Desire, Aversion, and Welfare

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Abstract: According to desire satisfactionism, well-being consists in getting what you desire. Recently, several theorists have suggested that this view should be extended to claim that ill-being consists in getting what you are averse to. I argue that both of these paradigmatic claims are false. As I show, desire and aversion are indeed both relevant to well-being and ill-being—in fact, perhaps surprisingly, each attitude has unique effects on both our well-being and ill-being. However, these effects are a matter of the unique feelings desire and aversion produce. The paradigmatic desire satisfactionist approach—and, I argue, a surprisingly wide variety of desire satisfactionist views—cannot properly capture the relevance of these feelings, and thus the relevance of desire and aversion, to well-being and ill-being, and should therefore be abandoned.

Keywords: desire satisfactionism; well-being; ill-being; welfare; desire; aversion

1. Introduction

Theories of well-being or welfare ultimately aim to tell us which things are basically good and bad for us, or which things are the basic constituents of our well-being and ill-being. According to *desire satisfactionism*, well-being consists in the satisfaction of desire, or in getting what we want. More precisely, it consists in our desiring something—say, that our favorite team wins—and that thing actually ('objectively') obtaining.

Which things are basically *bad* for us, on this theory? That is, which things are the basic constituents of our *ill*-being? This is a question that any complete theory of well-being must answer. Recently, several theorists have argued that the most plausible answer, for desire satisfactionism, is this: ill-being consists in the satisfaction of *aversion*, or in getting what we are *averse* to (Heathwood 2022, Kelley 2022, Pallies 2022).[1] That is, it consists in being averse to something—say, missing your flight—and that thing actually or 'objectively' obtaining. Thus, just as you are made better off just in case and to the extent you desire X and X obtains, on the theory, so you are made worse off just in case and to the extent you are averse to X and X obtains. This leaves the desire satisfactionist with a tidy symmetry: the pro-attitude of desire entirely captures the positive side of well-being, while desire's corresponding con-attitude, namely aversion, captures the negative side. I'll therefore call these desire satisfactionist theses (see Heathwood 2022, Pallies 2022, and especially Kelley 2022):

> *Desire-Good*: the (objective) satisfaction of positive desire is basically good for subjects, and it is the only thing that is basically good for them.

> *Aversion-Bad*: the (objective) satisfaction of aversion is basically bad for subjects, and it is the only thing that is basically bad for them.[2]

And, taken together, I'll call these *DG-AB*.

Desire-Good is well known, and represents the paradigmatic desire satisfactionist view. Aversion-Bad has only been advanced more recently, but seems the most plausible way of extending

[1] Here I follow e.g. Heathwood (2022) in calling an aversion 'satisfied' just in case its object obtains.
[2] While Pallies (2022: 598, 619) defends weaker claims than these, he does suggest that positive desire has 'wholly positive significance' for well-being, and that aversion has 'wholly negative significance' for well-being, which accords with the spirit of what I intend to challenge here. More on the terms 'positive desire' and 'aversion' below.

the paradigmatic desire satisfactionist view. Here, I'll argue that both claims are false. In fact, since my arguments against DG-AB will generalize, I'll argue that a wide variety of desire satisfactionist views are false. As I'll show, desire and aversion are indeed both relevant to our well-being and ill-being—in fact, perhaps surprisingly, each attitude has unique effects on both our well-being and ill-being. However, these effects are a matter of the unique feelings desire and aversion produce. Very many desire satisfactionist views, including DG-AB, cannot properly capture the unique influences of these feelings, and thus the unique influences of desire and aversion, on well-being and ill-being, and should therefore be abandoned.

