

I am currently finishing a book that defends a new theory of *well-being* or *welfare*.

For many reasons, it is important to understand welfare properly. For example, the law stipulates that decisions for children must accord with “the best interests of the child.” Thus, to apply the law well we need an understanding of what best interests *are*. Or consider the fact that the negative attitudes many people have about cognitive disability stem, at least in part, from the conviction that such lives are less good lives to live. It is thus important to consider whether such assumptions are really justified. Finally, in the international arena, theorists struggle to draw meaningful distinctions between (1) lives shaped by cultural values that are alien to us but not worse for those who live by them and (2) lives shaped by values that undermine the welfare of those who adhere to them. The assumption is that different *but not bad* values should be tolerated, but values that undermine welfare should be challenged. Here an understanding of welfare helps us to identify the boundaries of moral tolerance. As these examples illustrate, what we say about many significant topics depends on what welfare *is*. We need a theory that is useful, but not too controversial. My goal is to offer a theory that is both philosophically rigorous and able to fill this practical function. The first part of the book is devoted to psychology, the second part articulates and defends my new theory, and the third illustrates its advantages for practical ethics.

Ultimately, on my account, it turns out that two main things contribute positive value to a life: (1) a generally positive, affective “take” on things—a kind of psychological outlook and (2) successful engagement with the people or projects one cares most about. Various things can detract from the value of a life (including, obviously, the lack of positives), but the most significant positive evil is suffering, understood as severe, long-lasting physical or psychological distress. Because I am a welfare subjectivist, a major task of the book lies in explaining precisely how these things come to have value (or disvalue) for individuals.

The first part of the book is concerned with topics in philosophical psychology. Psychology is relevant to my project in at least two ways. First, it seems plausible that certain kinds of experiential mental states matter a great deal when it comes to welfare. I reject the hedonistic idea that *only* mental states have intrinsic prudential value. Nonetheless, I think

that experiential states are important in ways that philosophers of well-being have generally missed, either because they ignore psychology, or because they focus on the wrong kinds of mental states. For example, pleasure certainly can be a good thing, but pleasure is hardly the most important positive aspect of our experience. I believe the same can be said about psychological happiness. When it comes to negative experience, philosophy currently has no good account of what *emotional* pain and suffering consist in. I argue in the book that we do not currently have good labels for the kinds of affective mental phenomena—both positive and negative—that actually matter the most from the standpoint of individual welfare. To rectify this, I develop and defend an account of what I call “affective perspectives” that differentiates such perspectives both from ordinary emotions and moods, as well as from sensory pleasure/pain and happiness/unhappiness, arguing that insofar as some kind of positive experiential mental phenomenon is important for well-being it is a generally positive *affective perspective*. I also argue that extremely negative affective perspectives are the best way to understand both what emotional pain is and why it is bad.

Psychology matters in another sense for my project because, as a welfare subjectivist, I am committed to the idea that the psychological attitudes of subjects play an important grounding role in the best account of prudential value. This, in turn, suggests a need to attend to attitudes. The most common form of subjectivism is the desire theory, which claims that what is good for an individual is for her to get what she (actually or hypothetically) *wants* or *desires*. On this picture my desire for x is what makes it the case that x is good for me. However, for a variety of reasons, desire is not a plausible basis for a theory of welfare.

This focus on attitudes as the sole ground of prudential value also raises certain problems with respect to experiential states. The implication is that a negative feeling such as sensory pain is only intrinsically bad for someone if she happens to have a negative attitude towards it. Otherwise pain is not at all bad. Building on a view of pain defended by Gwen Bradford (*Utilitas*, 2020) I suggest we should say instead that experiential states such as pain have a default badness for us in virtue of how they feel, but that this value can be reversed if the subject has a positive attitude towards her pain. This allows me to say that positive and

negative experiential states—both sensory and affective—have a default prudential value that is only altered when subjects adopt contrary attitudes towards their experience. On the one hand, this allows me to preserve the intuitive idea that pain is bad, when it is, because of how it feels. On the other hand, it seems compatible with at least the spirit of subjectivism, since, on the view in question, it is never possible for there to be conflict between a person's attitude towards some object, *x*, and facts about the value *x* has for her. In other words, it will never turn out that something is bad for someone despite the fact that she likes it, or good for someone despite the fact that she dislikes it. Attitudes are not the only ground of prudential value on my account, but they are the more authoritative ground.

The general structure of my theory differs significantly from desire theories in other ways as well. Desire is often (even if not always) directed at what one does not have. However, because I insist that prudential value is something realized in the *present*, I articulate my view in terms of current attitudes adopted towards things one is engaged with, or activities, projects or relationships one is presently engaged in. I also, for various reasons, appeal to multiple kinds of attitude: (1) valuing, (2) caring, and (3) liking. Because these different kinds of attitude can conflict with one another (e.g. I can like something that I disvalue, i.e. take to be bad), I suggest we should see these different attitudes as having different degrees of subjective authority. In cases of attitude conflict, value is determined by the attitude with greater authority. As in the earlier case involving sensory pain (pleasure), we should say that certain negative attitudes confer negative value on their objects *unless* there is a conflicting positive attitude of a different, more authoritative kind. And likewise for positive attitudes: they confer positive value *unless* there is a more authoritative negative attitude towards the same thing. So, for example, whenever I engage in an activity I like, this is good for me, *unless* I disvalue the same thing, in which case the more authoritative attitude (valuing) overrules the first one.

Next, I devote attention to comparative value—to explaining what it means to say that, “A is good for S, but B is (or would be) *even better*.” Subjectivists usually explain such facts by appeal to the (actual or hypothetical) perspective of the subject. B is said to be better than A if the subject herself prefers (or would prefer) B if familiar with both. There are many

problems, however, with explaining comparative value this way. Instead, I conceive of comparative value in terms of alternative possibilities. For example, most people assume there are various possible ways their lives might unfold in the future. But then there presumably are facts about how a person *would* respond to living each of these possible futures. Although such facts can be hard to know, it is these kinds of facts that ground comparative value.

This, in turn, yields a plausible account of welfare knowledge. It has long been recognized that there is a tension between (a) the subjectivist idea that value is determined by the responses of subjects and (b) the plausible claim that we are often ignorant about our own good and so make poor prudential choices. I grant that current attitudes towards things in our lives determine local facts about what is good or bad for us in the present. However, making a good choice requires understanding how various good and bad things are related (e.g. can they all be realized in a single life?) as well as the ability to appreciate, from one's current position, complicated facts about the *comparative* value of alternative paths. The theory is *subjective* because it constructs welfare from facts about an individual's responses to things. But it does not imply that prudential knowledge is easy to have. Subjects have a degree of authority about what is good or bad for them in the present (though even here, lacking knowledge of alternatives, they can be ignorant of just *how* good or how bad something is). In many other ways, however, subjects are often very poorly placed to know how to make good prudential decisions.

As indicated at the outset, the third part of the book turns to the practical issues for welfare, including the specific issues I opened with. I aim to demonstrate how the theory developed can illuminate these issues in novel, helpful ways.