



Faring Well and Getting What You Want

Chris Heathwood

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Chris Heathwood opens his contribution with a very helpful discussion that distinguishes a number of different concerns we may have when talking about the good life. When we speak of a good life, we may be referring to what it is that makes for a *morally* good life. Or we may be asking about how a person can manifest various nonmoral excellences, such as being a great athlete or musician. In asking about the good life, we might also be wondering about life's meaning, and how we can live a meaningful life (if we can). While these are all interesting topics for reflection, Heathwood focuses elsewhere: he wants to know what it is that, in and of itself, makes our lives go better. What, in other words, is intrinsically good for us?

Objectivists answer this question by presenting a list of things whose possession, all by themselves, is supposed to make us better off. Familiar candidates include pleasure, friendship, knowledge, freedom, and virtue. The idea is that no matter our attitude toward such things, our lives go better to the extent that we have more of these items on the list.

Heathwood rejects all objective views about what is intrinsically good for us. He endorses *subjectivism about welfare*: the view "that something we get in life benefits us when and only when we have an interest in it, or want it, or have some other positive attitude towards it (or it causes us to get something else that we have, or will have, a positive attitude towards)." Heathwood asks us to imagine a scenario in

which, for any supposedly objective good, a person feels no attraction to it at all. If a person doesn't like, care about, or want (say) freedom, then how could freedom, in itself, improve her lot in life? If Heathwood is right, the answer is: it can't.

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The Question of Welfare

One of the greatest and oldest questions we can ask ourselves is, What is the good life? What is the best kind of life for a person to live? What are the things in a life that make it worth choosing over other possible lives one could lead? It's hard to imagine a more important question. However, I want to focus on what I take to be a narrower question, namely, What things in life are ultimately to our *benefit*? Or to put it a few other ways, What things make us *better off*?, What makes a life a good life *for us*?, What is it to *fare well*? Taking our cue from this last expression, let's call this *the question of welfare*. In what follows, I'm going to offer my answer to the question of welfare. But first, let's clarify the question further.

I think that the question of welfare is a narrower question than the question of the good life because there are things that make a life a better kind of life to live without necessarily being of any benefit to the person living it. That it would be beneficial to you is one reason for you to choose a life, but not the only reason. Another reason is that the life would be beneficial to others, or, more generally, would exhibit *moral virtue*. Although it is often in a person's self-interest to do the right thing, sometimes doing good is of no benefit to the do-gooder. Imagine a bystander who saves a child in a flash flood, but loses her life in the process. This praiseworthy deed was of great benefit to the child, but, sadly, not to the hero who did it.

Another way a life can be good without being good *for* the person living it is by manifesting *excellence*. People manifest excellence when they excel at certain worthwhile activities, such as playing the cello, proving interesting mathematical theorems, or mastering Szechuan cooking. As with moral virtue, a life that manifests excellence seems to be in that way better, but an activity's being excellent isn't the same thing as its benefitting the person doing it. Someone might have an amazing talent for basketball, but find the sport boring and repetitive, and claim to "get nothing out of it."

This is likely a case in which manifesting excellence in a certain aspect of life would be of no benefit to the person.

A third value that we should distinguish from welfare is *meaning*. When I ask what things are of ultimate benefit or harm to us, I don't intend to be asking about the meaning of life. Whatever having a meaningful life consists in, I take it that it can vary independently from how well off one is.

There is another important clarification of the question of welfare. If someone asks what things improve the quality of a person's life, he is likely to have in mind the question of what things *tend to cause* a person's life to be improved. He might be wondering, for example, whether all the new technology in our lives really makes us better off; or he might be wondering whether he would have been better off now had he gone to graduate school years ago. These causal questions, while immensely important, are not our question. Our question is rather the question of what things make us better off *in themselves*, independent of any other changes that these things might cause in our lives. In terms philosophers use, we are asking what things are *intrinsically good* for us rather than what things are merely *instrumentally good* for us (i.e., good for us because of what they lead to). The question of intrinsic value has a kind of priority over the question of instrumental value, in that any answer to the question of instrumental value will presuppose, if only implicitly, an answer to the question about intrinsic value.