2. Positive desire, aversion, well-being, and ill-being

The first thing I want to establish is that our everyday conception of 'desire' in fact captures two distinct, and importantly related, psychological phenomena. Following several others, I'll call these *positive desire* and *aversion* (Schroeder 2004, Sinhababu 2017). Whereas positive desires are fundamentally 'for' things, aversions are fundamentally 'against' things. The idea that desire in the wider sense covers both these phenomena is explained by the fact that, in general, we have a similar stance toward getting what we are 'for' as we do toward avoiding what we are 'against'—in each case, there is something we *want*. Take, for instance, my desire for a delicious meal, and compare this with my desire not to miss my flight. While in each case I desire something, my positive desire (for the meal) seems markedly different from my aversion (to missing my flight). For one, typically, positive desires are desires for some *p*, whereas aversions are desires for some not-*p*. But to be averse to something is not simply to have a positive desire for the thing's opposite. Indeed, despite being psychological parallels, the attitudes seem to be realized in distinct portions of the brain, explaining the more important distinguishing feature between the two.[3] In particular, the two forms

[3] See Schroeder 2004 (ch. 5) for discussion of the neuroscientific evidence here.

of desire come with different emotional profiles, and are fundamentally associated with distinct types of feelings. My desire to eat a delicious meal, for example, is a positive desire. It makes me prone to experience joy or delight if I satisfy it, and disappointment if I do not. My desire not to miss my flight, alternatively, is an aversion. It makes me prone to experience anxiety or dread if I satisfy it, and relief if I do not. In each case, then, it seems natural to say there is something I desire, yet the desires seem importantly different. This difference is partly captured by a difference in feeling: delight and disappointment in the case of positive desire, and anxiety and relief in the case of aversion.

These are our two kinds of desire. As I've mentioned, a number of theorists have recently suggested extending desire satisfactionism to account for both types, leading them to DG-AB. It's now crucial to note, though, that the above characterization of the attitudes' distinct emotional profiles is only roughly correct. To be more precise, note that whether I ultimately experience the feelings will not depend on whether the desires are actually satisfied, or whether the desires' objects in fact obtain. Instead, it will depend on whether I *take* the desires to be satisfied, or whether the desires' objects *appear* to me to obtain.[4] In other words, whether our desires produce these feelings depends on whether they are *subjectively* satisfied, and not on whether they are *objectively* satisfied. I may experience delight, for instance, at the thought of ordering my favorite meal, even if, unknown to me, the meal is actually sure to be terrible. Similarly, I may experience relief at the thought of getting to the airport on time even if, unknown to me, my flight has actually left without me. In each case, then, whether I experience these feelings will depend on my thoughts about the desires'

[4] Again, see e.g. Schroeder 2004 and Sinhababu 2017. More precisely, the feelings seem to be entailed by changes in subjective probability. See especially Schroeder 2004 (74-75, 132-33) and Sinhababu 2017 (28-29). I feel delight upon ordering my favorite meal, for instance, because my subjective probability of getting a delicious meal has sharply increased. And I feel relief upon arriving to the airport because my subjective probability of missing my flight has sharply decreased. For brevity, I'll call these increases and decreases in subjective probability 'subjective satisfaction' and 'subjective frustration'.

obtaining, rather than on facts about whether they actually do obtain. And, in each case, the *type* of feelings I experience will depend on the type of desire I have.

Regarding these feelings, it seems clear that experiences of joy and delight are pleasant, and that experiences of disappointment are unpleasant. Similarly, it seems clear that experiences of relief are pleasant, and that experiences of anxiety and dread are unpleasant. Moreover, it seems clear that, at least compared to a baseline state of indifference, these feelings can make our experiences better or worse. Insofar as good or bad experiences are good or bad for us, then, it seems that experiencing these feelings can be better or worse for us than experiencing the baseline state of indifference. That is, experiences of joy, delight, and relief are at least prima facie good for us to experience, whereas experiences of disappointment, dread, and anxiety are at least prima facie bad for us to experience—again, at least, compared to indifference.

This is a crucial point for my purposes, so it may help to illustrate it. As a baseline, take a day-long life that's spent doing nothing but emotionlessly staring at a wall. Call this life (B). Now compare (B) with two further lives:

(1) A day-long life consisting of nothing but the feelings of joy and delight associated with a positive desire's apparent satisfaction—of soon getting pizza, seeing one's partner, one's favorite team winning, etc.

(2) A day-long life consisting of nothing but the feelings of anxiety and dread associated with an aversion's apparent satisfaction—of missing one's flight, soon being covered in spiders, soon dying, etc.

