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Ill-Being for Desire Satisfactionists

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Abstract: Shelly Kagan notices in a recent, influential paper how philosophers of well-being tend to neglect ill-being – the part of the theory of well-being that tells us what is bad in itself for subjects – and explains why we need to give it more attention. This paper does its part by addressing the question, If desire satisfaction is good, what is the corresponding bad? The two most discussed ill-being options for theories on which desire satisfaction is a basic good are the Frustration View and the Aversion View. I aim to show that the Frustration View is more plausible than Kagan and others think; to introduce and evaluate two additional desire-oriented theories of ill-being worth considering, the Pluralist View and the Deflationary View; and to present a new line of argument for the Aversion View.

Key words: well-being, ill-being, Shelly Kagan, desire, aversion, desire satisfactionism, preferentism, desire-fulfillment theory

A complete theory of well-being must include doctrines not only about what things are basically good for subjects of welfare but what things are basically bad. As Shelly Kagan notices in a recent, influential paper, philosophers of well-being often neglect this negative side of things, apparently on the assumption that specifying what the basic prudential goods are makes it clear enough how the theory should be extended to cover ill-being. As Kagan shows, this is not so. Once we turn our attention to ill-being, interesting questions open up (Kagan 2014; see also Sumner 2020).

For suppose we think that knowledge is one of the basic prudential goods. A natural thought is that our theory should then say that ignorance is the basic bad corresponding to the basic good of knowledge. But note that there are infinitely many truths of which even the most knowledgeable human being will remain forever ignorant, and that may suggest, absurdly, that all our lives are infinitely bad, on account of their containing an infinite amount of ignorance. Maybe, then, ignorance is not the basic prudential bad corresponding to the basic good of knowledge after all. Another candidate worth considering is false belief. But another is unjustified belief. Another still is unjustified false belief. Once we give even a little attention to ill-being, interesting questions open up.¹

While Kagan thinks that almost all theorists of well-being would do well to devote more attention to ill-being, he allows that at least traditional hedonists, who hold that pleasure is the basic good and pain the basic bad, with their value being determined quantitatively, have done their due diligence on the matter of ill-being (2014, 264). Actually though, even traditional hedonists need to give ill-being more thought. Consider experiences like these: nausea, dizziness, fatigue, hunger, having an itch you can't scratch, the feeling of needing to sneeze while being unable to

¹ The thought that if knowledge is good, then ignorance is a good candidate for being the corresponding bad is suggested by Kagan. It is also found in Feldman 1986 (218). Kagan's reasons for ultimately doubting that ignorance would be the bad corresponding to the good of knowledge are different from the one I present above.

sneeze. Each of these experiences is typically unpleasant without being painful. When they are, the theory on which pleasure is the basic good should surely want to deem them bad. But they won't be deemed bad on hedonism as standardly understood, because they are not painful. Thus, even traditional hedonists need to think more about ill-being, not to mention the far larger number who agree with hedonists that pleasure is at least one of the basic prudential goods.

Advocates of the view that the satisfaction of desire is one of the basic prudential goods also need to think more about ill-being. It's not that we say nothing about it. We usually say that the basic bad standing opposite the basic good of desire satisfaction is *desire frustration*.² This default view has recently come under attack. The main alternative holds that the basic bad opposite desire satisfaction is not desire frustration but *aversion satisfaction*. In this paper, I aim to show, first, that some recent, prominent arguments against the idea that desire frustration is bad if desire satisfaction is good are not successful, and, second, that aversion satisfaction is nevertheless bad if desire satisfaction is good. I also consider a pluralist option that regards both desire frustration and aversion satisfaction as distinct prudential bads, as well as a deflationary view according to which there is actually no dispute here at all, because desire frustration and aversion satisfaction amount to the same thing. My final if tentative conclusion is that the single basic prudential bad corresponding to desire satisfaction is aversion satisfaction.

Despite this article's title, our discussion is of interest not only to desire satisfactionists about well-being, according to which the single basic prudential good is desire satisfaction, but to pluralists about well-being who hold that desire satisfaction is among the basic prudential goods; to hybrid theorists who hold that the single basic good is the satisfaction of desire for the right things; and to philosophers of well-being whose theories enshrine other satisfiable or frustratable mental states, such as aim achievement, value realization, and attitudinal pleasure.³

1. THE FRUSTRATION VIEW

Desire satisfactions are conjunctive states of affairs in which some subject wants something to be the case and that thing is or becomes the case. To simplify the discussion, we'll focus on desires directed towards the present time, as when someone wants the current weather to be a certain way. We'll thus be ignoring issues, orthogonal to the present topic, that arise when a desire fails to overlap temporally with its object.

As noted, desire satisfactionists tend to claim that the single basic prudential bad is desire frustration. We also noted that the question of what the basic prudential bad is corresponding to the basic good of desire satisfaction arises for some pluralist and hybrid theories as well. I note in addition that philosophers not committed to the idea that desire satisfaction is one of the basic prudential goods may still be interested in and have views about what the basic bad corresponding to desire satisfaction is *if* desire satisfaction turns out to be a basic prudential good. We should formulate the received frustration-oriented approach in a way that allows all such parties to participate in our debate. We'll call it

The Frustration View: If desire satisfaction is a basic good for subjects, the sole basic bad corresponding to it is desire frustration.

² I said this in Heathwood 2005 (489) and suggest it again in Heathwood 2019 (666, *passim*) and elsewhere. Parfit's seminal treatment assumes this as well (1984, 496).

³ Pluralist views of this sort are defended in Arneson 1999 and Lin 2016. A hybrid view of this sort is suggested in Parfit 1984 (502). Scanlon 1998 (118–26) defends the basic prudential value of aim achievement, Tiberius 2018 of value realization, and Feldman 2004 of attitudinal pleasure, with Feldman's "truth-adjusted" version (112–14) of attitudinal hedonism being most relevant here.

