

DORSEY'S WELFARE SUBJECTIVISM

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Dale Dorsey's *A Theory of Prudence* is a rich and fascinating book that sets out in great detail a formidable and comprehensive account of prudence and well-being. In what follows I will focus on just one aspect of his theory: his version of subjectivism about well-being. Although I think subjectivism is false, I will not raise objections to subjectivism in general; rather I'll argue that subjectivists have good reason to prefer an alternative way of understanding their view.

I. TWO VERSIONS OF SUBJECTIVISM

Perhaps surprisingly, it is not trivial to say exactly what all subjectivist theories of well-being have in common. An individual's subjective mental states will play some role in that individual's well-being; but what role? The two main options are what we could call a "conferring" role, which Dorsey prefers, and a "constitutive" role, which I will defend.

According to Dorsey's version of subjectivism, something is valuable for someone only if they value it. This is what Dorsey calls the "Good-Value Link" (Dorsey 2021, 80). Dorsey points out that this link has been endorsed in various forms by

philosophers at least since Hobbes (Dorsey 2021, 36). On this way of thinking about things, value gets *conferred* on things by the valuing attitudes of valuers.¹

There is another way of formulating subjectivism. According to what Dorsey calls the “D-state view,” what is good for S is the *combination* of S valuing P and P. Call that combination a “D-state.” The difference between Dorsey’s view and the D-state view concerns the bearers of value. According to Dorsey, the value bearer is the object of the valuing attitude; according to the D-state view, the value bearer is the D-state. Since D-states are valuable whether or not anyone values them, the D-state view is incompatible with the Good-Value Link. Subjective attitudes enter into well-being by being *constituents* of the bearers of value rather than by conferring value on things.

The distinction between conferring views and constitutive views is a difference concerning where the intrinsic value is located, not a difference concerning whether something intrinsically good is happening; as such it may seem like a trivial bookkeeping difference (Bradley 2014, 213-15). If I want to be playing tennis, and I am playing tennis, something good is happening to me. How well things are going for me is determined by the strength of my wanting. On this much both views agree. The conferring view locates the goodness in the tennis-playing; the constitutive view locates it in the combination of the tennis-playing and the wanting of it. Does the location matter? Dorsey says it matters a great deal; in fact he does not think the D-state view

¹ Compare e.g. Korsgaard: “Value is, as I have put it, ‘conferred’ by choice” (1983, 183).

really qualifies as a version of subjectivism, due to the argument I discuss in the next section. If that is right, and the arguments of this paper are successful, then subjectivism is in trouble, because the D-state view offers the most straightforward way for the subjectivist to avoid contradiction.

II. DORSEY'S ARGUMENT AGAINST D-STATES

As we've seen, the D-state view is incompatible with the Good-Value Link. It is also incompatible with some closely related views. Dorsey points out that if we accept the D-state view, we must reject "Existence Internalism", or the view that in order for something to be good for someone, they must be motivated by it (Dorsey 2021, 37; Rosati 1996). D-states themselves are not generally motivational; only the object of a desire is motivational. Existence Internalism is closely related to the "Resonance Constraint," according to which nothing can be good for someone unless it resonates with them (Dorsey 2021, 39-42; Railton 1986). They must find it appealing; it can't leave them cold. Again, D-states might not be appealing to someone even though they are good for that person. So the D-state view must reject both Existence Internalism and the Resonance Constraint.

Those who find these principles intuitively compelling will see this as a reason to prefer Dorsey's conferral view. But the two principles are very similar to Dorsey's view itself. In fact the Good-Value Link is essentially just a version of the resonance constraint. What can be said in favor of Dorsey's preferred cluster of views?