Preliminary Steps in Answering the Question of Welfare

Now that we have a clearer understanding of the question of welfare, how do we go about answering it? One natural way to begin is to devise a list of things whose presence in our lives seems intuitively to make our lives better. In developing such a list, we should keep in mind the distinction just introduced between intrinsic and instrumental value. Since the question of welfare is the question of intrinsic welfare value, we want to include on the list intuitive *intrinsic* goods only. Consider an example: while medicine can certainly make our lives better, there is no plausibility to the claim that possessing or taking medicine is good *in itself* for us. If medicine benefits us, this is due to the effects that it has on our health. We can also ask, in turn, whether being healthy is an intrinsic or merely an instrumental good. My own view is that bodily health, like medicine, is of merely instrumental value; we'll get to that view shortly.

So what might such a list include? Here are some natural candidates: happiness, knowledge, love, freedom, friendship, the appreciation of beauty, creative activity, being respected. Why think that the presence of such things in themselves makes our lives better? One reason is that these are things that we tend to want or value in our lives, and, moreover, to want or value *for their own sakes*—not merely for their effects. Next, note that such desires *seem reasonable*. These aren't crazy things to want in your life; it makes sense to want them. If it does, what explains this? The view that these things are intrinsically good for us would explain it.

Subjective vs. Objective Theories of Welfare

But now I want to ask a question, consideration of which, I believe, pulls us in the opposite direction—that is, away from the view that all of the items above are intrinsically good for us. It's true that many of us, much of the time, want the above things in our lives, and that we are glad to have them when we get them. But do we want them because it is good to have them, or is it good to have them because we want them? To put the question slightly differently, Do the items on our list above make our lives better only because they are things that we want and are glad to have in our lives, or do these things make our lives better even if we have no interest in them? This question—one of the deepest and most central questions in the philosophy of welfare—is the question of whether welfare is objective or subjective.

Subjectivists hold that something we get in life benefits us when and only when we have an interest in it, or want it, or have some other positive attitude towards it (or it causes us to get something else that we have, or will have, a positive attitude towards). *Objectivists* about welfare deny this, and maintain that at least some of the intrinsically beneficial things in our lives are good for us even if we don't want them, don't like them, don't care about them, and even if they fail to get us anything else that we want or care about. They are good for us “whether we like it or not.”

The debate over whether welfare is objective or subjective should not be confused with the debate over whether *morality* is objective or subjective. In my view, morality is pretty clearly objective. It is wrong to light a cat on fire for one's amusement. And the fact that this is wrong does not—as subjectivists about morality would have it—depend upon my or anyone else's negative attitudes towards this kind of act. It's not wrong to light cats on fire because we disapprove of this; rather, we disapprove of it because it's wrong. I feel pretty confident about that. Much less obvious is the

notion that a person can be *benefitted*, can have her own interests advanced, when she gets things that she herself in no way wants, things that leave her cold. Indeed, it seems to me that this cannot happen. It seems to me to be a truth about welfare that if something is truly a benefit to someone, it must be something she wants, likes, or cares about, or something that helps her get something she wants, likes, or cares about.

If I am right that this is a truth about welfare, I think that it is probably a foundational truth. That means that there are no deeper truths about welfare from which we can derive it, and hence argue for it. But there are still considerations that can help us to see it. Concrete examples can help do this. Consider the following case:

Charlie wants to improve his quality of life. He has heard that it is philosophers who claim to be experts on this topic, so he looks through some philosophy journals at his library. He finds an article claiming to have discovered the correct account of welfare. It is an objective theory that includes the items on our list above. The paper is in a pretty good journal, so Charlie decides to go about trying to increase his share of some of the items on the list. For example, to increase his freedom, he moves to a state with higher speed limits. Charlie is careful to make sure that the move won't have any detrimental side effects—that it won't cause him to fail to get less of any of the other goods on the list.

After succeeding in increasing his freedom, Charlie finds that he doesn't care about it, that he is completely indifferent to it. Although he is free to drive faster, he never does (he never wants to). Nor does the freedom to drive faster get him anything else that he is interested in. Charlie considers whether he is any better off as a result of the increase in his freedom. He concludes that he is no better off.

Do you agree with Charlie's own assessment of his situation? I do. I feel confident that Charlie is right that his gains in freedom turned out to be of no benefit to him. Note that the objective theory in question implies otherwise. For according to that theory, *freedom itself*—not freedom that you happen to want, but freedom itself—makes your life better. Since (i) this objective theory implies that Charlie's life is going better as a result of this increase in freedom, but (ii) in fact Charlie's life is not going any better as a result of this increase in freedom, the theory must be mistaken.