Desire frustrations (of desires directed towards the present time) are conjunctive states of affairs in which some subject wants something to be the case and that thing is *not* the case. The Frustration View thus holds that the same attitude – desire, a positive attitude – occurs in both the good and the bad; the states differ as regards the *object* of this attitude (whether it obtains or not).

There is a minor complication. All of this is true only on so-called “combo” versions of the desire theory, according to which the basically good states combine a desire with its obtaining object.⁴ These are states of the form **D(O) & O** (a desire for O together with the obtaining of O). Combo theories that include the Frustration View hold that the basic bads are states of the form **D(O) & ~O** (a desire for O together with the non-obtaining of O). But there are also “object” varieties of the desire theory, which identify the basically good states with the objects of desire. The basically good thing for you is simply **O**, though only on the condition that you desire it and that it obtains. Object views that endorse the frustration approach to ill-being will presumably say that the basic bad is the non-obtaining of an object of desire, or **~O**. For simplicity of presentation, we’ll carry on the discussion in terms of the combo view. I don’t believe that anything in our discussion will turn on how we prefer to formulate the theory in this respect.⁵

2. A POPULAR OBJECTION TO THE FRUSTRATION VIEW

Kagan takes aim at the Frustration View, mainly on the grounds that desire frustration fails to be even a plausible candidate for being a “robust” bad.⁶ Kagan rightly believes that it is a constraint of adequacy on theories of ill-being that they deliver robust bads. What makes a bad *robust* is its being not merely comparatively bad – or worse than some relevant alternative thing – but a positive bad in its own right, irrespective of how it compares with some other thing. Robust bads are needed to explain how a life can be worse than neutral, or positively negative, in well-being.

In a famous passage, Mill suggests that what is good is “pleasure, and the absence of pain” and what is bad is “pain, and the privation of pleasure” (1863, 9–10). But only pleasure, and not the absence of pain, is a plausible candidate for being a robust good, and only pain, and not the privation of pleasure, is a plausible candidate for being a robust bad. The absence of pain is good only comparatively; it is better than the relevant alternative: pain. Likewise, the privation of pleasure is bad only in the sense that it is worse than its relevant alternative: pleasure. Kagan’s complaint about the Frustration View, then, can be thought of as holding that the frustration of some desire is, like the privation of pleasure, not even a plausible candidate for being a robust bad. If it is bad, it is only comparatively so, by being worse than the relevant alternative: the satisfaction of that desire. As Kagan puts it,

If I want X, and X does not obtain, I fail to get the improvement in well-being that I would have gotten if X had obtained. But that is, after all, only the absence of a robust good. It seems to me that this doesn’t yet introduce any sort of robust bad. (2014, 268)

I agree with Kagan that the existence of robust bads is a datum that theories of well-being must accommodate and explain. And one can see why one might suspect that desire frustration is simply the wrong kind of entity for being a robust bad, involving as it does a mere absence: the absence of the object of the desire. And Kagan is right that the fact that **D(X) & ~X** (*desiring X combined with the non-obtaining of X*) is worse than **D(X) & X** (*desiring X combined with the*

⁴ The term ‘combo view’ is due to Ben Bradley (2014, 213).

⁵ But it is worth noting that Kagan’s main objection to the Frustration View’s main rival – the Aversion View – doesn’t even get off the ground for combo versions of the theory. Pallies notes this and explains why (2022, 615–16).

⁶ Despite these arguments, Kagan is nevertheless tentatively inclined to think the Frustration View to be the best way for the desire theory to go (2014, 272).

obtaining of X) does not show that $D(X) \& \sim X$ is a robust bad – any more than the fact that the privation of pleasure is worse than pleasure shows that the privation of pleasure is a robust bad.

But I don't think Kagan is right to infer that desire frustration fails to be a plausible candidate for being a robust bad. He neglects in this context to consider another relevant comparison: $D(X) \& \sim X$ with $\sim D(X) \& \sim X$ (*not desiring X combined with the non-obtaining of X*). Compare the following two possibilities:

DON'T CARE: It is not sunny. You have no desire that it be sunny, nor a desire that it not be sunny – that is, you don't care one way or the other whether it is sunny.

UNFULFILLED DESIRE: It is not sunny. You want it to be sunny.

Given how we formulated the Frustration View, in order to evaluate it, we take it for granted that desire satisfaction is a basic good for subjects. So, taking that for granted, is UNFULFILLED DESIRE worse for you than DON'T CARE? Given that it is not sunny, is it worse to want it to be sunny than not to care whether it is sunny? It sure seems like it. But if so, then Kagan's contention that desire frustration is not even a plausible candidate for being a robust bad is mistaken. For, on the assumption that desire satisfaction is basically good for you,

DON'T CARE is *well-being neutral* for you.

After all, it does not involve any desire satisfaction, nor any candidate corresponding basic bads – nor, we'll stipulate, any non-desire-related goods or bads. And, as just observed, it seems that

UNFULFILLED DESIRE is worse for you than DON'T CARE.

From these two premises it follows that UNFULFILLED DESIRE contains a robust bad for you. For if it didn't, then it would be merely neutral, the mere lack of a good. Moreover, UNFULFILLED DESIRE is a case of desire frustration. Although I will later argue that it is not obvious that the robust bad here *is* the desire frustration, consideration of this pair of cases should convince us that desire frustration is at least a plausible candidate for being a robust bad. It is a plausible hypothesis that the robust bad on the scene in UNFULFILLED DESIRE *is* the unfulfilled desire.

Wayne Sumner also thinks that at least some desire frustrations are mere privations (on the assumption that desire satisfaction is a basic good), and my argument here casts doubt on his case for this as well. Sumner presents an example in which you are drinking a decent red wine, which you like drinking, while wishing you could be drinking a certain fancier red wine. Sumner contends that the desire frustration involved in your not drinking the fancier wine is a mere privation. You'd be better off drinking that wine, but your not drinking it is not itself a robust bad for you.