For Dorsey, the important difference between the conferral and constitutive views concerns the *explanatory role* of valuing. Here is what Dorsey says:

For the state-based view,... the prudential ordering for x at t will not be a product of x 's desires at t , because the intrinsic value of particular goods on a state-based account is not *explained by* x 's desires. On a state-based view, a prudential ordering will consist—for all persons at all times—of an infinitely long list of desire-and-satisfaction pairs. (Dorsey 2021, 46, my emphasis)

One important clue that you have an objective rather than a subjective view at hand is that in providing an *explanation of* why the relevant value bearers are valuable, the view in question provides answers that are entirely independent of a person's pro-attitudes. (Dorsey 2021, 88, my emphasis)

As I understand it, the problem is not that the list is infinite, but that it contains desire-and-object pairs that contain every possible desire for something, not just the desires the person has. If I desired to degree n to eat this paper, then it would be intrinsically good to degree n for me to eat it; so the desire-object pair has intrinsic value of n for me, according to the D-state view. And of course the same would be true of everyone; for every valuer, exactly the same things would be intrinsically good for them. That's the part that Dorsey thinks is wrong. While he agrees that it *would* be good for me to eat the paper, if I desired to, he denies that it *is* good for me to desire and eat the paper given that I don't have the desire. This is a substantial difference, he thinks, because he says

there is a very different *explanation* of the change in well-being that would result were I to acquire and satisfy that desire. I take it that the difference is as follows: on Dorsey's view, something that wasn't good for me *became* good for me when I acquired the desire; whereas on the D-state view, *something that was good for me all along* was realized by my acquiring the desire and satisfying it.

But I don't think this is an essential difference between the approaches. There is a way to understand the D-state view according to which it is relevantly similar to Dorsey's view. Dorsey understands the D-state view as ascribing value to all desire-object combinations whether they obtain or not. But the D-state view could instead be understood as follows: combinations of desires and their objects *would be* good for an individual were they to obtain. But they *are not* good for that individual unless they do obtain. This would be in effect Noah Lemos's view about the bearers of intrinsic value, but applied to well-being: "we might say, speaking very loosely, of the states of affairs *everyone's being wise and happy* and *everyone's being perfectly just* not that these states of affairs *are* good, but that they *would be* good if they were to obtain" (Lemos 2005, 185, his emphasis). Abstract objects such as non-obtaining states of affairs or propositions are, on this Lemosian view, not the sorts of things that are intrinsically good; they must be concretized in order to have value. On the Lemosian way of thinking about the bearers of value, when an individual values something, and the object of the valuing obtains, the valuing *does* play an explanatory role in something being intrinsically good

for that individual. (It only plays half that role—the other half being played by the object of the valuing—but still an essential role.) Thus, on this way of thinking about things, different things are intrinsically good for different valuers. So what Dorsey is objecting to is not in fact anything essential to the D-state view; rather, his objection is to the view that D-states are good for someone whether they obtain or not.

(It can be difficult to see why it is so important to distinguish between the claim that *X* is good for *S* and the claim that *X would be* good for *S* if *X* were to obtain. I happen to think nothing very important can possibly ride on this distinction. But subjectivists who agree with Dorsey that it is important need not thereby feel forced to accept Dorsey's version of subjectivism.)

So I don't think the explanatory argument for Dorsey's conferral view will work; valuing attitudes can explain what is valuable even on a constitutive view. Still, some will find the Good-Value Link, or Existence Internalism, or the Resonance Constraint, to be independently plausible. The D-state view is incompatible with these principles. There may be similar principles to which the D-state defender can appeal. For example, they could say that nothing is good for someone unless it consists of that person occupying a motivational or conative state towards something. Or, if they endorse the version of the view introduced in the previous paragraph, they would say that nothing is good for someone unless that individual actually occupies a motivational or conative state towards something. Defenders of subjectivism should consider whether something

like these replacement principles could be sufficiently satisfying, because as I'll show next, Dorsey's conferral view has a consequence that is difficult to accept.

