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11 Objective Theories of Well-Being

According to a common formulation of utilitarianism, an act is morally permissible if and only if it maximizes total well-being. It is important for the utilitarian to investigate the theory of well-being, because many objections to utilitarianism are really objections to a particular theory of well-being rather than to the more general notion that we ought to maximize well-being. For example, the famous “doctrine of swine” objection to utilitarianism is not an objection to the claim that we ought to make people as well off as we can; it is an objection to the notion that to be well off is merely to be pleased.¹ There are many theories of well-being, but they are often divided into two sorts: objective theories and subjective theories. This chapter focuses on objective theories. I begin by attempting to explain what makes a theory objective; I then discuss some particular sorts of objective theories.

1. What is an objective theory of well-being?

Taxonomies of philosophical theories are not inherently interesting. But sometimes it can be useful to see that a bunch of theories have something important in common, so that when we see that a theory has that feature, we will know that the theory is likely to be vulnerable to a particular kind of objection. In this case, put very roughly, subjectivists about well-being argue that all objective theories face a worry about alienation: objective theories tell us that certain things are good for us whether we care about those things or not. But how could something be good for me if I didn’t care about it? Objectivists, on the other hand, point out that subjective theories entail that we can’t be wrong in what we care about, because there is no objective standard by which to judge our cares; things are good for us merely because we care about them, no matter how worthless, trivial, or immoral those things might be. But surely, says the objectivist, we can be mistaken about what is good for us.

But what is it that makes a theory subjective or objective? This turns out to be trickier than one might think. Here is how Dan Haybron characterizes subjectivism: “Subjectivism about well-being ... tells us that what ultimately benefits a person is *determined* by subjective psychological states like desires or pleasures.”²

These remarks might suggest the following distinction:

Subjectivism about well-being (version 1): An individual’s well-being is determined entirely by that individual’s own subjective psychological states.

Objectivism about well-being (version 1): An individual’s well-being depends at least in part on something other than that individual’s own subjective psychological states.

But there are different ways well-being might depend on, or be determined by, subjective psychological states. One way would be for subjective psychological states to themselves *be* the constituents of well-being. Haybron mentions pleasure as an example of the sort of psychological state that a subjectivist thinks determines well-being. Someone who thinks that pleasures determine one's level of well-being thinks that pleasures are themselves the fundamental constituents of well-being. On the other hand, subjective psychological states might determine well-being by *picking out* the constituents of well-being. If desire is the relevant psychological state, then what is good for someone is the object of the desire, not the desire itself. These are importantly different ways a psychological state can determine well-being, and it is the second way that subjectivists typically have in mind.

Before making a second pass at the distinction, let us distinguish between different sorts of subjective psychological states. On the one hand, there are *feelings*, such as heat, coldness, pressure, and (perhaps) pleasure and pain. On the other hand, there are *attitudes*, such as belief, desire, fear, hope, and the like. Attitudes are *about* something. Sometimes they are about propositions, such as when Jeff believes *that his pants are on fire*; sometimes, perhaps, they are about objects, such as when Buffy desires *a new bowling ball*. (Perhaps when the object of a desire seems to be a physical object such as a bowling ball, we should really think that it is a proposition, such as *that I have a bowling ball*. Perhaps it is easier to see how Buffy's having a bowling ball could be a constituent of Buffy's well-being than it would be to see how the ball itself could be a constituent of her well-being.) In this way attitudes are unlike feelings. The feeling of heat may be caused by a fire, but it is not *about* the fire.

It is natural to think that both feelings and attitudes are among the subjective states that a subjectivist thinks are relevant to well-being, and this is suggested by the quotation from Haybron. In fact, however, it is more typical for the subjectivist to say that only attitudes, and not feelings, are directly relevant to well-being. So, for example, consider how the subjective/objective distinction is drawn by L.W. Sumner and Richard Arneson:³

A subjective theory will map the polarity of welfare onto the polarity of attitudes, so that being well off will depend (in some way or other) on having a favourable attitude toward one's life (or some of its ingredients) ... On an objective theory ... something can be ... good for me though I do not regard it favourably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it.⁴

I would prefer to let the contrast between objective and subjective mark the contrast between (1) views which hold that claims about what is good can be correct or incorrect and that the correctness of a claim about a person's good is determined independently of that person's volition, attitudes, and opinions, and (2) views which deny this.⁵

Let us then understand subjectivism and objectivism in the following way:

Subjectivism about well-being (version 2): All the things that are good for an individual are good for her in virtue of her attitudes about them (e.g., in virtue of the fact that she desires them for their own sakes).