However, we can imagine again the same sort of comparison considered in the context of Kagan's argument: a pair of cases in neither of which do you get any wine. In the first, you have no desire for wine. This option is well-being neutral for you, consisting as it does in your not getting something that you are indifferent towards. In the second, you wish you could be drinking the fancy red wine. This second case seems worse for you than the first, welfare-neutral case. It thus must contain a robust bad. As before, all I've mentioned about the second case is that it contains a desire frustration. Thus, as before, it is at the very least a plausible hypothesis that the robust bad on the scene here *is* the desire frustration. Certainly Sumner's mere assertion that this would be a case "in which the absence of a good from your life does seem just to be a privation" is not enough to refute this hypothesis. Now, it is true that Sumner's own case compares lacking the fancy wine not with getting nothing but with getting the merely decent wine, but it's hard to

see how, if the frustration of the desire for the fancy wine in my case is a robust bad, it would not also be a robust bad in Sumner's case.

To be sure, I am not here concluding that the desire frustrations involved in these cases have hereby been proven to be robust bads (even relative to the supposition that desire satisfaction is a robust good). Indeed, later I will call this judgment into some doubt. My point is simply that the mere assertion that these desire frustrations are not robust bads or are not even plausible candidates for being robust bads is not justified. The Frustration View is initially plausible and its status as the default position is sensible.⁷

3. AN ARGUMENT FOR THE AVERSION VIEW, PART ONE: ELIMINATING THE FRUSTRATION AND DEFLATIONARY VIEWS

Although the Frustration View is the default account of ill-being for desire satisfactionists, there is a subtly different alternative that is no less natural: the Aversion View. Whereas on a desire satisfactionism that accepts the Frustration View, the same attitude – desire, a positive attitude – is involved in both the basic good and the basic bad, on this alternative, the basic bad opposite desire satisfaction involves not desire but its attitudinal opposite – aversion, a negative attitude. That was the notion Hobbes appealed to in his famous remark in *Leviathan* that “whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth *good*; and the object of his hate and aversion, *evil*”; one finds suggestions of the Aversion View in Sidgwick, Pigou, and Ramsey as well.⁸

⁷ Kagan gives another argument for his view that desire frustration is not plausibly regarded as a robust bad. It relies on the general idea that for any basic good that is a conjunction of two states of affairs, negating either conjunct results in a state of affairs that is merely the lack of that good, and so a state of affairs that fails to be a robust bad. But, as my arguments about the sunless days and wine cases show, desire satisfaction is a plausible candidate for being an exception to this general idea.

Though he does so using different vocabulary, Daniel Pallies also argues against the Frustration View. As he puts it, “Attraction satisfaction is good, but attraction frustration is not bad” (2022, 599). (Most use ‘desire’ where he uses ‘attraction’.) And Pallies's argument is better. It is based on an interesting example in which a subject desires something and the following appears to be the case: the thing's coming about would be better for the subject than its not coming about would be bad for the subject. I give a different argument against the Frustration View in the next section.

Pallies and I both go on to defend the Aversion View (introduced below). But Pallies's argument for the Aversion View neglects to consider and eliminate what I call the Pluralist View (also introduced below), on which both desire frustration and aversion satisfaction are distinct basic bads. I argue against the Pluralist View in §5. One might think that Pallies's argument implicitly eliminates the Pluralist View, because one might think that it eliminates the idea that desire frustration is a basic bad. But in fact Pallies's argument eliminates only the view that desire frustration is the *sole* basic bad (which, recall, is how we have formulated the Frustration View). That's because a certain kind of Pluralist View – one on which desire frustration is less bad than desire satisfaction is good and aversion frustration is less good than aversion satisfaction is bad – can evidently accommodate the sort of normative asymmetry that is the lynchpin of Pallies's arguments.

Mathison 2018 (ch. 4) and Kelley 2020 (ch. 4) also reject the Frustration View, in part on the basis of cases like Sumner's, and endorse the Aversion View. Their arguments, like Pallies's arguments, are worth more attention than I give them here, but I'll note that Mathison's case for the Aversion View also neglects to consider the Pluralist View, a view that does better with respect to one of his considerations (the “additive problem”) than the Aversion View does. Kelley's interesting appeal to what he calls the dissonance constraint does eliminate the Pluralist View, though I wonder if it begs the question.

⁸ Hobbes 1651, ch. 6; Sidgwick 1907, ch. IX §3 and passim; Pigou 1920, II.1; Ramsey 1931, pp. 173–4. Note that Hobbes's remark suggests the object rather than the combo view (see §1). More recently: Bengt Brülde formulates the desire theory as holding that that “Nothing but ‘aversion-fulfilment’ can be nonderivatively bad for a person” (Brülde 1998); Krister Bykvist claims that “any reasonable preferentialist theory must count negative attitudes such as aversions” (Bykvist 2002, 489); Eden Lin formulates the

Aversion is the opposite of desire; whatever it is to desire that something be the case, to be averse to its being the case is to have the opposite state of mind towards it. So, if desiring a thing that is the case is basically good, it would be natural to suppose that being averse to a thing that is the case is basically bad. This suggests

The Aversion View: If desire satisfaction is a basic good for subjects, the sole basic bad corresponding to it is aversion satisfaction.

Aversions satisfactions (of aversions directed towards the present time) are conjunctive states of affairs in which some subject is averse something's being the case and that thing is the case.⁹

The intuition that if desire satisfaction is basically good for you, then it is plausible that aversion satisfaction is basically bad for you is probably tacitly based on two claims: (i) a general principle of theory construction in axiology along the lines of that *if a certain thing is basically good for you, then, unless we have some reason to doubt this, we should think that the opposite of that thing is basically bad for you*; and (ii) the idea that aversion satisfaction is the opposite of desire satisfaction. The principle of theory construction is plausible on its face. And since aversion is the opposite of desire, it is reasonable to think that the opposite of *desiring a thing that is the case* is *being averse to a thing that is the case*. These two claims – (i) and (ii) – support the Aversion View.

