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Rejecting Well-Being Invariabilism

Guy Fletcher

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to undermine a basic assumption of theories of well-being, one that I call *well-being invariabilism*. I argue that much of what makes existing theories of well-being inadequate stems from the invariabilist assumption. After distinguishing and explaining *well-being invariabilism* and *well-being variabilism*, I show that the most widely-held theories of well-being—hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and pluralist objective-list theories—presuppose invariabilism and that a large class of the objections to them arise because of it. My aim is to show that abandoning invariabilism and adopting variabilism is a sensible first step for those aiming to formulate more plausible theories of well-being. After considering objections to my argument, I explain what a variabilist theory of well-being would be like and show that *well-being variabilism* need not be any threat to the project of formulating theories of well-being that deliver general principles concerning well-being enhancement.

1. Introduction

Those of us who find the existing theories of well-being inadequate should trace much of their implausibility to a common feature of these theories: *invariabilism*. I begin by distinguishing and explaining two theses, *well-being invariabilism* and *well-being variabilism*. I show that the most widely-held theories of well-being—hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and objective-list theories—presuppose invariabilism and that a large class of the objections to them arise because of it. I try to show that abandoning invariabilism and adopting variabilism is the first step in formulating more plausible theories of well-being.

2. Invariabilism and well-being

The first task is to lay out two theses about well-being. I call them *well-being invariabilism* and *well-being variabilism* and they comprise the following claims:

Well-being invariabilism: Any X that non-instrumentally enhances well-being in one context must enhance well-being in any other.¹

Well-being variabilism: Any X that non-instrumentally enhances well-being in one context may fail to enhance well-being, or detract from well-being, in another context.

Note that I say ‘enhances well-being’. This is deliberately vague. It is intended to ensure that I am not committed to any particular view of how well-being and value are related, or on the nature of well-being more generally.² My aim in Sections 3-5 is to show that many existing theories of well-being rest upon *well-being invariabilism* and that much of what people have found inadequate about them can be traced back to this feature. If this is so, then we should reject this feature if we want to make progress in formulating plausible theories of well-being. I consider objections to my argument in Section 6 before showing what a variabilist theory of well-being would be like in Section 7.

3. Hedonism

First, let us consider hedonistic theories of well-being. We can find evidence of *well-being invariabilism* in contemporary forms of hedonism about well-being, such as those defended by Roger Crisp (2006: 100) and Fred Feldman (2004: 13). These forms of hedonism are explicitly about well-being, as revealed when they write, respectively:

I wish to discuss hedonism as a theory of well-being, that is, of what is ultimately good for any individual.

I want to know, in the abstract, what features make a life a good one for the one who lives it.

1 The theses concern non-instrumental well-being enhancement because no-one would wish to defend *well-being invariabilism* about *instrumental* well-being enhancers. It is more common to use ‘intrinsic’ where I have used ‘non-instrumental’ but because this is potentially misleading I follow Richard Kraut (2007: 6) in using the more inelegant term.

2 It is tempting, however, to think that the popularity of invariabilist theories of value in general partly explains the popularity of invariabilist theories of well-being.

More importantly, they rest upon *well-being invariabilism*. Crisp (2006: 102) writes that:

[W]e might define hedonism as the view that what is good for any individual is the enjoyable experiences in her life, what is bad is the suffering in that life, and the life best for an individual is that with the greatest balance of enjoyment over suffering.

Crisp (2006:102) writes that this characterisation, which is the closest he comes to an explicit statement of the view he wishes to defend, ‘seems to me correct as far as it goes’. I take his comments to suggest a commitment to *well-being invariabilism*, even if it does not explicitly state it.

Thankfully, Feldman’s ‘Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism’ theory of well-being explicitly commits itself to *well-being invariabilism*. Feldman (2004: 66) states this view thus:

Every episode of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure is intrinsically good; every episode of intrinsic attitudinal pain is intrinsically bad.

The intrinsic value of an episode of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure is equal to the amount of pleasure contained in that episode; the intrinsic value of an episode of intrinsic attitudinal pain is equal to—(the amount of pain contained in that episode).