Objectivism about well-being (version 2): Some of the things that are good for an individual are good for her independently of her attitudes about them.

This will do for a start. But it may be easier to tell where the distinction should be drawn after we have seen examples of objective theories and how the subjectivist objects to them. So at the end of this chapter I will return to the classificatory question. I turn now to some specific sorts of objective theories.

2. Hedonism

Hedonism is the view that the only components of well-being are pleasure and pain.⁶ Pleasure is the sole positive welfare component, and pain is the sole negative welfare component. How well someone's life goes for her is determined by subtracting the total amount of pain she receives in her life from the total amount of pleasure she receives. At first blush, hedonism seems to be a form of objectivism, because pleasure makes one's life go better, and pain makes it go worse, no matter what one's attitude towards the pleasure or pain might be.

On one way of thinking about pleasure, however, hedonism turns out to be a version of subjectivism. On this view, what makes a feeling a feeling of pleasure is that the person having the feeling desires that it continue.⁷ This makes hedonism a sort of subjectivism, because whether a feeling is a pleasure, and hence whether that feeling contributes to well-being, depends on the attitude of the person having the feeling. This is an attractive view; it is certainly true that, in general, we want our pleasures to continue. But do we always want this? And couldn't there be feelings that we want to continue even though they are not pleasures? These are difficult questions. For the purposes of this chapter I will assume that pleasure is a distinct sort of feeling, not reducible to desire; thus I will take hedonism to be a sort of objectivism.⁸ I merely wish to flag the interesting point that, if hedonism is true, whether subjectivism or objectivism about well-being is true might depend on how we answer these difficult questions about the nature of pleasure.

Hedonism has a good deal of initial plausibility and explanatory power. First, it is very plausible that at least some pleasures increase our well-being, and that at least some pains decrease it. This perhaps puts some pressure on the anti-hedonist to explain how it could be that some pleasures and pains do not affect our well-being in this way. Second, concerning many of the things that we think of as being good or bad in some way, a plausible story can be told that links those things to pleasure or pain. This perhaps puts pressure on the anti-hedonist to show that there are some things about which no such story can be told. So anti-hedonists have

primarily given two sorts of objections to hedonism: that not all pleasures are good for us, and that some things other than pleasures are good for us.

It is often claimed that *false pleasures* are not good for us. Robert Nozick's well-known example of the "experience machine" is sometimes employed to show this.⁹ Imagine you could be hooked up to a machine that would give you any experiences you wanted to have. While in the machine you would think that everything that was happening was real (as in many science fiction movies). You would think you were dating famous models, playing center field for the Dodgers, climbing Mount Everest, or whatever would give you the most pleasure. Of course, you would not be doing any of those things. Many people say that they would not choose to be hooked up to such a machine. Perhaps they think that the pleasures they would get while in the machine would not be valuable. We can also think of less fanciful deceptions; if someone believes her spouse loves her and takes pleasure in this belief, while in fact, unbeknownst to her, her spouse only married her for the money and is cheating on her at every opportunity, we might think that the pleasure she takes in her marriage is not valuable to her.

It is also often claimed that *immoral pleasures* are not good for us. For example, the serial killer who derives great pleasure from torturing and murdering his innocent victims, and never gets caught or feels guilty about his actions, is not thereby well-off.

Hedonists might not be bothered by such objections. Regarding immoral pleasures, they might argue that the serial killer's pleasures *do* benefit him – and that in fact this partly explains why the situation is so appalling, since he so obviously does not deserve to be well-off.¹⁰ Regarding false pleasures, they might stick to their guns and say that ignorance can be bliss, or that what you don't know can't hurt you. Or they might say that, although people would prefer not to be plugged into an experience machine, this is not because they think they would be worse off if they did; rather, it is because they prefer to sacrifice some of their own well-being for the sake of other things, such as genuine relationships, commitments, or knowledge.¹¹

But there are other options for the hedonist. Mill famously claimed that pleasures come in different qualities, in addition to different quantities.¹² The pleasures of doing philosophy, enjoying artwork, or acting morally are higher quality pleasures than those of, for example, eating food. Perhaps Mill would have thought of immoral and false pleasures as low quality pleasures. More recently, several philosophers have endorsed impure or hybrid forms of hedonism in an effort to avoid these objections; I discuss these views below.