Can a similar case be made for the competing Frustration View? It might seem so, because another reasonable-sounding answer to the question, What is the opposite of *desiring a thing that is the case*?, is: *desiring a thing that is not the case*. Perhaps the claim that desire frustration is the opposite of desire satisfaction is no less plausible than the claim that aversion satisfaction is the opposite of desire frustration.

Actually, though, it is less plausible. That's because, while aversion is obviously the opposite of desire, a thing's not being the case isn't actually the opposite of that thing's being the case.¹⁰ The opposite of a thing's obtaining is not the non-obtaining of that thing but the obtaining of the opposite of that thing. Thus, the opposite of *Michelle's being tall* is not *Michelle's not being tall* but *Michelle's being short*. As we say, *not being tall* is the “contradictory” of *being tall*, whereas *being short* is its “contrary.” And it is clear that it is the notion of a contrary that is the notion that we have in mind when we find the aforementioned principle of theory construction in axiology plausible. The following principle of theory construction is not plausible: *if a certain thing is basically good for you, then, unless we have some reason to doubt this, we should think that the contradictory of that thing is basically bad for you*. Such a principle would imply what we have already noted is implausible: that if pleasure is a basic good, then this gives us reason to think that the absence of pleasure is a basic bad.¹¹

desire theory that he is attacking in a way that assumes the Aversion View (Lin 2017, 361 and passim); Mathison 2018, Kelley 2020, and Pallies 2022 argue for the Aversion View over the Frustration View (as noted in the previous footnote); and a theory of mine about a related topic appeals to aversion satisfaction rather than desire frustration (Heathwood 2022, 62–3 and passim).

⁹ What I call ‘aversion satisfaction’ Kagan, Sumner, and Pallies call ‘aversion frustration’. I prefer to use ‘satisfaction’ univocally throughout the theory of well-being: a satisfiable or frustratable attitude is satisfied just in case its object obtains. Mathison 2018 and Kelley 2020 use ‘aversion satisfaction’ as I do. They also use the terms ‘frustration view’ and ‘aversion view’, though their formulations of these doctrines are slightly different from mine.

¹⁰ In Heathwood 2007 (27), I mistakenly claimed that the opposite of a proposition is its negation.

¹¹ Keeping in mind the distinction between contraries and contradictories helps make it clear that some candidate goods lack opposites entirely. According to Parfit, one of the basic welfare goods might be *having children* (1984, 499). This state has no contrary, and so we have the good news that there may be no basic bad corresponding to it. That some candidate goods lack opposites shows that we need to adjust our formulation of the principle of theory construction to something like the following: *if a certain thing is*

While this is all reason to think that the Aversion View is more likely to be correct than the Frustration View, we shouldn't declare the case closed. For one thing, the Frustration View is not actually saying that it is the contradictory of desire satisfaction (the absence of desire satisfaction) that is basically bad; it is saying that what is basically bad is desire for something combined with the contradictory of that thing. For another thing, the plausible principle of theory construction tells us merely what we should think *prima facie*, or defeasibly, not once and for all.

If both desire frustration and aversion satisfaction are reasonable candidates for being the bad corresponding to the good of desire satisfaction, a possibility worth considering is that they are both bad. This makes for a pluralist theory of ill-being for desire satisfactionists. (If it is true, presumably there would be two corresponding basic goods: desire satisfaction and aversion frustration.) It would be surprising, though, if positing two basic bads in a desire theory were necessary to account for the ill-being data. Indeed, such a view would seem to be double-counting. When a person has an aversion to something, they typically also have a certain desire concerning that thing: that it not be the case. If that thing nevertheless is the case, then we have both an aversion satisfaction and a desire frustration on the scene. Do we really want to say that both states independently make the subject's life worse, and that having both is twice as bad as having just one or the other?¹²

In addition to the Frustration View, the Aversion View, and the Pluralist View, a fourth possibility is that we can avoid having to decide between these views in the first place, because desire frustration and aversion satisfaction aren't two different states after all. This Deflationary View will be true if a certain plausible-sounding account of the nature of aversion is true. On this account, to be averse to a thing's being the case is simply to desire that it not be the case. Since there would presumably be nothing to favor explaining aversions in terms of "desires not" rather than desires in terms of "aversions not," perhaps the best way to understand the doctrine about the relationship between desire and aversion that would serve to deflate our debate is as

Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability: To be averse to a thing's being the case is the same thing as desiring that it not be the case, and to desire that a thing be the case is the same thing as being averse to its not being the case.

If Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability is true, then **A(O) & O** states, which are aversion satisfactions, are the same thing as **D(~O) & O** states, which are desire frustrations, and **D(O) & ~O** states, which are desire frustrations, are the same thing as **A(~O) & ~O** states, which are aversion satisfactions.¹³ In other words, aversion satisfaction and desire frustration are the same thing. There would then be no difference between the Frustration, Aversion, and Pluralist Views, and the dispute that this paper is about would be dissolved. Philosophers of well-being should welcome such a tidy resolution to the controversies of ill-being for desire satisfactionists.

basically good for you and it has an opposite, then, unless we have some reason to doubt this, we should think that the opposite of that thing is basically bad for you. I am indebted to Jason Raibley here.

¹² Krister Bykvist appears to want to say this when he writes that "what makes a life miserable is not just that we fail to get what we want, but that we get what we detest (2002, 489). As I alluded to in an earlier footnote, one can affirm that both states independently make one worse off while denying that having both is twice as bad as having just one or the other, say because desire frustration isn't as bad as aversion satisfaction.

¹³ The standard definition of desire frustrations – as states of affairs conjoining some subject wanting something to be the case with that thing's not being the case – may not technically be satisfied by **D(~O) & O** states, which I claim above are desire frustrations. If that's right, then we can simply expand the standard definition to cover such states.