III. THE MOOREAN ARGUMENT FOR D-STATES

Moore's *Ethics* contains an extended argument against varieties of subjectivism about rightness and goodness. Here is an excerpt from one such argument:

Thus it may be held that to say that a thing is 'good' is the same thing as to say that somebody thinks it is good... Again it may be held that each man when he calls a thing 'good' or 'bad' merely means that he himself thinks it to be so or has some feeling towards it; a view from which it will follow, as in the case of right and wrong, that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether a thing is good or bad. Again, also, in most of the forms in which it can be held, it will certainly follow that one and the same thing can be both good and bad; since, whatever pair of mental attitudes or single mental attitude we take, it seems as certain here, as in the case of right and wrong, that different men will sometimes have different mental attitudes towards the same thing. (Moore 1912/2005, 81)

Moore's charge is that subjectivism entails the absurd claim that something can be both intrinsically good and intrinsically bad. The version of subjectivism Moore attacks here is not widely held today, and Dorsey himself does not hold it. However, his conferral view shares an important feature with it, leaving his view vulnerable to the same kind of problem. Whereas Moore's argument rests on the possibility of *different* people

having conflicting mental attitudes towards something, my argument will focus on the possibility of a *single* person having conflicting mental attitudes.

All of us are incoherent valuers in various ways. We have inconsistent desires, intransitive preferences, and so on. To adapt a famous example, Pierre strongly wants to visit beautiful Londres, but also is deeply averse to visiting ugly, smelly, overcrowded London (Kripke 1979). He does not realize they are the same city. Pierre's values are inconsistent. That inconsistency should not pose a problem for subjectivism. Pierre does face practical problems, because whether he visits London or not, something bad will happen to him by subjectivists' lights. This may make it harder for Pierre to live a good life, but that is a personal problem, not an objection to subjectivism. But if Dorsey's preferred kind of subjectivism is true, *we* are forced into contradictions in our attempts to describe Pierre's welfare. We must say of Pierre that one and the same thing, visiting London, is both intrinsically good for him (because he wants it, under one guise) and intrinsically bad for him (because he is averse to it, under another).

This is not yet a contradiction, but contradiction looms when we introduce a plausible principle linking goodness and betterness. We would get a contradiction if we endorsed, for example, a definition of intrinsic goodness in terms of intrinsic betterness (revised to apply to goodness-for): P is intrinsically good for S iff P is better for S than not-P is for S (Brogan 1919, 98; von Wright 1963, 34; Hansson and Grüne-Yanoff 2009).

This would give us the result that $P > \text{not-}P$ and $\text{not-}P > P$; if we assume, plausibly, that betterness is asymmetric, we have a contradiction.

The D-state view is immune to the problem raised here. If S desires that P and S desires that not-P, the following two states are intrinsically good for S:

S desires that P and P

S desires that not-P and not-P.

And the following two states are intrinsically bad for S:

S desires that P and not-P

S desires that not-P and P.

There are four distinct states of affairs here, two of which are intrinsically good and two of which are intrinsically bad; there is no single state that is both intrinsically good for S and intrinsically bad for S. So no contradiction arises.

Dorsey is aware of the possibility of an agent having contradictory attitudes towards something. He endorses the following coherence constraint on values: “a necessary condition for x to value φ is that x would take the relevant valuing attitude toward φ were x’s valuing attitudes rendered coherent... I only mean to suggest that one’s evaluative beliefs should not offer inconsistent evaluative verdicts concerning individual bearers of intrinsic prudential value” (2021, 144; see also Dorsey 2017b, 204). Dorsey offers two reasons for endorsing this constraint; (i) “when someone maintains incoherent valuing attitudes, it can be unclear, ultimately, what he values” (Dorsey

2021, 144); and (ii) there are cases of “evaluative self-deception” where someone pretends not to have certain values, but deep down really has them, resulting in inconsistency between the person’s valuing attitudes and what they genuinely value (Dorsey 2021, 145-7). We could take the Moorean argument just presented as providing a third, and to my mind more compelling, reason to endorse a coherence constraint: without such a constraint, the conferral view entails contradictions.