There is another, stronger objection to hedonism. It seems that some things other than pleasures are good for us. To see what sorts of things those might be, it is helpful to think about the experience machine again. What would a life on the experience machine be lacking? There are many candidates, including knowledge, achievement, virtue, and friendship. These things all seem to be good for us. However, the hedonist will argue that such things are good for us only if, and to the extent that, they improve the hedonic status of our lives. Imagine someone who has immense knowledge about the universe, but gets no enjoyment at all from this knowledge; or someone who has many friends, but does not enjoy any of these friendships even a little bit. Are these people well off?

These arguments and replies about the good life have been given at least since Plato's *Philebus* and probably longer than that. We will not resolve them here, so let us now turn to other objective theories, and see what sort of objective view we might hold if we are convinced by the anti-hedonist arguments.

3. Objective List Theories

Why think that only one thing can be good for us? Why not two, or ten? According to what is sometimes called the objective list theory, or pluralism, there are several things that are good or bad for us; when we arrive at a list of these things, we have reached rock-bottom in our investigation into the fundamental elements of well-being.¹³ No further explanation is possible.¹⁴

It is perhaps misleading to refer to "the" objective list theory. For there are many possible lists. The "theory" has no content until we identify the items on the list. Pleasure and pain are obvious candidates for the list. Other prominent candidates include achievement and failure, knowledge and false belief, virtue and vice, and friendship and loneliness. The objective list theorist might also wish to add what we might call "second-order" goods and evils to the list. For example, we might think that it is better to have a *variety* of goods in one's life than it is to have a similar quantity of very similar goods. Or we might think that it is better to have a life that *improves* over time than to have one that deteriorates, even if the sum of goods is the same: better to have the bad things in one's life closer to the beginning, and the good things toward the end, than vice versa.¹⁵ Since it is an objective list, all these things would be good or bad for someone no matter what that person thinks about it.

The objective list theory has some obvious strengths. It is immune to the objection that it leaves something out of the good life. Thus it seems to be invulnerable to, e.g., arguments based on experience machines and such. If you think something has been left out of the theory, then just add that thing to the list. As a result, many find the objective list theory more intuitively plausible than hedonism or other monistic theories. There are certain sorts of cases where it seems particularly important to employ an objective list theory. For example, consider a society in which women are systematically oppressed; they cannot go outside without being accompanied by a man, cannot go to school, have a job outside the home, etc. This seems like a deprived existence. But sometimes people can adapt to such situations. They sometimes find a way to be happy and satisfied even while being oppressed; they might even come to prefer such a lifestyle to one in which they would have more opportunities. Still, we want to say that not everything is all right. Even though they would not agree, their lives would be better if they had more freedom to acquire knowledge and achieve things. Yet from the perspective of the content-but-oppressed person, everything is fine and nothing is lacking. This shows, we might think, that our perspectives and our attitudes can be wrong, and that one can be inappropriately pleased or satisfied with how one's life is going.¹⁶

However, there are certain questions that it seems difficult or impossible for the objective list theory to answer. The most obvious question is why these things, rather than some other

things, are on the list. This question cannot, in principle, be answered by the objective list theory. There's just a list; that's the end of the story.

But is this a problem for the list theory? According to Roger Crisp there is a difference between "enumerative" and "explanatory" theories of well-being (*Reasons and the Good*, pp. 102–3).¹⁷ The list theory would count as an enumerative theory, because it tells us *which* things are good for us. It would not count as an explanatory theory, because it does not tell us *why* those things are on the list. We might take it as a defect of the list theory that it does not count as explanatory. But Crisp's distinction is ultimately not very helpful in identifying a special problem for objective list theories relative to other theories. Once we arrive at a fundamentally good thing, the only explanation of what it is that makes that thing good for us is *that it is the sort of thing that it is*. This is so whether it is the only fundamentally good thing or one of several. Thus, as Crisp says, "the hedonist ... will say that what makes accomplishment, enjoyable experiences, or whatever good for people is *their being enjoyable*."¹⁸

