

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Theories of Well-being

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In the philosophical literature as well as in discussions of public policy, happiness is sometimes identified with well-being. More often, however, happiness is seen as a long-term psychological state of fulfillment, and well-being (also sometimes called “flourishing” or “eudaimonia”) as the *summum bonum* that includes both happiness and the sense that one’s happiness is worth having, or that one’s life is worth living. As our highest personal or prudential good, our well-being gives each of us reason to cultivate certain traits and act in certain ways and not others.

On my view, what is required for a worthwhile life is an understanding of the important aspects of one’s own life and human life in general, and the traits that are necessary for achieving such understanding and acting accordingly.

Subjective vs. Objective Standards

According to some—maybe many—people, the standards by which we evaluate our lives as worthwhile or satisfactory need not themselves pass muster by some objective standard of worth, because there *are* no objective standards of worth for well-being. According to others, because well-being is the highest prudential good (HPG) for the individual as a human being, well-being must meet not only the individual’s own standards, but also certain objective standards of worth. Alternatively, on this view, the individual’s own

standards must pass muster by an objective standard of worth.

I dub the proponents of the first view subjectivists, and those of the latter view objectivists. Subjectivists make a sharp distinction between a life’s *prudential value* on the one hand, and its *objective value* on the other, between the idea of *the highest prudential good for an individual* and the idea of *her objective worth as a person*. Objectivists, by contrast, hold that the objective value of a life is partly constitutive of a life’s prudential value, and that the idea of *the highest prudential good for an individual* entails the idea of *an objectively worthwhile life*.

In *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life* (2014), I defend the latter view. Building on an idea of Aristotle’s, I argue that a satisfactory conception of well-being must meet the formal requirements of the highest prudential good (HPG) as the most complete, self-sufficient, and choice-worthy good for an individual. The central idea here is that the HPG for an individual is a life that is both supremely desirable and worthwhile, a life that is therefore eminently worth living. I argue that the HPG conceived thus is an ideal that many of us yearn for from an early age, however dimly and inarticulately, and that to meet its requirements, well-being must be defined as happiness in a worthwhile life. Our lives can be worthwhile without being happy, thanks to great misfortunes, and they can be (more or less) happy without being (very) worthwhile, thanks to bad values. On my view, what is required for a worthwhile life is an understanding of the important aspects of one’s own life and human life in general, and the traits that are necessary for achieving such understanding and acting accordingly. These traits, I argue, are autonomy (the disposition to think for ourselves about important matters), and

reality-orientation (the disposition to seek truth or understanding about important matters and live accordingly).

My defense of an objective conception of well-being is contrary to the general trend these days. In the philosophical literature, subjectivism about the prudential good has been on the ascendancy, gaining strength and respectability from its alliance with empirical studies of subjective well-being, while objectivism has been on the retreat. Subjectivism also seems to align well with the preference-based view of welfare economics. Subjectivists claim that objectivist theories of well-being are elitist, that they give short shrift to the individual's own point of view on her life, or that they ignore individual differences. Some also complain that objectivist theories confuse the prudential value of a life with other dimensions of value. Finally, subjectivists worry that an objective conception of well-being justifies paternalism, that is, the imposition of the objectivist's preferences or values on others against their will. Those who believe that the state should promote our well-being add that objective theories will lead governments to impose alien values on citizens. In this summary, I limit myself to showing that my conception of well-being as happiness in a worthwhile life can meet these objections; the positive defense of this conception is in my book.

Elitism

The charge that objective theories are elitist is somewhat obscure. Is the thought here that objective well-being requires extraordinary ability, but subjective well-being is open to all comers? If so, the worry seems unfounded, because this requirement is not essential to an objective conception. Only "Objective List Theories" are guilty of elitism, insofar as they hold that a high degree of intellectual or cultural achievement is essential for well-being. My conception of objective well-being requires only that we be reality-oriented and autonomous. And the ability for reality-orientation and autonomy is an ability that everyone who is capable of well-being possesses. True, not everyone has this ability to the same extent, whether because of innate features or because of upbringing. But this is also true of happiness: some people are born with a happy personality—a high genetic happiness set-point—some with a melancholic or grouchy one.¹ Some people are brought up by happy people in