The intrinsic value of a life is entirely determined by the intrinsic values of the episodes of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure and pain contained in the life, in such a way that one life is intrinsically better than another if and only if the net amount of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure in the one is greater than the net amount of that sort of pleasure in the other.

This clearly rests upon *well-being invariabilism*.³

Having shown that hedonist theories of well-being are invariabilist, I move on to the more important task of showing that many of the objections that philosophers have levelled at hedonism can be traced back to this feature.⁴

3 Feldman’s third thesis is another that many theories of well-being have presupposed—*additivism*—and is the claim that the value of a life as a whole is a simple sum of the value of its parts. I remain neutral on additivism here.

4 There are, of course, other objections to hedonism. My claim is that a large and significant class of objections to it can be traced back to this feature.

One long-standing objection to hedonism comes from considering *malicious* pleasures.⁵ The objection is often pressed against hedonism as a theory of value generally rather than about well-being in particular but Feldman (2004: 39) discusses it in the context of well-being also. He uses the example of a terrorist who sets off a bomb in a playground and takes great pleasure in the ensuing suffering. The objection to hedonism is that this pleasure does not make the terrorist's life go any better (some would want to say it makes it worse), so hedonism is false.

In response to this, Feldman (2004: 39) points out that the relevant scale of evaluation is what he calls 'the evaluation of the life in itself, *for the one who lives it*' (Italics in original). He argues that, if we focus on this scale of evaluation, hedonism can perhaps respond to the objection by saying that the life of the terrorist, 'though disgraceful and morally indefensible, was not so terribly bad in itself for him.' Whether we find such a response convincing is by-the-by. The important point is that the response nicely brings out the invariabilism at the heart of hedonism.

A second long-standing objection to hedonism is the *base* pleasures objection. Feldman (2004: 40) uses the example of 'Porky', a person who spends his time in a pigsty gaining great pleasure from 'the most obscene sexual practices imaginable.'⁶ Feldman claims that hedonism is committed to adjudging Porky's life to be very good, and judges that this implication is disturbing.⁷

A third perennial objection is that the hedonist must attribute positive value to *false* pleasures. We can see the false pleasures objection in the following thought-experiment, from Kagan (1994: 311). Imagine that H takes a large amount of pleasure in believing that he is a successful and respected family member and colleague where actually: his friends detest him, his wife cuckolds him, and his colleagues mock him in his absence. Hedonism must judge that, other things being equal,

5 For discussion of the objection against hedonism as a theory of value generally, see Fletcher (2008: 467-71).

6 Feldman's example is a modified version of one found in Moore (1903: 146).

7 More specifically, 'default hedonism' in Feldman's terminology.

his life is better for the presence of these pleasures. The person wielding the objection will then likely claim that *even if* it is not going any worse for the presence of these pleasures, they do not make it any better.⁸

Whilst these kinds of objections to hedonism are often deployed in unison, they are usually regarded as distinct. The more interesting point, though, is that we can trace all of them back to the invariabilism at the root of hedonism.⁹ Most critics of hedonism who wield the aforementioned objections agree that *some* pleasures have value, it is just that they do not think that all of the malicious, base and false ones do as well. Hedonism is vulnerable precisely because it claims that *any* pleasure enhances a person's well-being.

4. Desire-fulfilment theories

Consider now desire-fulfilment theories of well-being. The most basic type—unrestricted desire-fulfilment theory—holds that what enhances someone's well-being is the satisfaction of their actual desires. This is invariabilist and the resulting problem for unrestricted desire-fulfilment theory is that we often have desires that cannot plausibly be thought to contribute to well-being. The ubiquitous example from the literature is Parfit's (1984: 494) stranger case. Suppose I meet an affable stranger and come to desire that they recover from their illness but never meet them again. The problem for unrestricted desire-fulfilment theory is seeing how the satisfaction of such a desire itself could plausibly be said to make *my* life go better. Similarly, as Griffin (1986: 10) points out, we often have preferences that are based on factual error, or a lack of knowledge, and unrestricted desire-fulfilment theory gives us the wrong answers in these cases also by holding that the satisfaction of such desires always contributes to well-being.