The objective list theorist will point out that explanation must stop somewhere; it's just that where explanation stops, the objective list theorist finds more than one thing. We should not look for deeper unity where there is none to be found. She might also point out that hedonism is not in an obviously better position on this score: why is only this one thing, pleasure, on the good list? The hedonist can't answer this question either. Perhaps the objection to the objective list theory relies on the natural thought that, for certain sorts of things at least, the question "how many of these things are there?" has some answers that seem less arbitrary than others. Zero, one, and infinitely many are non-arbitrary-seeming answers; three, eight, and 745,982 are arbitrary-seeming answers.¹⁹ But this depends on the sort of thing we are talking about. It is not arbitrary to say there are two kinds of elephant or 1,467,358,448 kinds of insect. That's just how many there are (let's say). We figured it out by counting them. Maybe we can just count up the intrinsic goods, and find out that there are five kinds. But is this a sufficient reply on behalf of the list theory? The fact that there are two kinds of elephant is not a brute, unexplainable fact. Evolutionary biologists can tell us a story about why there are two kinds of elephant. If there are exactly five sorts of things that are good for a person, this is, on the objective list story, a brute, unexplainable fact about the universe. This may be hard to believe.²⁰

But we should not rule out the theory on the basis of this general consideration before we look more closely at the particular candidates for the list. Begin with knowledge: are we better off just for knowing things, and are we worse off just for having false beliefs about things? If I think there are a million blades of grass in my yard, but in fact there are a million and one, am I worse off? Could my neighbor make me worse off by, unbeknownst to me, removing a blade of grass from my yard, thereby rendering one of my beliefs false (even if justified)? This will strike some as unlikely. But perhaps, just as the hedonist might try to account for objections involving worthless pleasures, the objective list theorist could try to account for worthless knowledge. Maybe some things are more worth knowing than others.²¹ How many blades of grass are on my lawn is not worth knowing, but the fundamental physical laws of the universe are worth knowing. Of course, the hedonist has an explanation for this: knowing the fundamental physical

laws is more likely to promote happiness than knowing how many blades of grass are in my yard. But is this the only thing that makes it worthwhile to know such things? We often behave as if we do not think so. People pursue knowledge even when they do not believe it will result in any pleasure for them or others. We donate money to universities and build expensive machines to explore outer space. Maybe we do these things for the sake of pleasure, but it is far from clear that this is so, since there are other things we could do that seem likely to promote pleasure or prevent pain more effectively. Of course, some would argue that if this is so, we should be doing those other things. Rather than use resources to fund universities or explore space, we should be preventing suffering by donating to Oxfam and such.

Achievement is another candidate for the list. To achieve something is, roughly, to put forth some efforts towards a goal, and for those efforts to be successful. Once again there seem to be things worth achieving and things not worth achieving; finding a cure for a deadly disease is worth achieving, while reaching level 50 on Angry Birds is not.²² So perhaps it is implausible to say that achievement *per se* is intrinsically good for us. The objective list theorist might say that it's better, for one who is trying to reach level 50 on Angry Birds, to be successful than to fail.²³ Or it could be argued that the value of an achievement depends on the value of what is achieved. But is it good to achieve something, valuable or not, if one would not be at all pained by failing, and would get no pleasure from succeeding?

Virtue is another plausible candidate. Certainly we want those we care about to be (at least to some extent) courageous, honest, and kind people. But this might just be because we think being virtuous is likely to make one better off instrumentally, by making other people like one more, etc. Or we might care that someone is virtuous without thinking that virtue is intrinsically good *for him*; we might think the universe is better for having virtuous people in it.

One way to try to figure out whether something is an element of well-being is to think about reward and punishment.²⁴ When someone has done something bad, we might try to punish that person by doing something that would negatively impact his well-being. Those with retributivist leanings might find it appropriate to punish someone by inflicting some pain, or preventing some pleasure, or preventing the person from getting what he wants. But it seems totally inappropriate to punish someone by making him more cowardly, dishonest, or miserly. Perhaps it is similarly strange to think of rewarding someone for a good deed by making her more beneficent. We might take this to be a reason to doubt that virtue and vice are components of well-being.