Here I'll merely report my own intuitions, but I suspect others will agree: (1) is better for the person living it than (B), and (2) is worse for the person living it than (B). It is at least *somewhat* better for the

person whose life it is to have (constant) positive feelings of joy and delight than to have no feelings at all, and it is at least *somewhat* worse for the person whose life it is to have (constant) negative feelings of anxiety and dread than it is to have no feelings at all.[5] Denying these claims effectively amounts to claiming that (2) is no worse than (1), or that we should be indifferent between the two. I find this deeply implausible. This suggests that the feelings associated with positive desire satisfaction and those associated with aversion satisfaction are indeed prima facie good and bad for us, respectively.[6]

Thus far, our comparison of lives may capture the intuitive draw of DG-AB. After all, the feelings associated with positive desire satisfaction have a prima facie link to what is good for us, while the feelings associated with aversion satisfaction have a prima facie link to what is bad for us.[7] Importantly, though, this is not the whole story, for at least two reasons. The first is that, as we've seen, positive desire and aversion are each associated with both positive and negative feelings. This suggests that, insofar as the positive feelings associated with one attitude are relevant to what is good for us, the negative feelings associated with the attitude will be relevant to what is bad for us, and vice versa. And, indeed, this seems to be what we find. To see this, next compare (B) with two additional lives:

(3) A day-long life consisting of nothing but the feelings of disappointment associated with a positive desire's apparent frustration—of one's pizza never arriving or being unavailable, never being able to see one's partner, one's favorite team losing, etc.

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[5] For recent work on the reliability of our evaluative intuitions regarding pleasant and unpleasant feelings, see Lee forthcoming and Sinhababu 2024.

[6] Admittedly, it might be claimed that it is the subjective satisfaction of desire itself that's good (or bad) for one here, rather than the feelings. However, if we hold fixed the feelings in (e.g.) (1) while removing the subjective desire satisfaction (if this is indeed possible—see fn. 11), (1) intuitively still seems better than (B).

[7] Indeed, cases motivating views like DG-AB typically include some appeal to these feelings—without them, DG-AB seems to lose much of its luster. See especially Heathwood 2022 (46-48).

(4) A day-long life consisting of nothing but the feelings of relief associated with an aversion's apparent frustration—of arriving to the airport on time, a looming deadline being extended, realizing it is the weekend upon waking, etc.

Again, I can only report my own intuitions, but I suspect others will agree: (3) is worse for the person living it than (B), and (4) is better for the person living it than (B). It is at least *somewhat* worse for the person whose life it is to have (constant) negative feelings of disappointment than it is to have no feelings at all, and it is at least *somewhat* better for the person whose life it is to have (constant) feelings of relief than it is to have no feelings at all. When we focus just on the pleasant feelings of relief in (4), it seems to me that it is indeed better for the person living it than (B), and that it is certainly better for the person living it than (3). This suggests that the feelings associated with positive desire frustration and those associated with aversion frustration are indeed prima facie bad and good for us, respectively. Taken together, then, our comparisons of lives suggest that positive desire is relevant to both our well-being and ill-being, and that aversion is relevant to both our well-being and ill-being.

Of course, none of this in itself presents any problem for DG-AB. After all, it might be that all of these effects on well-being and ill-being can be explained in terms of DG-AB. But this brings us to the second, more fundamental point about the view. Specifically, DG-AB cannot properly capture how the feelings associated with positive desire and aversion could be relevant to well-being or ill-being at all. Importantly, this is not because DG-AB focuses on the objective, rather than subjective, satisfaction of desire. Nor is it because DG-AB focuses just on the (objective) satisfaction, and not also the (objective) frustration, of positive desire and aversion. Instead, it's because DG-AB can only explain the feelings' relevance to well-being and ill-being in terms of the

feelings being the objects of some of our desires.[8] As we'll see, this form of explanation, and so any view offering it, is implausible. And, as we'll also see, this problem applies not just to DG-AB, but to a wide variety of desire satisfactionist views. To see the problem, in any case, we'll focus on DG-AB.