8 There are stronger forms of invariabilism that would entail that the level of well-being would be equal between this life and one in which the pleasures were based on true beliefs, other things being equal. I concentrate on the weaker forms of invariabilism that do not make the equal value claim in order to make my argument more general.

9 Feldman (2004: 49-50) makes this point.

The same invariabilism can be located in other more sophisticated desire-fulfilment theories of well-being. For example, consider those theories that hold that what makes my life go better is the satisfaction of ideal-desires, where these are understood as desires which have gone through some sort of filtering, such as being free of factual or logical error, or being formed in conditions of full-information. Aside from any other problems with such a theory, there seem to be many desires that I would have in such circumstances the fulfilment of which would not plausibly contribute to my well-being, in addition to those that would.¹⁰

5. Objective-list theories

Finally, let us consider objective-list theories. These theories specify a certain list of goods that contribute to well-being in a manner independently of the agent's attitude or preferences. Sometimes they also have a unifying rationale, as in some perfectionist theories, other times they do not.

One difficulty here is that there are fewer examples of well-developed pluralist objective-list theories than of the other two types of theory I have examined.¹¹ This means that part of my target here is the sort of objective-list theory that many people *appear* to hold, even if they do not devote much time to formulating it.¹² Typically, objective-list theories have at least these four entries on the list: pleasure, knowledge, autonomy and friendship. I will let this serve as my candidate objective-list theory.

Two corollaries of the lack of development of objective-list theories are that there is less textual evidence for their invariabilism and fewer long-standing objections. Nevertheless, I take such theories to presuppose the invariabilist thesis. One articulation of the invariabilism I

¹⁰ See Griffin (1986: 17).

¹¹ Finnis (1980) is one of the few examples of a worked-out and defended objective list theory.

¹² See, for instance, Hooker (2000: 43) who identifies himself as holding an objective list theory though he does not spend time formulating it (for perfectly legitimate reasons).

take to be inherent in such theories appears in Griffin (1986: 54) when he writes the following:

So the most plausible form of objectivism allows that many values—many more than the ones linked to basic needs—are objective. The thought behind forming them into a standard of well-being would be this: *when they appear in a person's life, then whatever his tastes, attitudes, or interests, his life is better.* (My italics).

I take this to be representative of the rationale underlying objective list theories and their commitment to *well-being invariabilism*.

A second example comes from Finnis (1980: 72) when, in discussing knowledge, he writes:

It is obvious that a man who is well-informed, etc., simply *is* better-off (other things being equal) than a man who is muddled, deluded, and ignorant, that the state of the one is better than the state of the other, not just in this particular case or that, but in all cases, as such, universally, and *whether I like it or not.* (Italics in original).

Although Finnis only explicitly compares the well-informed man and the deluded man—as opposed to the well-informed man and the marginally-better-informed man—the rest of the passage, and his discussion in general, is strongly invariabilist.

The problem for objective-list theories is that their typical contents do not seem to contribute to well-being in an invariable fashion. For example, any objective-list theory that includes pleasure faces the same problems faced by hedonism—that of trying to account for those instances of pleasure that do not seem to enhance well-being.

A second problem is that an objective-list theory that identifies knowledge as something that contributes to well-being will face a similar objection—that there are many instances of knowledge that look like they do not contribute to a person's well-being. For example, imagine two people—A and B—who have led previously identical lives that are solitary and filled with pain and misery. Imagine that, shortly before they both die, a well-meaning person places a note in the cell of A on which is written 'Gorillas cannot swim' and that A thereby comes to know that gorillas cannot swim.

To keep things simple, we need to imagine that A has no particular aversion to knowing about gorillas but neither was it something that he (or B) wanted to discover, nor does he experience pleasure from acquiring the knowledge. Assuming that possessing such knowledge does not cause a reduction in one of the other objective-list goods, the objective-list theorist who includes knowledge on their list must conclude that A is made better off than B by the acquisition of this knowledge. This implication seems to cast doubt upon those objective list theories that claim that knowledge *always* contributes to well-being.