What about friendship, and more generally, loving relationships? These are perhaps the most important things one would miss in the experience machine; one would believe one had loving relationships with one's family and friends, but in fact one would have no such relationships. It is hard to see such an existence as being wonderful. On the other hand, friendships that bring no enjoyment seem rather pointless. We sometimes have to decide whether to put effort into maintaining a relationship with someone. Sometimes these decisions are not made on the basis of self-interest; we might maintain a relationship out of a sense of moral duty. But when this is not the case, it seems reasonable to decide not to maintain a relationship that is

bringing only annoyance or pain. (This might point us toward a hybrid view of well-being; see section 5.)

Suppose we find a list of goods we are happy with. Our work will still not be done. For another question remains: how are the items on the list to be weighed? We must have some way to determine how well someone's life goes, given that it has some combination of those goods.

A flatfooted thought is just to add up the values of the items on the list. For example, if Joe gets 10 units of pleasure, and 10 units of knowledge, and 10 units of virtue, his life would have a value of 30 for him. But how are the "units" to be determined across types of value? The choice of unit will be doing all the work here. The question of how to weigh the items on the list merely gets reformulated as the question of how to determine what counts as one unit of each sort of thing.

One thought would be that there is a *lexical ordering*.²⁵ For example, suppose that there are only two goods: pleasure and knowledge. We might think that pleasure always outweighs knowledge. When comparing two possible lives, we first look at which one contains more pleasure, and if one contains more, then it is better; if they are equal in pleasure, we then look at which one contains more knowledge. But this is very implausible; if knowledge really impacts well-being, how could it be that a tiny bit of pleasure could outweigh an enormous amount of knowledge? Since the amounts of pleasure in any two lives would almost never be identical, knowledge would effectively have little or no impact on well-being.

If there is no lexical ordering, what determines the relative values of the good things? This question might be impossible to answer for the objective list theorist. But once again, the hedonist has a similar problem: how can the positive values of pleasures and the negative values of pains be compared? Pleasure and pain are distinct feelings, and it is not clear how to compare one combination of pleasure and pain with another. This seems to be a problem for all objective views, but perhaps not a problem for subjective views. If what is good for an individual is getting what she wants, and what is bad is not getting what she wants, the goodness of getting what one wants and the badness of not getting what one wants may both be determined by the same thing: the degree of desire.

While it is initially plausible to say that such things as knowledge, virtue, friendship, and achievement are intrinsically good for us, we can see that it is also plausible to say that they are merely very important instrumental goods. Rather than just appeal to intuitive judgments about the values of these things, we might try to find a more general reason to think that these things must be on the list: an organizing principle for the list that tells us what goes on the list and why. Perfectionism promises to provide such an account. So we turn now to perfectionism.

4. Perfectionism

A promising thought about well-being is that what is good for us is determined by *what kind of thing we are*. But of course we are many kinds of thing: we are physical objects, living things, medium-sized things, intelligent and sentient things, walking things, ... What is good for

us cannot be determined by every sort of thing we are. Some of these kinds are special. They are the kind of thing we are in a more *fundamental* way. Right now I am a sitting thing, but this has little to do with making me what I am. Shortly I will be a standing thing, but I won't have undergone any fundamental change. Perfectionism requires us to begin with a metaphysical question: what is the *nature* of a human being? When we have answered that question, then perhaps we can derive the answer to what is good for us from it: to be well off is to perfect one's nature. Perhaps perfecting one's nature will involve such things as acquiring knowledge, achieving things, having friends, and enjoying oneself. Perfectionism promises to tell us what is going wrong with people who are contentedly oppressed: in a society in which some people are treated as less than fully human, those people fail to perfect their natures as humans, which is a tragedy for them.

It is no easy task to say what our nature is, and of course many will be skeptical that there is such a thing as human nature at all. As a first pass, we might say that our nature consists of the properties that are essential to us. This would rule out, e.g., being a sitting thing as being part of our nature. But it might also rule in other properties, such as being a physical object, that seem irrelevant to what is good for us. What would it be to perfect one's nature as a physical object? Some properties are essential to us, but do not make us *what we are*, at least in the sense we care about when thinking about what is good for us.