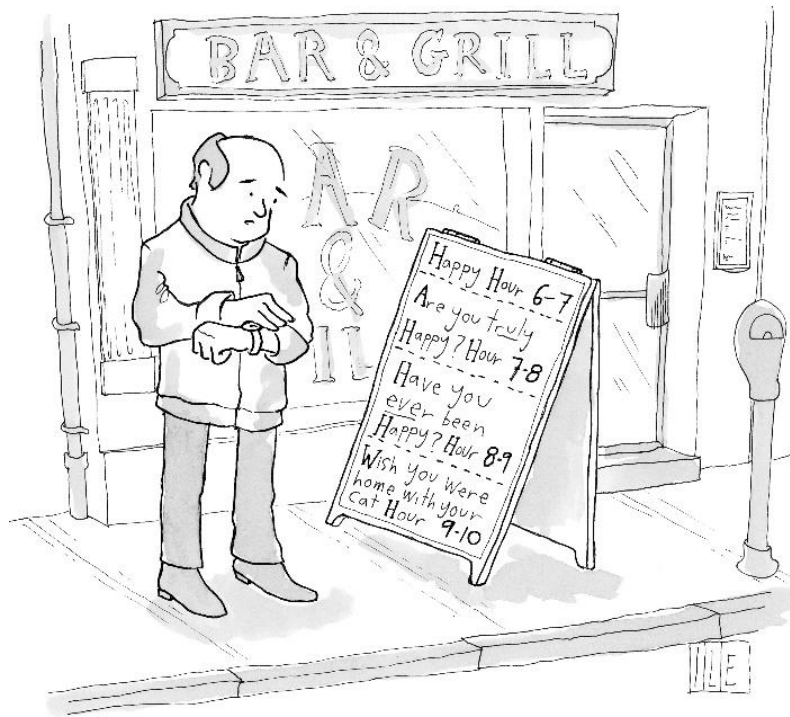
circumstances that promote happiness, others by unhappy people in circumstances that promote unhappiness. Yet these would be poor reasons for excluding happiness from a conception of well-being.

Ignoring Subject-relativity



Objective theories have also been criticized for ignoring the individual's own point of view on her life, the fact that her good must be her good from her own perspective. But what sort of objective theory do critics have in mind? Valerie Tiberius and Alicia Hall define objective theories as those that claim that "there are at least some components of well-being whose status as components of well-being does not depend on people's attitudes toward them."² Presumably, this means that you would be better off with these components even if you were perfectly happy without them and would find them hateful if you had them. A striking example is the Objective List Theory, which Derek Parfit defines as a theory that claims that "certain things are good or bad for people, whether or not these people would want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things."³ These good things, he continues, "might include moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty" (p. 499). So even if none of these things appeals to us – even if we wouldn't enjoy having children and being good parents, would rather not exert ourselves to develop our abilities, and have no capacity to appreciate beauty - they are necessary to our well-being.

However, the Objective List view is not committed to this counterintuitive view. It can say that *enjoyment* or *deep appreciation* of these and the other goods on the list is essential to well-being, so someone who has no pro-attitudes towards them no more has well-being than someone who lacks them altogether. Richard Arneson recognizes the importance of the individual's own feelings towards, and evaluations of, his life when he argues that a life of objective well-being is a life "that has lots of *pleasure*, especially when this comes by way of *enjoyment* of what is truly excellent, a life that includes sustained and *deep relationships of friendship and love*, a life that includes significant achievement in art or culture or systematic scientific understanding, a life that includes significant and sustained *meaningful and interesting* work--these features of a life inherently make it a better one for the one who lives it" (italics mine).⁴



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It is not the case, then, that the Objective List Theory has to give short shrift to the **subject-relativity** of well-being, the fact that an individual's perspective on her life, her positive evaluation of it, is essential to her well-being. Nor does my theory. My theory recognizes that meaningful relationships, significant achievements in art or culture, appreciation of beauty and so on are valuable in a human life independently of any particular individual's enjoyment or positive evaluation of them, but that they become components of an individual's well-being only if he does enjoy them, or finds them fulfilling, or has some other pro-attitude towards them. There is an asymmetry in the role played by objectively bad and objectively good values in an individual's life: Someone with bad values lacks well-being, whether or not he approves of them or takes joy in them, whereas someone with good values has well-being only if he takes joy in them and approves of them. Unlike some objectivist conceptions, my conception of well-being as the HPG also avoids the next problem.



A defensible conception of well-being must be responsive, as Mill's was, not only to the fact that we human beings are mostly alike, but also to the fact that we are very different in our tastes, talents, and abilities.