Unfortunately, Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability does not stand up to scrutiny. This is because there could be minds, rather simple minds, that can desire and be averse to things yet lack the concept of negation, or the mental ability to negate.

Perhaps the simplest way to have an attitude is to have it towards a state of affairs that is currently before one that one currently sees to be the case. This is less of a cognitive achievement than holding an attitude towards a state of affairs that one doesn't see to be obtaining, since this requires being able to form a mental representation of a non-obtaining state of affairs. A similar if less impressive cognitive achievement to that is to conjure a representation of *the negation* of a state of affairs that one currently sees before one. That is psychologically more sophisticated than merely seeing and grasping a state of affairs currently obtaining. After all, doing the former thing (thinking of the possibility of this state of affairs not obtaining) requires doing the latter thing (seeing and grasping the obtaining state of affairs in the first place) but not vice versa. But then it follows that there could be a being that can do the latter thing but not the former thing. Since cognitive sophistication evolved gradually in our world, there probably are or were some actual critters like this.

Some such beings – beings that can perceive obtaining states of affairs before them but cannot think about any sort of non-obtaining state of affairs, not even the non-obtaining of a state of affairs that they see currently before them – will be averse to some of the things they perceive. They might taste some taste, or smell some smell, or feel some hot or cold feeling, and be averse to it. *Ex hypothesi*, they do not and cannot consider the possibility of this taste, smell, or feeling *not* occurring. They simply experience it occurring and, while it is occurring, are averse to it. But then it cannot be that their being averse to the experience can be equally well described as their desiring that the experience not be occurring, as Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability holds. For that is, *ex hypothesi*, a possibility that they cannot conceive. Still, they really are averse to the experience. Thus, aversion to X cannot be the same thing as desiring that X not be occurring.¹⁴

Aversion is a thing, and is the opposite of desire. So, if desire satisfaction is a basic prudential good, then, unless we are given some reason to doubt it, we should conclude that aversion satisfaction is a basic prudential bad. Consideration of simple examples indeed confirms this. Imagine one of these simple minds tasting a taste that it wants to be tasting as it is tasting it. If having an experience like that is a basic good for that being, then its having the experience of being averse to a taste that it is currently tasting is undoubtedly a basic bad for that being. If desire satisfaction is good, aversion satisfaction is bad.

But, because, as we just saw, aversion cannot be understood as desiring-not, aversion satisfaction is not the same thing desire frustration. It follows that even if desire frustration is a basic bad, it cannot be the *sole* basic bad corresponding to desire satisfaction. From the case of simple minds, then, we learn something not only about the nature of aversion, but three things about ill-being: (i) that aversion satisfaction is a basic prudential bad if desire satisfaction is a basic prudential good; (ii) that the Frustration View (the view that desire frustration is the *sole* basic prudential bad corresponding to desire satisfaction) is thus false; and (iii) the Deflationary View is also false.

This does not yet establish the Aversion View, however. For the Pluralist View that aversion satisfaction and desire frustration are independent basic bads has not been eliminated.

4. A COMPLICATION: TWO SENSES OF 'DESIRE'

The discussion of the simple minds case was conducted using a certain sense of the term 'desire', one that made the things said about the case plausible. But there is another sense of 'desire', and, using this other sense, these claims would not have been plausible.

¹⁴ I was thus wrong when I assumed, in Heathwood 2007 (27), that "aversion . . . is just desiring not."

The quickest way to see that there are these two senses of ‘desire’ or ‘want’, due to Parfit 2011 (43), is to consider a sentence like the following, which I might say to you if we had plans to spend the afternoon together and were trying to decide what specifically to do: “I don’t want us to do what I want us to do; I want us to do what you want us to do.” Such a remark is sensible, and could be true. But if there were only one sense of ‘want’, it would be incoherent on its face. I believe that the second occurrence of ‘want’ expresses something like a state of my finding its object genuinely appealing – we might say that it is what I “really” want – while the meaning of the first occurrence is exhausted by its conceptual connection to choice and behavior. Its object is what I am disposed to choose and make happen, even if it doesn’t appeal to me.¹⁵

That ‘desire’ is in this way polysemous shows that there are two desire phenomena. Unsurprisingly, some theories of the nature of desire are more plausible when put forth as theories of one of these desire phenomena and others when put forth as theories of the other. Perhaps the most familiar account of desire analyzes it in terms of behavior. On a simplified version of this view, to desire that a certain thing be the case is to be disposed to act so that it becomes or remains the case, and to be averse to it is to be disposed to act so that it doesn’t become the case or that it stops being the case. But another plausible idea takes desires to be certain experiences. On this view, to desire that a certain thing be the case is to feel genuinely attracted to its being the case or to find its being the case genuinely appealing; and to be averse to it is to feel genuinely turned off by its being the case or to find its being the case genuinely unappealing. Let’s call the first theory *the behavioral account* of desire and the second *the experiential account*. Although some writers think of these as competing accounts of a single phenomenon,¹⁶ they need not be thought of as competitors. Each can be thought of as a roughly plausible account of one of the two desire phenomena – behavioral or experiential.

When I argued above against Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability using the case of simple minds, my argument was plausible only if carried out using the notion of experiential desire. For when it comes to behavioral desire and aversion, being averse to something – a smell that you are smelling, say – entails desiring that it not be occurring. For on this notion of desire and aversion, if you are averse to some X that you see to be occurring, you are thereby disposed to make X stop being the case. But if you are disposed to make X stop being the case, you are thereby disposed to make $\sim X$ be the case. Behavioral dispositions are in this way “course-grained” or “extensional.” But if you are disposed to make $\sim X$ be the case, then that is just what it is to desire $\sim X$. Thus, aversion to something entails a desire for its negation, on a behavioral notion of desire and aversion. This is true even for simple minds. No representation of $\sim X$ needs to be tokened in the subject for it to be true of the subject that they are disposed to make $\sim X$ occur. Similar reasoning shows that desire for something, in the behavioral sense, entails an aversion to its negation. The behavioral conception of desire and aversion in this way validates Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability, a doctrine that entails that desire frustration and aversion satisfaction come to the same thing.