Of course, as Finnis (1980: 62) points out, holding that knowledge invariably contributes to well-being does not entail that every proposition is equally worth knowing or that knowledge of any particular proposition would be equally valuable for each person. But it does mean that in any case where a person acquires more knowledge—no matter what it is knowledge of—it will be of some benefit to them (other things equal), even if only a very small one. And even this weaker claim seems implausible.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I frame the rest of the discussion using just objective-list theories. This is for three reasons. First, one should properly regard hedonism as an objective-list theory, albeit with an unusually short list. Second, the correct theory of well-being will be an objective-list theory. Third, everything that I say could also be applied, with the necessary changes, to desire-fulfilment theories.

6. Objection

I will now address an objection to my attempt to undermine invariabilism in the theory of well-being. An objector might claim that the examples I have used are disingenuous. Before proceeding then, let us be reminded of the sorts of examples I have cited.

In the case of pleasure, there do seem to be many cases in which pleasure contributes to someone's well-being. Yet, there also seem to be situations, such as the deluded businessman case, where it does not. In a similar vein, consider instances of knowledge. It seems plausible to think

that sometimes knowledge can enhance well-being. Other times, though, it seems likely that it will have no effect. Examples of this might be the knowledge that gorillas cannot swim, or of the number of black pens in the Pentagon.¹³

An obvious move for the invariabilist to make here is to try and refine the atoms of well-being in order to head off these objections. They might claim that the examples that I have cited against *well-being invariabilism* only work because I have used particularly unsuitable candidates.¹⁴ In response to the cases mentioned above, they might claim that the correct well-being enhancers, rather than being things like pleasure or knowledge, are actually more like the following:¹⁵

- (a) pleasure that is not based on a false belief.
- (b) knowledge of important truths.

My responses to this are threefold. First, especially for refinements such as (b), there will be the question of whether atoms refined in this fashion can be independently specified. The person who points to a feature such as (b) needs to be able to provide an account of important truths that does not come out as ‘the sort that contributes to well-being’. I do not claim that they cannot do so, but it is something lurking in the background for those who wish to pursue this strategy. Nevertheless, I will assume that such specification is always forthcoming, as there are other problems to address.

A more important point is that this refinement strategy blurs an important distinction between (a) the thing that contributes to well-being

13 When discussing the value of knowledge (generally, not in relation to well-being) Ross (1930: 139) mentions the apparent worthlessness of what he calls ‘mere matters of fact’ such as the number of stories in a building. He writes: ‘But on reflection it seems clear that even about matters of fact right opinion is in itself a better state of mind to be in than wrong, and knowledge than right opinion.’

14 Although, of course, these are exactly the sorts of candidates objective-list theorists have tended to include on their lists.

15 The first of these is based on Feldman’s (2004: 112) ‘Truth-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism’.

in a particular context and (b) the background conditions that can affect whether it does so.¹⁶ In the case of the pleasure not based on false belief, the fact that it is not based on a false belief seems better conceived as part of the background conditions that can affect whether the pleasure is well-being enhancing, rather than as a part of the well-being enhancer itself.

Even if the invariabilist is unconvinced that the refinement strategy blurs a genuine distinction between a well-being enhancing feature and the background conditions that affect whether it contributes to well-being, there is a third problem for the strategy. This is that we will find that the same considerations which undermined the purported invariability of our original atoms can undermine the new refined atoms (a) and (b). Contra (a), we can think of cases in which pleasure based on false belief does make someone's life go better. For example, there are many times in which one takes pleasure in the belief that one has solved a philosophical problem or is listening to someone else doing so. It is clear that at least some of these pleasures are good for their experiencer, even where the person is mistaken in so believing.

Against (b), it is difficult to see how even knowledge of important truths *always* contributes to well-being. Whatever one uses as a candidate for (b), the proof of Fermat's last theorem, the knowledge of how the universe began, or whether there is intelligent life elsewhere within it—it does not seem plausible to think that the possession of such knowledge by a person must make that person's life go better. If it were so then the possession of such knowledge would make the life of anyone go better as long as it did not cause a reduction in any of the other objective-list goods of the same or greater amount. But this does not seem to be true in the case of incredibly destitute people. And the same is true of many people who have led good lives. It just is not clear that even these more specific classes of knowledge will always contribute to well-being regardless of whatever else is the case.