Ignoring Individual Nature

Insofar as a theory holds that *everyone's* well-being requires, or is enhanced by, cultural or intellectual achievements, appreciation of beauty, etc., it has too narrow a view of the sorts of lives that can be worthwhile or happy. An early example is provided by Aristotle's conception, on which a life of manual labor is a life that no one would freely choose, and the life of the philosopher is the most *endaimon* (flourishing). But not all objective theories are fated to make this mistake. On the view I defend, someone who has well-being as the highest prudential good possesses the traits necessary for a worthwhile life (autonomy and reality-orientation), understands important aspects of his own life and human life in general, and pursues those

worthwhile goals, of the many available to him, that suit his particular nature - those pursuits in which he finds happiness. Our activities must engage our interests and passions to be fulfilling and, indeed, to be our “own,” expressive of, or suited to, our individual natures. In this emphasis on individuality, my conception of well-being is more Millian than Aristotelian. A defensible conception of well-being must be responsive, as Mill’s was, not only to the fact that we human beings are mostly alike, but also to the fact that we are very different in our tastes, talents, and abilities. These differences, combined with differences in our social situations, make all the difference to the sorts of lives different individuals need for their own fulfillment.

According to some philosophers, however, objective theories rest on a fundamental confusion: the confusion of the prudential value of a life with other values. This argument has been made most forcefully by L.W. Sumner.⁵

Confusing Prudential Value with other Dimensions of Value

Sumner holds that a thoroughgoing subjectivism about well-being is the only game in town, because there *can* be no objective standard for well-being. Such a standard cannot be prudential, he argues, because it is circular to say that the objective requirement for well-being (the prudential value of a life) is that the life be truly prudentially valuable.⁶ But neither can the standard be moral or “perfectionist”, for we can imagine someone who is a paragon of virtue, or who has perfected his central human capacities to an exemplary extent, failing to find much satisfaction in his ethical or perfectionist excellences.⁷ Think of the honest, just, and generous man who fails to realize his dreams, loses his wife to his dazzling neighbor, and his wealth to his counterfeit friends. Or of the lonely genius, who dies never having known the simple pleasures of hanging out with drinking buddies or the intimacy of romantic love. Or, for that matter, of the autonomous and reality-oriented but unhappy individual.

From the fact that virtue and perfection do not guarantee well-being, Sumner concludes that there is a conceptual gulf between prudential values, on the one hand, and moral or perfectionist values, on the other, and hence that well-being is entirely subjective. Those who value morality or human perfection enough to see

it as part of their well-being will measure their well-being partly by moral or perfectionist standards; those who do not, will not. The individual’s own priorities determine what makes her life better for her; there are no objective constraints on prudential values.⁸

These arguments, however, are too quick. No doubt it is circular to say, “Alpha’s life is prudentially valuable because it is prudentially valuable.” But there is no reason to think that we cannot say something more informative about the prudential standard Alpha’s life must meet to be prudentially valuable. Using a prudential standard for measuring well-being is no more circular than using a moral standard for measuring the moral value of a life, or using weights for measuring the weight of a bag of potatoes. Indeed, what else could we use to measure the prudential value of a life if not a prudential standard? If, as I argue in my book, autonomy and reality-orientation are necessary for objective worth, and objective worth is necessary for well-being as the HPG, then they are also prudential standards of the prudential value of a person’s life.

Sumner’s second argument against moral or perfectionist standards to measure well-being, namely, that even a paragon of morality or human perfection may fail to have well-being, merely shows that virtue or perfection are not *sufficient* for happiness, not that they are not *necessary*. Hence, Sumner’s arguments do not support his conclusion that there are conceptual barriers to thinking that prudential standards can be (partly) objective. The idea that all prudential values *must* be subjective creates an artificial and indefensible conceptual gulf between prudential values on the one hand, and moral and perfectionist values on the other.

But Sumner also has an epistemological objection to the claim that there are objective standards for well-being: if the individual’s own (authentic) point of view on her life does not determine her well-being, he asks rhetorically, who is to decide which goals or ways of life really are prudentially valuable? “The enlightened elite? Mill’s ‘competent judges’? Philosopher kings?”⁹ But this is a problem only if we assume that well-being does not require any objective values. So far, however, this assumption remains unjustified. Hence, if there are objective standards of well-being, anyone who knows what they are can judge which ways of life are prudentially valuable. Accordingly, it doesn’t seem “presumptuous,” as Sumner complains, to say of someone whose central goals are worthless that his life is not going well for him, even if he judges otherwise.¹⁰

It would, of course, normally be presumptuous to tell him so. But it would also normally be presumptuous to tell an irrational person that she lacks an important human quality or a cowardly person that she lacks moral fiber, even though it would not be presumptuous to make these judgments *tout court*. We can apply objective standards to others without announcing them.

It is safe to conclude, then, that none of the objections we have considered so far are fatal to the thesis that well-being as the HPG is happiness in an objectively worthwhile life. But there is one more objection that I need to consider.

The most one can do to help others become autonomous and reality-oriented is to exemplify these traits oneself, persuade others of their value, and ... promote the conditions that encourage the development of these traits.