This has important implications for well-being. For if desire frustration and aversion satisfaction come to the same thing, then the Deflationary View that there is no real dispute between the Frustration View, the Aversion View, and the Pluralist View is also validated. It follows that theories of well-being that hold that desire satisfaction is one of the basic goods *and that employ a behavioral conception of desire* don’t have to decide which corresponding account

¹⁵ I say more about these two senses in Heathwood 2019.

¹⁶ For example, Michael Smith (1994, §§4.5–4.6) rejects what he calls the phenomenological conception of desire in favor of the dispositional conception, while Galen Strawson, representing the opposing side, writes, “the link to the notion of affect dispositions is internal to and fundamentally constitutive of the notion of desire in a way that the link to the notion of behavioral dispositions is not” (Strawson 2010, 282).

of ill-being – the Frustration View, the Aversion View, or the Pluralist View – is correct. The three views are equivalent. Their work on ill-being, as it relates to desire satisfaction, is done.¹⁷

But work remains for those of us who think that the experiential conception of desire is the one relevant to well-being.¹⁸ As the case of simple minds shows, on this conception, having an aversion satisfied does not entail the frustration of any desire. And having an aversion in this sense satisfied is surely a basic bad if having a desire in the same sense satisfied is a basic good. It would be tidy and satisfying if we could defensibly claim, further, that, assuming the experiential conception, aversion satisfaction is the *only* basic bad corresponding to the basic good of desire satisfaction – that is, if the Aversion View is true rather than the Pluralist View. Can this be defensibly claimed?

5. AN ARGUMENT FOR THE AVERSION VIEW, PART TWO: ELIMINATING THE PLURALIST VIEW

I believe that the answer is Yes, though I admit to having been caught off guard by the vitality of the Pluralist View. That view strikes one, or at least it initially struck me, as a merely coherent view, one of the theories occupying logical space that should at least be noted. But the Pluralist View is stronger than you might think. In the end, however, I think it is reasonable to side with the Aversion View.

We have already seen considerations friendly to the idea that desire frustration is a basic bad (and thus friendly to the Pluralist View over the Aversion View). Intuitively, you are worse off in

UNFULFILLED DESIRE: It is not sunny. You want it to be sunny.

than you are in

DON'T CARE: It is not sunny. You have no desire that it be sunny, nor a desire that it not be sunny – that is, you don't care one way or the other whether it is sunny.

Since you are welfare neutral in DON'T CARE, this suggests that something in UNFULFILLED DESIRE is basically bad for you. All we are told about UNFULFILLED DESIRE is that it contains an unfulfilled desire, making it reasonable to surmise that the basic bad *is* the unfulfilled desire.

But an Aversion-View-friendly account of the sunless days is also plausible. An advocate of the Aversion View who agrees that UNFULFILLED DESIRE contains a basic bad is committed to

¹⁷ Harriet Baber's preferentism employs a behavioral conception, on which "[p]reference is inextricably linked to choice" (Baber 2007, 106). The desire theories of welfare favored by economists and decision theorists also tend to employ this conception (see, e.g., Winch 1971, p. 33).

¹⁸ I defend the contention that the experiential conception of desire is the one relevant to well-being in Heathwood 2019. It's worth emphasizing that a desire satisfactionism that employs the experiential sense of desire is not thereby committed to the so-called experience requirement on well-being, according to which the basically good and bad states are certain experiences and there can be no difference in well-being without a difference in experience.

Although not himself a desire satisfactionist, Sumner may be the first to call attention to the distinction between experiential and behavioral desire in the context of well-being (he uses the labels 'attitudinal' and 'behavioral') and to argue that desire satisfactionists should employ the experiential sense (1996, 120). I was thus surprised to see Sumner recently claim, essentially on grounds of Desire-Aversion Intertranslatability, that the Frustration and Aversion Views are not really different views (2020, 427–9). For this deflationary conclusion goes through (it seems to me) only on the conception of desire (the behavioral one) that Sumner thinks is the wrong one for desire satisfactionists to use.

there being an aversion satisfaction on the scene in UNFULFILLED DESIRE. But that is plausible. That's because, if you want it to be sunny while it is in fact completely cloudy, then, in all likelihood, you will be averse to its being completely cloudy. There will thus be an aversion satisfaction on the scene, and the Aversion View can accommodate the idea that UNFULFILLED DESIRE contains a basic bad.

What opponents of the Aversion View need is a case in which someone wants X but, unusually, is not averse to any of X's alternatives, nor even to $\sim X$. To make it easier to find such a case, let's assume what many philosophers who believe in the basic prudential value of desire satisfaction assume: that it is only the satisfaction of a desire for something *for its own sake* that is basically good for someone. Desiring something for its own sake contrasts with desiring something for the sake of its connection to something else, such as what that thing might lead to, entail, be an instance of, symbolize, make more probable, be evidence for, prevent, or preclude. The former are *basic* desires and the latter *derivative*.

This makes it easier for opponents of the Aversion View to find the right sort of case because if a person has a basic desire for X, it is all but certain that they will be averse *at least derivatively* to any alternative to X that they consider. They will be averse to the alternative because its obtaining precludes X from obtaining. This means that when there is a basic desire frustration on the scene in some case, it is very likely that we will also find on the scene the satisfaction of at least a *derivative* aversion. But, on the standard view, the satisfaction of derivative attitudes is of no welfare relevance. Thus, that opponents of the Aversion View cannot produce a case in which there is the frustration of a basic desire absent the satisfaction of a derivative aversion is no problem for their position. They only need a case in which someone has a basic desire for something, X, but fails to be *basically* averse to any alternative to X, as well as to $\sim X$.

