friend would be ecstatic to attend a performance of Madonna’s music but would only mildly enjoy attending a performance of Miles Davis’ music. We want to do what would give our friend the best evening for her. So long as we describe the case properly, the hybrid theory will imply that we benefit our friend most by sending her to hear Miles Davis’ music rather than Madonna’s. But that seems wrong, and is not how we conceive of rewarding people and benefiting friends. Although the hybrid theory avoids much of the objectionable paternalism of pure objective list theories, it may not avoid all of it.

There is no consensus among philosophers which, if any, of the six broad approaches described above,

- objective list theory
- hedonism
- eudaimonism
- preferentism
- aim achievementism
- the hybrid theory

is correct. But this disagreement should not worry us unduly. Serious, sustained inquiry into this topic by a relatively large group of people is a new phenomenon in human intellectual history. The deep disagreement of today may not be a sign of intractable disagreement. Also, it's not as if the many inquiries in moral philosophy in which welfare figures need to be put on hold until the true theory of welfare has been discovered. We don't need to know the correct theory of welfare to know, for instance, that malnutrition and disease are bad for people and that eliminating such evils is praiseworthy.

### **3. How Should I Live My Life?**

Moral philosophy's first question is, How should one live? Most of us agree that, in living our lives, we ought to be concerned with how our choices affect others – and not only because of the effects that this, in turn, will have on us. But even if we set this factor aside, there remains the question of what I ought to do, just taking myself into account. One answer is that I ought to do whatever would benefit me most, or maximize my own well-being. Indeed, the claim that, just taking myself into account, I ought to promote my own well-being, may seem to be something of a tautology. But in fact it is a substantive claim, for an alternative answer is that I ought, say, to become the best person I can be (and that this is not exhausted by the effects I have on others). Fleshing this idea out somewhat, perhaps it would make me a more excellent person if there was some worthwhile intellectual activity – e.g., chess – I did well and if there was some worthwhile physical pursuit – e.g., rock-climbing – at which I excelled. An advocate of this view might say that doing things like these is what we should be doing in life (again, putting aside our duties to others). But they need not say that we should be doing such things because such things are the ingredients of well-being.

This view is a kind of perfectionism, not about well-being (as was discussed earlier), but about “how I should live my life, just taking myself into account.” Advocates of this approach may even want to describe it as a view about “the good life,” or as a view about what makes a life most worth choosing – as against a view about what well-being, welfare, or benefit consists in (Scanlon 1998: 131). Proponents of this view may hold that hedonism, say, is the correct theory of well-being, but that well-being is only one ingredient, and perhaps not even a very important ingredient, of the good life. The life most worth our while is not one in which we are most well-off but in which we have the highest possible level of excellence.

All of this suggests a potential way to resolve some of the disagreement described earlier. Perhaps the advocates of the more objective theories discussed

earlier disagree so deeply with the advocates of more subjective theories because the two parties are in fact offering theories of different phenomena (see Kagan 1994 for discussion of a different but related claim). Advocates of the objective theories may be telling us which sort of life is most worth choosing, while advocates of the subjective theories may be telling us in which sort of life one would be most well-off. This distinction is subtle, but assuming it is genuine, then, of any proposed theory, we must ask, before evaluating it, what it is a theory of. Its proponent should be prepared to identify what roles its target notion is meant to play. The notion may, for example, play a role in a principle of beneficence, or in defining rational self-interest; or the theory may simply be an analysis of a concept of ordinary language. The most ambitious and satisfying theories will offer a unified account meant to play all the roles in the neighborhood. Some hedonists mean to be doing this; they think not only that well-being consists in pleasure, but that the pleasant life is the one most worth choosing. More modest proposals will attempt to capture less. Increased sensitivity to exactly which phenomena one's proposed theory is meant to capture may be a way for future theorizing about welfare to make further progress.

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### **Citations**

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### **Related Topics**

Aristotle, Utilitarianism to Bentham, Mill, Consequentialism, Evil, Ideals of living (perfectionism), Life and death.

## **Biographical Note**

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