Paternalism

This objection claims that objective theories are paternalistic, requiring that we impose our own supposedly objective values on others if we want to promote their well-being.¹¹ But theories of well-being in themselves do not tell us to promote other people's well-being, let alone to promote *our* conception of their well-being. The prescription to promote others' well-being can come only from a substantive theory of ethics, and a sensible ethics must be alive to the dangers of busybody-ism. Additionally, even in situations in which one *should* promote another's well-being, an obvious non-paternalistic way of doing so is to support her (as Kant would put it) in her permissible ends, instead of (self-defeatingly) imposing one's own values on her — self-defeatingly, because for these values to benefit her, she must find them attractive and admirable enough to integrate into her valuational and motivational system. Pursuing good values kicking and screaming, so to speak, does nothing for her well-being. Moreover, on my conception of well-being as happiness in a worthwhile life, the values that are central to well-being are autonomy and reality-orientation, and autonomy and reality-orientation cannot be imposed on anyone. The most one can do to help others become autonomous and reality-oriented is to exemplify these traits oneself, persuade

others of their value, and (depending on one's relationship to the people to be helped), promote the conditions that encourage the development of these traits.

Some subjectivists about well-being argue that the state ought to pursue well-being policies, but that it can do so justifiably only if it promotes everyone's well-being as they themselves see it.¹² In other words, the state can pursue such policies justifiably only if it takes no stand on the correct conception of well-being. I agree with the last point because the correct conception is a matter of controversy, and the state is supposed to be impartial. But how can the state promote *everyone's well-being as they themselves see it*, given that people differ in their conceptions of well-being? The state cannot have different well-being policies for different people. Hence, if it adopts such policies, it will necessarily favor some over others.

There is another equally grave problem with the idea of the government promoting people's well-being as they themselves see their well-being: some people's values and preferences are simply not worth supporting. Tiberius and Hall, and Tiberius and Plakias seem to think that their subjective conception of well-being as value-based life-satisfaction (VBLS) escapes this criticism. They argue that well-being is life-satisfaction according to "appropriate values," that is, values that are in accord with the individual's affective nature and that would not be undermined in the light of new information about these values or about the individual. As they put it, "when life-satisfaction judgments are informed and grounded in appropriate values, then these judgments are made from a perspective that is authoritative for a person's well-being"¹³ These values can range, on one extreme, from regarding pleasure as the most important thing in life, to not caring about pleasure or even happiness, on the other.

Tiberius and Hall argue that their theory offers an advantage that some have thought to be the province of objective theories of well-being alone: it can show why well-being is normative for us, that is, why it is worth pursuing, why we should pursue some values and not others, and why we should care about other people's well-being—indeed, not only care about it, but use it as a basis for public policy and decisions about how resources "should be distributed."¹⁴ Their general argument for thinking that their theory meets these normative demands is that "[t]he fact that appropriate values are an ideal to aspire to means that

when we wish someone a life that lives up to their values, we are wishing for something necessarily worthwhile.”¹⁵

However, what is appropriate for an individual and worthwhile to him on the VBLS theory can be quite inappropriate and worthless objectively speaking, since his well-being can lie in the pursuit of pleasure to the exclusion of everything else, or in getting special favors from the state, or in discriminating against members of certain groups, and so on. (In my book I argue that this is a problem with every subjectivist theory of well-being.) Hence, the rest of us have reason to hope that he will *not* have a life that lives up to his values, and that he will *not* get any of our resources to help him live thus.

I have argued that my conception of well-being as happiness in a worthwhile life is not elitist, does not give short shrift to the **subject-relativity** of well-being or ride rough shod over individual differences, does not confuse the prudential value of a life with other dimensions of value, and is not paternalist. In positive terms, unlike subjectivist conceptions of well-being, my conception of well-being can justify the time and energy we spend on trying to understand well-being, on striving for it in our own lives, and on wishing for it in the lives of others.



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Notes:

Lykken (1999), Chapter 2. Lykken emphasizes, however, that there is much we can ourselves do to live below or above our set point.

²Tiberius and Hall (2010), p. 213.

³Parfit (1986), p. 499.

⁴Arneson (1999), pp. 113–142.

⁵Sumner (1996).

⁶Ibid., pp. 164–65.

⁷Ibid., pp. 20–25, 164–165.

⁸Ibid., p. 93.

⁹Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 166.

¹¹Kashdan, et al. (2008), pp. 219–233. Tiberius and Plakias (2010), pp. 403–432, reject this view, but Tiberius and

Hall (2010) call it “a troubling implication of a theory of well-being,” p. 213.

¹²Haybron et al. (2013).

¹³Tiberius and Hall (2010), p. 220.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 214.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 220.

Sources:

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