A sort of case in which this may happen is a case in which some desired thing is viewed as "gravy," or as a good thing that one isn't expecting and doesn't feel entitled to – like finding a twenty-dollar bill on the sidewalk.¹⁹ To suit the case to our purposes, however, we need it to be a thing that, unlike finding a twenty-dollar bill, would be desired for its own sake. Suppose, then, that you are travelling on the train from Edinburgh to St. Andrews. After your train departs, you overhear a rumor that, to celebrate the anniversary of this route, the train company will be giving away free Belhaven beer to anyone who wants it. You love beer, you love Belhaven beer, and you'd love a Belhaven right now. So you hope the rumor is true. At the same time, however, you are an especially mature and grounded person; if it turns out to be just a rumor, you won't be at all disappointed.

Next suppose that it was just a rumor. There isn't going to be any Belhaven. And you indeed really are not disappointed. You continue to have a positive view toward the notion of your having a Belhaven right now, but you lack a negative view of your actual lack of Belhaven.²⁰

¹⁹ You might think that another kind of case is one involving a simple mind of the sort discussed earlier. A simple mind might be having a certain experience while desiring to be having it, yet, due to the simple mind's inability to conceive of the experience's not obtaining, the simple mind fails to be averse to that possibility. But this case is of the wrong structure. We need there to be a desire frustration, and so need the desired thing to fail to obtain. But then it would be a thing that the simple is no longer desiring, since it cannot consider possibilities that fail to obtain. There isn't much to envy about these simple minds, but one thing going for them is that they are incapable of desire frustration.

²⁰ The Belhaven case is structurally similar to cases discussed in Mathison 2018 (ch. 4), Kelley 2020 (ch. 4), and Pallies's 2022 (though in the latter, the subject maintains some aversion towards not getting the desired thing, just less aversion towards not getting it than desire to get it). But I don't believe that these writers appreciate the general idea that I've tried to show using the case of the sunless days – that if X isn't happening, it's better not to care whether X happens than to want X to happen – and how it provides a

Is this state of things – in which you want a Belhaven, are not going to get one, but don't view not getting one negatively – positively bad for you? Of course it is worse for you than if you had gotten the Belhaven, for in that outcome, you'd have a good thing, a desire satisfaction. But is your not getting the Belhaven while wanting to get it – when it is also true that you are not averse to not getting it – robustly bad for you?

This is the crucial question, and it is difficult to answer. I believe that initial appearances favor the view that this desire frustration is a basic bad, and thus favor the Pluralist View over the Aversion View. This is because the sort of argument that I gave earlier about the case of the sunless days applies here too. Given that you aren't going to get any Belhaven, it seems worse to want one than to have no interest in one, even if you are ok not getting one. But the state of having no interest in a Belhaven when you aren't going to get one is welfare neutral. So, the state in which you are wanting the Belhaven when you aren't going to get one contains a robust bad. This robust bad cannot be an aversion satisfaction, for, *ex hypothesi*, you aren't averse to lacking a Belhaven. So, the robust bad must simply be the desire frustration.

In response, the advocate of the Aversion View may want to claim that we are making an error when we consider this matter. The reason, they might claim, that we intuit that if you aren't going to get a Belhaven, it's worse to be wishing you had one than to have no interest in one is that, when we imagine this scenario, we imagine, without realizing it, also being averse to not having a Belhaven. It is a strange enough thing to want an X without minding lacking an X that we fail to imagine it when we try. The scenario we imagine instead contains an aversion satisfaction, and this explains our intuiting that this scenario is worse for you than if you hadn't wanted the X.

This error theory of our Pluralist-View-friendly intuition may be true. But it is easier to spin such stories than to have actual evidence for them. Without such evidence, the Pluralist may be in the more comfortable position.

But there actually is some evidence that the Pluralist-View-friendly intuition is mistaken.²¹ It has to do with the fact that if the Pluralist View of ill-being for desire satisfactionists is correct, then the corresponding pluralism about *well*-being must surely also be correct. On this fully pluralist theory, opposite the two basic bads are two basic goods: desire satisfaction and aversion frustration, aversion frustrations being states of affairs in which a subject is averse to something that does not obtain. The problem for the full pluralist view is that it seems pretty clear that aversion frustration is *not* in fact a robust good.

Sometimes I can feel, on the base of my neck, the tag of the shirt that I am wearing. When I can, I often don't like it. When I am not feeling the tag of the shirt I am wearing, and I attend to this fact, two things are usually true: I fail to view this in a positive light, but I remain averse to the possibility of feeling this feeling. This is a real-life mirror image of the imaginary Belhaven case. I have a basic aversion to a thing while lacking a basic desire for the lack of that thing.

When I am not feeling my shirt tag, am I better off being averse to the possibility of feeling it than I am not caring one way or the other whether I feel it? To this crucial question I think the answer is clearer than to the crucial question about the Belhaven case. The clear answer here is No; given that you are not feeling the feeling of the tag on your shirt, you are no better off being averse to that feeling than you are being neutral about it. I am more confident of this than I am that you are worse off wanting a Belhaven if you don't have one than you are having no interest one.

If, as the shirt-tag case suggests, aversion frustration is not a robust good, this casts doubt on the idea that desire frustration is a robust bad. If not feeling the tag of your shirt when you are

presumption in favor of the view that desire frustration is basically bad, a presumption that must be overturned in a proper defense of the Aversion View over the Pluralist View.

²¹ I am indebted to Eden Lin for helping me to see this.

averse to that feeling fails to be a good thing in itself, this may teach us that having no Belhaven when you desire a Belhaven fails to be a bad thing in itself. And indeed, when I reconsider the Belhaven case in light of my judgment about the shirt-tag case, I find that the claim that there is nothing bad in itself about wanting and not having a Belhaven seems more plausible. If we are still resistant to this, then, because it would be surprising for there to be this sort of asymmetry between the shirt-tag and Belhaven cases, the error theory discussed above gains some real appeal. Perhaps wanting and lacking an X is virtually always accompanied by a basic aversion to the lack of an X, whereas being averse to and lacking an X is rarely accompanied by a basic desire for the lack of an X; and this is why we erroneously have asymmetrical intuitions about the cases.