I see two problems for the coherence constraint. First, consider Inconsistent Irma, who strongly desires to take steps to render her attitudes more coherent and believes this would be intrinsically good for her. If the coherence condition is true, Inconsistent Irma does not value taking steps to render her attitudes coherent. Were her valuing attitudes rendered coherent per the coherence constraint, she would not believe it would be good for her to take such steps, because it would be unnecessary for her; thus she would not value taking those steps. But she does value that. So the coherence constraint is not true, at least as Dorsey formulates it.

Second, as Dorsey notes, there will be cases in which there is no unique way to render an inconsistent valuer’s attitudes coherent (145). Suppose the agent intrinsically values both ϕ and its negation; it may be false to say that were the agent’s values rendered coherent, they would value ϕ , and also false to say that were the agent’s values rendered coherent, they would value not- ϕ . Some coherence renderings would go one way, and some the other. In response Dorsey says: “in cases like this, my view is

that a person's evaluative perspective is genuinely incoherent" (2021, 145; 2017b, 205).

But if this means that the person genuinely values φ and its negation, the contradictions remain. The Moorean argument prevents Dorsey from allowing for any exceptions to the coherence constraint.

A different response is suggested elsewhere. In "Why Should Welfare 'Fit'?" Dorsey offers the following suggestion about how to deal with incoherent valuers: "One natural response would simply be to say that the extent to which this state bears the kinship relation to Esther — and is hence eligible to be a welfare good for Esther — is indeterminate" (Dorsey 2017a, 707). I take it the upshot of this suggestion is that in cases where someone has inconsistent valuing attitudes towards something, it is indeterminate whether the person values that thing. This would get Dorsey out of the contradiction.

First it is worth noting that this response is at odds with the idea that someone can have a genuinely incoherent evaluative perspective. For if, in cases where someone has conflicting pro-attitudes towards something, it is indeterminate whether the person values that thing, their values are perfectly coherent. Dorsey still must give up the idea that it is possible to have a genuinely incoherent evaluative perspective.

It strikes me as not obviously correct to say that it is indeterminate whether someone values something in a case where they have conflicting pro-attitudes towards it. For this will have the effect of masking genuine distinctions between valuers.

Consider someone who, rather than having contradictory attitudes towards something, simply has an indeterminate attitude towards it. Perhaps they just aren't sure what to feel about it; they kind of believe it is good for them, but they haven't decided. Or perhaps they are very young and are just gradually developing the capacity to value things, and thus it is as yet indeterminate whether they value a particular thing. In such cases, the person doesn't have contradictory attitudes. But their evaluative perspective would, on Dorsey's view, be identical to the perspective of the person with contradictory attitudes, at least so far as their attitudes towards the relevant thing are concerned. That doesn't seem right to me.

Another implication of this view will be that we often do not know what we value. Consider Pierre again. He thinks he values visiting Londres, and disvalues visiting London. But since these attitudes conflict, it is indeterminate (on the version of the coherence constraint we are now considering) whether he values visiting Londres or not. Pierre is wrong about whether he (determinately) values certain things, for reasons that are inaccessible to him given his evidence. This could be true of all of us!

IV. CONCLUSION

The D-state view doesn't require us to have a coherence constraint, because it doesn't generate any risk of contradictions. So the D-state view is straightforwardly compatible with the following plausible claims: Inconsistent Irma values making her values more coherent; it is possible to have an incoherent evaluative perspective; the

evaluative perspective of the person with conflicting attitudes and the evaluative perspective of the ambivalent or developing valuer are different; and we generally are in a position to know what we determinately value. There may be ways for Dorsey to get these results, but it is not obvious what they are. This strikes me as a good reason to prefer the D-state view over Dorsey's. Furthermore, as I explained in Section II, Dorsey's argument against the D-state view does not work; the D-state view is compatible with the idea that an individual's values explain what is good for them. The D-state view is incompatible with the Existence Condition and the Resonance Constraint, but these principles are so close to Dorsey's actual view that they cannot provide independent support for it. To my mind, the balance of reasons favors the D-state view over Dorsey's.

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