To illustrate, then, notice: getting something we positively desire or are averse to is the only way for something to be good or bad for us, on DG-AB. Hence if the feelings associated with the apparent satisfaction of positive desire (joy) and those associated with the apparent frustration of aversion (relief) are ever good for us, on DG-AB, it seems they must be good for us ultimately because we have an objectively satisfied positive desire for *the feelings themselves*. Similarly, if the feelings associated with the apparent satisfaction of aversion (anxiety) and those associated with the apparent frustration of positive desire (disappointment) are ever bad for us, on DG-AB, it seems they must be bad for us ultimately because we have an objectively satisfied aversion toward *the feelings themselves*. But could this plausibly be the case? Could the apparent influence of these feelings on well-being and ill-being ultimately be explained just by their being the objects of our objectively satisfied positive desires and aversions, as DG-AB suggests?

It could not. To see why, consider disappointment (or the feeling associated with subjective positive desire frustration). As we've seen, (3) seems worse than (B), suggesting that disappointment is at least prima facie bad for us. To account for this badness, proponents of DG-AB must claim that the disappointment, whenever it is bad for us, is something we are both averse to and (objectively) getting. This is because getting something one is averse to is the only way for something to ultimately be bad for one, on DG-AB, and the type of disappointment in (3) does indeed seem to be bad for one. Here, however, is the problem. Notice that, if one has this aversion to the disappointment, and this aversion is objectively satisfied—if one is in fact feeling

[8] This is in contrast to the feelings being good or bad for us just in virtue of being the kinds of things they are. Notably, views facing this problem include both 'object' and 'combo' versions of DG-AB—see Van Weelden 2019.

disappointment—it seems this aversion will invariably also be *subjectively* satisfied, since one will be aware of the disappointment one is experiencing. That is, one will also *take* oneself to be experiencing the disappointment that one is averse to, as long as one is in fact getting it, since the object of the aversion just is *the feeling one is experiencing*. Yet this implies that one will experience feelings of *anxiety*, since one's objectively satisfied aversion is also subjectively satisfied, and the subjective satisfaction of aversion involves feelings of anxiety. That is, it implies that whenever the feelings of disappointment like those in (3) are bad for one—or, whenever one's aversion to them is objectively satisfied—they will invariably come alongside additional feelings of anxiety, since one's aversion to them will also be subjectively satisfied. Intuitively, though, this seems clearly incorrect, for at least two reasons.

For one, it seems clear that we do not, in general, experience feelings of dread or anxiety alongside the feelings of disappointment associated with positive desire frustration. When we learn we won't get the pizza we wanted for dinner, for instance, the disappointment we feel doesn't normally seem to come alongside any feeling of anxiety. And, importantly, these feelings of disappointment seem bad for us even if they don't come alongside the feelings of anxiety. In evaluating (3), and determining that the feelings of disappointment made it worse for the person living it than a baseline life, we didn't seem to have any additional feelings of anxiety in mind. In that case, we should conclude that the feelings of disappointment are bad for the subject even if they don't have any objectively (and subjectively) satisfied aversions toward those feelings. And, in that case, we should conclude that DG-AB is false.

For another, note that this approach merely pushes the issue back an extra step. Presumably, just as the feelings of disappointment are bad for us, so the feelings of anxiety are bad for us. So if we explain the badness of the feelings of disappointment in terms of the objective satisfaction of an aversion toward the feelings, which (we've just seen) produces feelings of anxiety, we'll need *another*

aversion to explain the badness of these additional feelings of anxiety. If the added feelings of anxiety also seem bad for us, in other words, we'll need a *second* aversion toward *those* feelings that is objectively satisfied, in order for *them* to be bad for us, on DG-AB. And since the objective satisfaction of *this second* aversion will *also* produce feelings of anxiety, we'll need a *third* aversion … and so on. It seems, then, that the badness of the original feelings of disappointment could only be explained by an endless line of additional aversions, whose objective satisfaction comes alongside additional feelings of anxiety, which themselves seem bad for one. This is clearly implausible.