¹⁶ A similar distinction between reasons and enablers is argued for by Dancy (2004).

The particular refinements I have discussed here are not important, as they are only supposed to be representative of the strategy of specifying more complex contributors to well-being in the hope of making invariabilism more plausible. As such, undermining (a) and (b) in particular is a small victory and is only supposed to suggest the type of problems that will arise for such specifications. An important point is that even if one does think, for example, that important knowledge always contributes to well-being, there is still the further issue of what else is on the objective list, and whether it too can plausibly be regarded as invariable. Furthermore, even if one thinks that the refinement strategy will succeed in homing in on a range of invariable contributors to well-being, we still have the interesting result that many of the existing theories of well-being are inadequate and need reformulation in terms of more specific well-being contributors.

In light of the problems outlined above, I think that we have reason to believe that the refinement strategy will not rescue invariabilism. It can perhaps survive the demand for independent specification of the refined atoms but I do not think it can avoid both of the other objections. The first was that the strategy fuses elements that seem better kept apart: the well-being enhancing feature and the background conditions. The second was that it seemed doubtful whether even such refined atoms would exhibit invariability.

7. What a variabilist theory of well-being could be

Someone who has doubts about invariabilism might nevertheless worry that to allow variabilism at the base of a theory of well-being would be to abandon the theory of well-being altogether. My aim now is to show that this is not so by showing that a variabilist theory of well-being is perfectly consistent with the existence of general principles governing well-being.¹⁷

¹⁷ I thank anonymous referees for encouraging me to say more about what *well-being variabilism* would be like and for suggesting the objection that variabilist theories could not recognise general truths about well-being enhancement.

The difference between a variabilist and an invariabilist theory of well-being is shown in their answer to the second of two questions about well-being. The first is: ‘which things are capable of being well-being enhancing?’ The second is: ‘when will they be so?’ Holders of the kinds of invariabilist positions considered above have tended to assume that the answer to the second question is ‘always’. A variabilist will suggest that the answer to the second question is not ‘always’ but rather ‘under certain circumstances’. A variabilist objective-list theory therefore distinguishes two tasks. The first is to specify the things that are *capable* of enhancing well-being. The second task is to discover *when* these things are well-being enhancing (on the assumption that at least one of the items on the list is variable). And there is nothing in the variabilist position as such that rules out the possibility of there being simple principles that govern when they are.

For example, consider the following theory (chosen for simplicity alone). One could hold an objective list theory that claims that only pleasure is *capable* of being well-being enhancing and that there are only three factors that can prevent it from being so: its being based on a false belief, its arising in the course of doing something base, or its being malicious. This is a variabilist theory that is perfectly compatible with general truths about well-being enhancement. Of course, it is an implausible and artificial theory but it nonetheless serves to show that there need not be anything mysterious about a variabilist theory of well-being.

Those who are inclined towards invariabilism will likely seek to rewrite this theory of well-being, such that it has only one well-being enhancer, which is invariable. This brings us back to the objections above, especially the objection that this move distorts things by combining elements that have a different status—namely the thing that is well-being enhancing and factors that can affect whether it is so.¹⁸ And in the absence of a reason for thinking that well-being must function invariably

18 Section 6.

it is difficult to see the motivation for doing so. My alternative proposal is for well-being theorists to recast their theories as accounts of the *only* things that are capable of enhancing well-being and to investigate separately the question of when they do so.

8. Conclusion

I have shown that many of the existing theories of well-being are invariabilist. I have also shown that much of what we find implausible about them stems from the presence of this feature. I then claimed that there is room to doubt whether specifying the well-being contributors in a more detailed way will make invariabilism more plausible. As such, I think that we should see whether we are able to formulate more plausible theories of well-being by rejecting invariabilism and adopting variabilism.¹⁹

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¹⁹ For helpful discussion of these issues I would like to thank: two anonymous referees, John Cottingham, Jonathan Dancy, Brad Hooker, Debbie Roberts, and Philip Stratton-Lake.

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