Importantly, the point here generalizes. For any of the alleged goods on the list, so long as it is an objective putative good—i.e., a putative good

that bears no necessary connection to any positive attitudes on the part of the person for whom it is supposed to be good—we could construct a case similar in all relevant respects to Charlie's case. This would be a case in which someone gets the supposed good, but is in no way glad to have it, and is in no way glad to have anything else that it gets her. I believe that we would again feel confident that this person receives no benefit. And the reason we can always construct such a case, I submit, is the idea mentioned earlier: that if something is truly a benefit to someone, it must be something she wants, likes, or cares about, or something that helps her get such a thing. This is why I'm inclined to believe that whereas objectivism is the correct view of morality, subjectivism is the correct view of welfare.

If there are such good reasons to be a subjectivist, why would anyone reject the view? One of the main reasons that some are driven to reject subjectivism about welfare is that, intuitively, it's possible for a person to want, like, or care about getting *the wrong things*. Some pursuits, for example, strike us as pointless or meaningless. What if someone wants never to step on a crack when he walks on the sidewalk? Would his life really be going better for him each time he satisfies this desire?

But the objection may be most forceful when it appeals to pursuits that are positively bad. Consider, to take a real life example, the serial rapist and murderer Ted Bundy. What Bundy wanted most in his life was to inflict pain on innocent strangers, to wield power over them, and to watch them beg, suffer, and die at his own hand. For quite a number of years, Bundy got just what he wanted. According to subjectivism, when it comes to welfare, anything you take an interest in is as good as any other; that is, it doesn't matter what you want, so long as you get it, and so long as your getting it doesn't conflict with your getting other things that you want. Thus, assuming that Bundy wasn't plagued with guilt or regret during his reign of terror, and that he avoided other unwanted side-effects of his lifestyle, subjectivists must say that Bundy benefitted greatly in doing what he did, that he was quite well off, at least before he got caught. Objectivists, by contrast, have the resources to condemn Bundy's behavior, not just morally, but from the point of view of his own self-interest. They can say that Bundy would himself have been better off if he had had, and had achieved, more admirable goals.

Thus we need to ask ourselves a question. Consider the years before Bundy was caught, the years in which he lived just the sort of life he most wanted to live. Were these years good years for Bundy? Did he live a life that was in his interest to live? Was he just as well off as he would have been

during these years had he had morally acceptable interests, and successfully pursued those? Note that our question is not, Did Bundy's lifestyle *make him happy*? Objectivists can agree that it did. Our question is not, Did Bundy *get just what he wanted*? Objectivists agree that he did. Nor should we be distracted by the fact that Bundy's lifestyle led to his eventual ruin. Subjectivists agree that his choices harmed him later on, after he got caught. (Bundy was eventually executed for his crimes.) Rather, our question is, Were the years before he got caught good years for Bundy?

I agree that Bundy was a monster. I condemn what he did in the strongest terms. But it strikes me as a false hope to think that Bundy could not have benefitted from doing what he did. Thus, I "bite the bullet" and maintain that Bundy in fact was quite well off before he got caught. To be honest, I don't even think of this as biting a bullet. It strikes me as the genuinely correct verdict. Remember that all we are saying is that Bundy *benefitted*, for a time, from his lifestyle. We are not saying that his lifestyle was morally acceptable or that it was worth emulating. Indeed, the claim that Bundy benefitted from his monstrous lifestyle helps explain something. It helps explain why we find the whole situation so sickening: here is this monster, doing the most unspeakable things, and all the while living large because of it.

The Desire Theory of Welfare

Subjectivists maintain that being well off has to do with the attitudes we have towards what we get in life rather than the nature of the things themselves. Being benefitted is a matter of having a positive attitude towards things, whatever these things are. Subjectivists often hold that *desire* or *wanting* is the special positive attitude here. Desire may even be an element in all positive attitudes, attitudes such as liking, preferring, caring about something, or having something as a goal.

According to the desire theory of welfare, human welfare consists in the satisfaction of desire. Whenever what a person wants to be the case is in fact the case, this constitutes a benefit for the person. Whenever a person's desires are frustrated, this constitutes a basic harm. The theory recognizes no other fundamental sources of benefit and harm. Many other kinds of event—making money, becoming sick, gaining freedom, appreciating beauty—can cause our lives to go better or worse, but only by being things that we want or don't want, or by causing us to get, or fail to get, other things that we want or don't want. *How* good or bad a desire satisfaction or

frustration is for its subject, according to the theory, is a function of the strength of the desire; the more deeply we want something to be the case, the better it is for us if it is the case, and the worse it is if it's not. How well things go for us overall in life is determined by the extent to which we get what we want throughout our lives, both on a day-to-day basis and with respect to larger life goals.