This line of thought puts the asymmetry in our contingent psychology rather than in fundamental axiology. But the latter is a coherent option, and yet another location in logical space. On this asymmetrical version of the Pluralist View, there are two desire-related bads – desire frustration and aversion satisfaction – but only one desire-related good, desire satisfaction. The symmetrical pluralist option seems untenable, because aversion frustration is not a plausible candidate for being a basic good, but might the Pluralist View beat the Aversion View if the former resists its natural symmetrical extension?

Whether it does depends I believe on how much weight to give abstract theoretical considerations in comparison to considerations about how theories do with respect to particular cases. Several such theoretical considerations, some of which we've noted along the way, favor the Aversion View over the Pluralist View.²²

One consideration is that the asymmetrical version of the Pluralist View seems like an ad hoc gerrymander, and thus a theory unlikely to be correct. But nor, for reasons to do with consideration of cases, is the Pluralist View in its symmetrical form a viable option. So the Pluralist View is implausible either way.

A second consideration involves the principle of theory choice in axiology considered earlier, the idea that if a certain thing is basically good for you, then, unless we have some reason to doubt this, we should think that the opposite of that thing (if it has one) is basically bad for you. Combined with the claims that aversion satisfaction is more clearly the opposite of desire satisfaction than is desire frustration and that things can have only one opposite, this gives us some reason to think that aversion satisfaction rather than desire frustration is bad if desire satisfaction is good.

A third consideration favoring the Aversion View over the Pluralist View is essentially Ockham's razor, or the idea that if two theories do about as well at explaining the data, then the simpler of the two theories is more likely to be true. Consideration of the cases examined in this paper (sunless days, simple minds, the Belhaven beer, the shirt tag) may suggest that the Aversion View and the Pluralist View in its asymmetrical form are about equally good at explaining the data, and that both are clearly better than the Pluralist View in its symmetrical form, not to mention the Frustration View. This is because the simple minds case refutes the Frustration View, the shirt tag case refutes the Pluralist View in its symmetrical form, and the accounts of the cases given by the Aversion View (including its error theory of our intuitions about the Belhaven case) and the Pluralist View in its asymmetrical form are about equally good. But the Aversion View is the simpler theory, positing only one basic bad alongside the Pluralist View's two. Admittedly, some philosophers may judge the Pluralist View better than the Aversion View at handling the Belhaven case, and better by enough of a margin to outweigh considerations of Ockham's razor. I think reasonable people can disagree about this.

²² It should be mentioned that Kagan has an argument against the Aversion View, which could be further evidence bearing on our question (2014: 270–2). But I don't think this argument has much force. For rebuttals to it, see Mathison 2018 (47–8), Kelley 2020 (108–10), and Pallies 2022 (613–7).

A fourth, less abstract piece of evidence favoring the Aversion View, which we earlier touched on, is that the Pluralist View has the appearance of double-counting. Suppose that a person has a basic desire for something (a sunny day, a Belhaven). Suppose that they also have a basic aversion to *not* getting that thing. If the thing fails to materialize, then we have both a desire frustration and an aversion satisfaction on the scene. But it seems like a mistake to say, as the Pluralist View must, that *two* bad things have happened to the person. Those two things are so intimately related that it does not seem plausible to count them as separate bads. This is a strike against Pluralism that both the Aversion and Frustration Views avoid.

All that said, the Pluralist View, which has received virtually no attention, has more going for it than one might have thought. I am convinced by the simple minds argument that aversion satisfaction is a basic good. I also think that the most popular sort of argument against the idea that desire frustration is a basic bad – the one that moves Kagan, Sumner, and others – is no good. This should soften us to the surprising hypothesis that, even though there is only one basic good for desire satisfactionists, there are two basic bads. I am inclined to think that the balance of consideration tilts against this hypothesis and toward the simpler idea that aversion satisfaction is the sole basic bad. But the case is not knockdown and should not be treated as closed.

6. CONCLUSION

To recap: I tried to show that Kagan's and Sumner's reasons for rejecting the Frustration View are not adequate. The Frustration View cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it fails to deliver even a plausible candidate for being a robust bad.

I tried to show that, for desire theories that employ a behavioral conception of desire, the Deflationary View is correct. There is no dispute between the Frustration, Aversion, and Pluralist Views on a behavioral conception of desire because, on this conception, desire frustrations and aversion satisfactions are one and the same.

I tried to show, using the case of simple minds, that, on the experiential conception of desire, desire frustration and aversion satisfaction come apart. And I tried to show on the basis of the same case that, for desire theories that employ an experiential conception of desire, aversion satisfaction is a basic bad. This shows that the Frustration View is false for these theories.

That leaves the Aversion and Pluralist Views standing. I found these views to be equally plausible in dealing with the cases of the sunless days but, at least initially, the Pluralist View to be better at dealing with the case Belhaven case. But consideration of the shirt-tag case both casts doubt on the idea that the Pluralist View is better at dealing with the case Belhaven case and reveals that the Pluralist View is tenable only if the full theory that includes it takes a theoretically unsatisfying asymmetrical form. The Aversion View has other advantages, concerning a principle of theory construction in axiology, theoretical simplicity, and double-counting.

Philosophers who believe in the basic prudential value of the satisfaction of experiential desire should therefore accept, even if only tentatively, the Aversion View of ill-being.²³

²³ Thanks to Gwen Bradford, Anthony Kelley, Eden Lin, Jason Raibley, Travis Rebello, Kyle York, and audiences at the University of Colorado Boulder's Center for Values and Social Policy and the Edinburgh Workshop on Well-Being.

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