It seems, then, that DG-AB cannot plausibly account for the badness of feelings of disappointment. And notice that the same problem arises on the 'positive' side: DG-AB also cannot plausibly account for the goodness of feelings of relief, for parallel reasons. In particular: the view seems to imply that whenever the feelings of relief are good for one, they will invariably come alongside additional feelings of joy (since one's positive desire for them will be both objectively, and subjectively, satisfied). Intuitively, though, this seems clearly incorrect, for the same two reasons we've seen just above. Thus, both Desire-Good and Aversion-Bad should be abandoned. Neither can properly capture the unique influences of positive desire and aversion on well-being and ill-being.[9]

Importantly, these problems for DG-AB generalize. They're generated by the following three claims:

[9] Thus, even if the proponent of Desire-Good adopts an alternative view of ill-being, we'll still have strong reason to reject their view. See Heathwood 2022, Kagan 2014, and Pallies 2022.

(i) Subjective positive desire satisfaction and frustration cause feelings of joy and disappointment, and subjective aversion satisfaction and frustration cause feelings of anxiety and relief.

(ii) Those feelings are (either derivatively or non-derivatively) good or bad for us.

(iii) For each instance of those feelings, if it is good or bad for us, it is good or bad for us because it is the object of a positive desire or aversion that is distinct from the positive desire or aversion that caused the feeling.

(i) and (ii) seem hard to deny.[10] Along with (iii), though, they seem to generate the problem faced by DG-AB. This is because, given (iii), the feelings themselves can be relevant to well-being only if they are the objects of some of one's desires. And so, whenever the feelings are good or bad for one, they will invariably come alongside additional such feelings—whose relevance can only be explained by yet further desires, whose objects are those additional feelings—since one's desire for the original feelings will be subjectively satisfied or frustrated, leading to a regress. Hence, the problem is (iii): any version of desire satisfactionism that accepts this claim seems to face the same problems as DG-AB. Importantly, this includes not just versions of *objective* desire satisfactionism—which claim that well-being consists in the objective satisfaction of desire—but also, perhaps surprisingly, versions of *subjective* desire satisfactionism—which claim that well-being consists in the subjective satisfaction of desire (Heathwood 2021: 72-73). Take, for instance, a theory on which you are better off just in case

[10] Do my arguments for the relevance of these feelings provide support for *hedonism* about well-being? Perhaps in a limited way. Specifically: my arguments suggest that many versions of desire satisfactionism cannot plausibly explain (ii), which hedonism explains with ease. So, hedonism seems to have an advantage here. Importantly, though, my arguments fall far short of showing that pleasant and unpleasant feelings are the *only* things that are relevant to well-being, as hedonism claims. Additionally, I think it remains possible for a version of desire satisfactionism to properly account for (ii)—see fn. 11.

you both positively desire X and take X to obtain (Heathwood 2006). Given (iii), if X is the feeling of relief associated with aversion frustration, it seems this feeling can be good for one only if one has a subjectively satisfied positive desire for the feeling itself, meaning that whenever these feelings of relief are good for one, they will additionally come alongside feelings of joy. Again, though, this seems incorrect, for reasons we've seen above. It seems, then, that the problems outlined here will plague, not just the paradigmatic, objective desire satisfactionist approach, but also subjective desire satisfactionist views. And it seems, consequently, that a wide variety of desire satisfactionist views cannot properly capture the unique influences of desire and aversion—and specifically the feelings they cause—on well-being and ill-being, and should therefore be abandoned.[11,12]

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[11] In fact, I think a certain version of subjective desire satisfactionism may avoid these worries, by rejecting (iii). Specifically: the view might claim that the feelings of joy and relief are good for us to experience because to experience the feelings *just is* to see our positive desires as satisfied and our aversions as frustrated (respectively). And it might claim that the feelings of anxiety and disappointment are bad for us to experience because to experience the feelings *just is* to see our aversions as satisfied and our positive desires as frustrated (respectively). In this way, the view need not explain the feelings' relevance via (iii). It might instead be that to experience the feelings just is to experience subjective desire satisfaction or frustration.

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