We can distinguish two different things we might mean by the term "want." One sense of the term is merely behavioral. If we voluntarily do something, it follows, on the behavioral sense of the term, that it is something we wanted to do. According to a second sense of the term, we count as wanting something only if we are genuinely attracted to it, only if it genuinely appeals to us. Sometimes a person voluntarily does something that holds no appeal for him. On the behavioral sense of the term, it follows that he wanted to do it. But this kind of desire satisfaction does not seem to be of any benefit to the person faced with doing the unappealing thing. Thus I believe that the best version of the desire theory of welfare is one that understands "desire" or "want"—I use these terms interchangeably—in the "genuine attraction" sense mentioned above. Only when we get, or get to do, those things that we are genuinely attracted to or that genuinely appeal to us—the things we "really want"—are we made better off.

What about Pleasure and Happiness?

One of the simplest and oldest theories of human welfare is hedonism, the view that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good for us. Almost everyone accepts that pleasure is an intrinsic welfare good. Hedonism is controversial mainly because it claims that there are no other such goods. How does the desire satisfaction theory of welfare accommodate the value of pleasure?

Whether it can make such an accommodation, and whether it should, depends upon what pleasure is. On one view of the nature of pleasure, pleasure is an indefinable feeling or sensation, in the same general category as the indefinable sensations of seeing red, of the taste of chocolate, or of nausea. If this is what pleasure is, I don't think that pleasure is good in itself for anyone. For imagine a creature who is completely indifferent to this feeling, or even finds it unbearable. It is not plausible to suggest that such a creature would be having a good experience—an experience that is

good for it, and makes its life better—when it experiences this indifferent, or even reviled, sensation. Rather, if this view of the nature of pleasure is right, then pleasure's value depends entirely on the creature's wanting it, liking it, or taking an interest in it. It would be just like the taste of chocolate, which (ignoring side effects) is good for a creature to taste when, but only when, the creature wants to be tasting it.

On a competing account of the nature of pleasure, pleasure is a positive attitude, an attitude that one can take up towards things like the chocolate taste one is currently experiencing, the music one is hearing, or the fact that one has gotten a raise. The attitude of being pleased that something is the case is certainly a good state to be in, but it is one that, in my view, ultimately involves desire. Taking pleasure in a chocolate taste sensation just is to be wanting to be experiencing it as you are experiencing it. To be pleased that you have gotten a raise is to want the raise while seeing that you have gotten it. Thus, if pleasure turns out to be a kind of state that is indeed intrinsically valuable, it is a kind of state whose value the desire theory of welfare can recognize, and even explain.

The desire theory can also accommodate the irresistible idea that it's good to be happy. Consider being happy that one has gotten a raise, or that the sun is shining, or that one is living in Barcelona. These are good states to be in. But, just as above, I believe that they are states that essentially involve desire. They involve, respectively, the desire for a raise, the desire that the sun be shining, and the desire to be living in Barcelona. If one gets a raise, and is happy about this, one will necessarily be receiving a desire satisfaction. In this way the value of happiness can be accommodated by the desire theory of welfare.

Refining the Desire Theory

Sometimes our desires are based on ignorance or confused thinking. When they are, it can seem doubtful that satisfying them benefits us. Thus we have a potential problem for the desire theory of welfare, and probably for any subjective theory. To take a simple example, suppose that I have a strong craving for cherry pie, not knowing that I have recently developed a serious allergy to cherries. If I satisfy my desire, I'll need a shot of adrenaline to avoid suffocating to death. Still, in my ignorant state, cherry pie is what I want most. The desire theory of welfare seems to imply, absurdly, that it is most in my interest to have cherry pie.

For this reason, many subjectivists revise the theory so that what determines our welfare is not our actual desires but our *idealized* desires. These are the desires we would have if we knew all the facts, were vividly appreciating them, and were thinking rationally. If I knew, and vividly appreciated, what eating cherry pie would do to me, I would prefer not to have it; the informed desire theory thus does not imply that it would be most in my interest to satisfy my desire for cherry pie.

Subjectivists who are troubled by the problems caused by pointless or immoral desires may hope that the move to idealized desires will help here as well. Perhaps if Ted Bundy had appreciated the effects that his actions would have on his victims, and had been thinking rationally about it, he would not have desired to do the horrible things he did. Perhaps he would have instead wanted the things on the objectivist's list. This is a nice thought, but for it to be true, it would have to be that no one who was fully informed, vividly appreciating the facts, and thinking clearly could have pointless or immoral desires. But surely it's just wishful thinking to believe that.