Thomas Hurka has defended a perfectionist view according to which what is valuable is the development of those properties that are essential to human beings "qua living things," or properties that are both essential to humans and distinctive of living things.²⁶ According to Hurka, this version of perfectionism entails that what is good for us is to develop our physical nature (to be healthy and physically fit), our theoretical rationality, and our practical rationality.²⁷ This seems to do a nice job of capturing at least some of the items on the pluralist's list of goods; for example, developing one's theoretical rationality involves acquiring knowledge; developing one's practical rationality involves acquiring (at least some) virtues.

We might wonder, though, whether it can capture all the goods that belong on the list. For example, pleasure seems like it ought to be on the list, but one can be healthy and rational without enjoying oneself. Perhaps the best that can be said for perfectionism is that it adds some unity to the list, which is nice, but does not completely unify the list.

A deeper problem for Hurka's view is that it seems to rely on an implausible view about what is essential to humanity. There are members of *homo sapiens* that do not have the properties identified by Hurka as essential to humanity: those with serious brain damage, and very young infants, for example, do not have the sort of rationality that is alleged by Hurka to be part of the human essence.

Furthermore, it is hard to see how to avoid ruling in some things that we don't want to rule in. Human beings can be cruel to one another and to other beings. Suppose cruelty turns out to be part of human nature; then it would turn out to be good for us to be cruel. This seems hard to accept.²⁸

5. Hybrid Views

Recall that one problem for hedonism was the problem of worthless pleasures: some things seem to be the wrong sort of thing to enjoy. Recall also that a problem for perfectionism is that it leaves pleasure out of the picture, and that a problem for, e.g., the view that friendship or knowledge is intrinsically valuable is that friendship or knowledge that brings no enjoyment seems pointless. We might try to solve all of these problems with a hybrid view. According to hybrid views, what is good for someone is to take pleasure in something that is worthy of having pleasure taken in it, or to want something good and get it. Several philosophers have endorsed or flirted with this sort of view, including Parfit, Wolf, Feldman, Adams, Darwall, Kagan, and Kraut.²⁹ The hybrid theory is “subjective” enough to avoid at least some worries about alienation such as those raised at the start of Section 1, because getting some allegedly good thing will not be deemed by the theory to benefit one unless one wants or enjoys that thing. But it is still an objective theory, because what things are worth enjoying or desiring is an objective matter. Furthermore, the hybrid view can account for the intuition that virtue is a component of well-being. As Shelly Kagan points out, on one way of thinking about virtue, virtue consists of loving the good; and one way to love something is to enjoy or desire it; so when one enjoys what is good, one is thereby virtuous.³⁰

But which are the sorts of things that are worthy of being enjoyed or desired? Here we face familiar problems. Perhaps there is just a list of things that are worthy of being enjoyed. Or perhaps the things that are worthy of being enjoyed are instances of perfecting someone’s nature.

Hybrid views also face another sort of problem.³¹ Suppose we think that the better an object of enjoyment is, the better it is to enjoy it.³² Some things seem appropriate objects of enjoyment, but have *indeterminate* values. For example, it is appropriate for me to enjoy the fact that my son is enjoying himself to some extent. But my son enjoying himself to some extent has indeterminate value. So how good is it for me that I enjoy my son’s enjoyment? It seems that the value of my enjoyment must be indeterminate for me. This would present complications for the consequentialist who thinks we ought to maximize well-being, for it will sometimes be indeterminate which option maximizes well-being, and therefore indeterminate whether some action is permissible.

6. Alienation

As mentioned in Section 1, the subjectivist has an argument against all the versions of objectivism stated so far. She says: how can pleasure, knowledge, virtue, perfecting one’s nature, or anything else be good for me if it is not something I care about? The perfectionist says I will be better off if I perfect my human nature. But I don’t care about my human nature, and why should I? How can I be wrong in failing to care about it?³³

If this is supposed to be an *argument* against objective theories, it is fair to ask why it should be convincing. Once we have grasped the distinction between objective and subjective

accounts of well-being, the alienation argument amounts to little more than pointing to the fact that objective theories are not subjective theories, and saying: “See? Objectivism can’t be true, because it is not subjectivism.” But subjectivism does have intuitive appeal. When we think of someone living a life doing things she is not interested in and does not care about, it is hard to think of her life as being good for her. The good life is supposed to seem attractive.

The strength of this argument might depend on the particular sort of objective theory it is leveled against. For example, if someone just doesn’t care about knowing things unless this helps her in some other way, it might seem right to say that knowing things isn’t good for her. On the other hand, if someone doesn’t want to experience any pleasure or doesn’t care about avoiding pain, we might well think something is wrong with her desires. “Why wouldn’t she want to avoid pain?” we might ask. This suggests that the alienation argument seems strong when leveled against a questionable candidate for the list, but loses force when employed against a more plausible candidate.

7. Reconsidering the Distinction

I now return to the distinction between objective and subjective theories. Recall that we distinguished subjectivism and objectivism in the following way:

Subjectivism about well-being (version 2): All the things that are good for an individual are good for her in virtue of her attitudes about them (e.g., in virtue of the fact that she desires them).

Objectivism about well-being (version 2): Some of the things that are good for an individual are good for her independently of her attitudes about them.

There are reasons to think that this way of distinguishing the theories cannot be right. So I would like to suggest a tempting revision, even though it may also be unsatisfactory.

Consider the following view about well-being. What is good for someone is wanting something and getting it; what is bad for someone is wanting something and not getting it. This is a version of desire-satisfactionism about well-being. It sounds like a subjective theory of well-being, and it won’t be subject to any worries about alienation. But given version 2, it counts as an objective theory. This is because it attributes value to the combination of my wanting something and getting it, and that combination is good for me no matter what my attitude is about that combination.

The reason this is interesting is that there are two distinct versions of desire satisfactionism, the “object view” (according to which it is *the thing desired* that is good) and the “combo view” (according to which the *combination* of desiring the thing and getting the thing is good), that give us exactly the same results concerning which lives contain more well-being than which – but given version 2 of our distinction between theories, one of those is a subjective view and the other is objective. The difference between the views is to be found not in how much value there is in a given life, but in *where that value is located*: in the objects of the person’s

desires, or in combinations of the person's desires and their objects. And we might well wonder, given that this is the case, why we should worry about the distinction between objective and subjective theories. The mere fact that one theory is subjective and another theory is objective does not necessarily lead to any distinction in how they evaluate lives. In fact, it might be that every subjective theory has an objective counterpart that yields the same results.

We might think that this shows that version 2 draws the distinction between subjective and objective views improperly. We might be tempted to redraw the distinction to get these desire-satisfactionist views on the same side of the divide. Here is one way we might do that:

Subjectivism about well-being (version 3): All the things that are good for an individual involve that individual's desires in some way.

Objectivism about well-being (version 3): Some of the things that are good for an individual do not in any way involve that individual's desires.

It is important that we restrict the relevant attitudes to desires; otherwise we would risk misclassifying as subjective, e.g., the view that knowledge is intrinsically good, since knowledge involves an individual's pro-attitudes (viz. her beliefs). Version 3 gets both the combo and object versions of desire satisfactionism on the subjectivist side of the divide. The combo view counts as subjective because the good things include desires as parts; the object view counts as subjective because the good things are objects of desires. But does version 3 include too many theories as subjective? Consider the following wild view: what is intrinsically good for me is the combination of some item on the objective list and my desire that $2 + 2 = 4$. According to this view, what is good for me involves my desires in some way. But it is *the wrong way*, from the standpoint of a subjectivist. This wild view would be subject to all the worries about alienation that motivate the move to subjectivism in the first place. So the challenge in formulating subjectivism is to say something sufficiently specific about how an individual's desires are related to what is good for her, without saying something so specific that, e.g., combo views do not count as subjective.

It might be that philosophers – subjectivists, in particular – are led to believe that there is an important distinction between objective and subjective theories of well-being for reasons having little to do with judgments about what sorts of lives are valuable. They might rather be motivated by metaphysical and epistemological concerns. A likely motivation for being a subjectivist about well-being is a commitment to a naturalistic metaphysical worldview that does not allow for an irreducible, non-natural property of goodness for an individual (this may be in part because of epistemological worries about such properties). If you are suspicious of such properties, but you believe that some things are good for you and some things are bad for you, it is natural to think that all this amounts to is that you want or like some things and don't want or like others. Certain things seem to have the glow of goodness about them, but this just means we want them; other things seem to have the stench of badness emanating from them, but this just means we are averse to them.