In any case, the move to ideal desires faces a problem: it begins to abandon the core idea of subjectivism. That idea is simple: what is good for you must be connected to what *you yourself* want, like, or care about—not what someone else wants for you, even if that someone else is an improved version of yourself. If you had full knowledge and appreciation of all of what was possible for you, perhaps you would prefer caviar and experimental music. As it happens, you prefer peanuts and baseball. Surely you benefit when you receive the things you actually want (peanuts and baseball) rather than the things (caviar and experimental music) that you merely would want if you were fully informed and rational. For this reason, I believe that we should regard our actual desires as the ones whose satisfaction directly benefits us.

Fortunately, the problem that motivated the move to idealization—the problem to do with desires based on ignorance—can be solved within the original theory, the theory that appeals to one's actual desires. Recall the case of the allergenic cherry pie. The actual desire theory can say that it is in fact not in my interest to eat the pie. The theory does imply that I'll receive *some* benefit from doing so, but that is plausible—I crave the pie, after all, and I will be very glad to be eating it. But the theory doesn't imply that I'll receive a *net* benefit. For I also have strong desires not to be sent to an emergency room and not to be suffocating. Eating the pie will frustrate these very strong desires. The theory thus delivers the desired result: that

overall I'm better off not eating the cherry pie. The move to idealization, which violates the spirit of subjectivism, is not necessary in the first place.

Other objections pose more serious problems for the desire theory and may require that we refine it. Here is one such objection. Suppose that my uncle must go into exile, and I know that I will never see him again. Whenever I think of him, I think of him fondly, hoping very much that he is happy and healthy. As a matter of fact, though I couldn't know this, my uncle *is* happy and healthy. According to the desire theory of welfare, a person benefits whenever a desire of his is satisfied. For a desire to be satisfied, all that is required is that the desired event actually occur; the person need not know this and need derive no satisfaction from it for it to be true that his desire was satisfied. The desire theory thus implies that I am made better off when my uncle achieves happiness and health.

Many (though not all) desire theorists regard this as an unacceptably counterintuitive implication of the theory. They think that I have not been benefitted in the example. I agree, though there is little agreement on how best to handle such a case. One popular solution is to revise the theory so that it counts only desires that are *about one's own life*. My uncle's being happy and healthy is an event in his life, not mine, and thus when it occurs, this revised theory denies that I am benefitted even though I wanted the event to occur. But I believe this restriction excludes too much; it excludes, for example, the desires of fans for their team to win. In my view, the lesson of the exiled uncle is rather that in order to be benefitted, we must *be aware* that the desired event has occurred, or is occurring.

This raises all sorts of issues that we cannot explore here. But I hope I have made a decent case for the ideas that subjectivism is the better approach to welfare, that the desire theory is the way for the subjectivist to go, that the desire theory should appeal to desires in the "genuine attraction" sense of the term, and that your actual rather than ideal desires are plausibly regarded as what determines how well you fare in life.

Chris Heathwood: Faring Well and Getting What You Want

1. Heathwood claims that the meaningfulness of a life can vary independently from how well off the person living it is. To see whether you agree, try to describe an example of (a) a life that you think is meaningful that is not beneficial to the person living it, and (b) a life that is beneficial to the person living it without being a meaningful life.

2. Suppose someone claims that being healthy is intrinsically good for us. Can you think of a way to test whether this is true? Here is one idea: describe a pair of cases that are exactly alike except that in one of the cases, the person involved has greater health than in the other case. It's crucial that there be no other differences between the cases. Describe such a pair of cases. What do you think it tells us about the intrinsic value of being healthy?
3. Do you agree that Charlie's gains in freedom turned out to be of no benefit to him? If they are of no benefit to him, is that enough to show that objectivism about well-being is mistaken? If not, what more is required?
4. What is an ideal desire as opposed to an actual desire? Which kind of desire does Heathwood think is connected to welfare? Why does he think this?
5. Do you believe that Heathwood benefits when, unbeknownst to him, his exiled uncle achieves happiness and health? Why or why not?
6. According to one version of the desire theory of welfare, a person is benefitted just when a desire that is about her own life is satisfied. Is this theory plausible? Explain.
7. Heathwood thinks that our life is a good life for us to the extent that we get what we want, so long as we are aware of it, and so long as this is a want in the "genuine attraction" sense of "want." Are there any cases in which your life goes better for you even though no such want is satisfied? Are there any cases in which such wants are satisfied, but one fails to be benefitted as a result?