If we had subjectivist leanings, we might find the combo view problematic. It seems to require a property of goodness for an individual that is not itself reducible to wanting or liking, even though it states that wantings are part of what is good for an individual. The object view does not require such a property; one who defends the object view can say that the property of being *good for* an individual just is the property of being *desired by* that individual. Now, the defender of the combo view might try to say something similar: that the property of being good for an individual *just is* the property of being a combination of desiring something and getting that thing.³⁴ But the glow of goodness and the stench of badness do not seem to emanate from such combinations, as they seem to emanate from things we desire and things to which we are averse. In light of this, the subjectivist may wish to stick to her guns and place the combo view on the objectivist side of the divide after all.³⁵

NOTES

¹ J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Collected Works*, vol. X, p. 210.

² Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, p. 13 (his emphasis); also see Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 33, and Ferkany, “The Objectivity of Wellbeing,” pp. 474–5.

³ Also see Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 32 and Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 499.

⁴ Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, p. 38.

⁵ Arneson, “Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction,” p. 115.

⁶ For recent defenses of hedonism see Goldstein, “Pleasure and Pain”; Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*; Crisp, “Hedonism Reconsidered” and *Reasons and the Good*; Mendola, Goodness and Justice; and Bradley, *Well-Being and Death*.

⁷ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 42; see Heathwood, “The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire,” for a recent defense of this sort of view.

⁸ On the view of pleasure espoused by Fred Feldman in *Pleasure and the Good Life*, pleasure is not a feeling at all, but an attitude. But it is the having of the attitude that is good for someone, not the object of the attitude. So his version of hedonism counts as objective given version 2 of the distinction between subjective and objective views..

⁹ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 42–45.

¹⁰ Goldstein, “Pleasure and Pain.”

¹¹ Kawall, “The Experience Machine and Mental State Theories of Well-Being.”

¹² J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Collected Works*, vol. X, Ch. II.

¹³ As Eden Lin has pointed out to me, in principle there is no reason one could not be a pluralist and a subjectivist, or a monist and an objectivist (hedonism is an example of the latter). So it is not ideal to identify the objective list theory with pluralism. But the name ‘objective list theory’ has attached to pluralist views, for better or worse, thanks to Parfit’s influence (Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 493).

¹⁴ See Ross, *The Right and the Good*, Ch. V for a classic objective list view.

¹⁵ C.I. Lewis, *The Ground and Nature of the Right*, p. 68.

¹⁶ This sort of argument has been widely discussed; for one example see Nussbaum 2001.

¹⁷ Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, pp. 102–3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103

¹⁹ See David Lewis's discussion of possible sizes of spacetime (Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, p. 103).

²⁰ Thanks to Chris Heathwood for discussion of this thought.

²¹ Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 145–9.

²² Note to readers of the distant future: long ago, Angry Birds was a video game popular with children (I'm told).

²³ Keller, "Welfare and the Achievement of Goals."

²⁴ See also Brad Hooker's "Sympathy Test" ("Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent?" pp. 149–55).

²⁵ For an example of a lexical view see Ross, *The Right and the Good*, Ch. VI; Ross is concerned with goodness *simpliciter* rather than well-being but the issues are the same.

²⁶ Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 16.

²⁷ Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 37.

²⁸ See Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," for a recent critical discussion of arguments in favor of perfectionism.

²⁹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 501–2; Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*; Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, pp. 93–101; Darwall, "Valuing Activity"; Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good"; Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good"; Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*.

³⁰ Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," pp. 261–2.

³¹ For a detailed explanation of this argument see Lemos, "Indeterminate Value, Basic Value, and Summation."

³² Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," pp. 263–4.

³³ Railton, "Facts and Values," p. 9.

³⁴ Thanks to Chris Heathwood for pointing this out to me and to Eden Lin for helpful clarification.

³⁵ Thanks to Ben Eggleston, Chris Heathwood, Eden Lin, and Dale Miller for helpful comments on a previous draft. Thanks also to Dale Dorsey, Kris McDaniel and David Sobel for helpful discussion of the arguments discussed herein.