What Should the Desire Theorist Say About Ill-Being?

Anthony Kelley
Louisiana State University
akelley@lsu.edu

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Both proponents and critics of the desire theory of welfare have narrowly focused on the positive side of the theory while virtually ignoring its negative side. On the positive side, the desire theorist says that getting what you want is good for you. But what should the desire theorist say is *bad* for you? A common and plausible-sounding answer is that if getting what you want is good for you, then surely *not* getting what you want is bad for you. I argue that this answer is a mistake that would commit desire theorists to a claim that is implausible by their own lights, namely that a state of affairs could be bad for you even if you were not at all bothered by it. The desire theorist should instead say that getting what you are averse to is bad for you. If desire satisfaction is good for you, then aversion satisfaction, not desire frustration, is bad for you.

1. Introduction

According to the desire-satisfaction or desire-fulfillment theory of welfare—or simply the *desire theory*—the sole basic good for a person is the satisfaction of their desires.[1] That is the positive side of the theory concerning *well-being*. It gives an answer to the question of what is basically *good* for you. But what about the negative side of the theory? What should the desire theorist say is basically *bad* for you? In other words, what should the desire theorist say about *ill-being*?[2]

One natural and plausible-sounding answer is the *frustration view*, according to which not getting what you want is the only thing that is basically bad for you. On this view, your level of welfare lowers when and only when you desire that *p* and *p* does not obtain. This is the answer that many theorists have presupposed is the correct way to fill in the negative side of the theory.[3]

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[1] Important discussions of the desire theory include Sidgwick 1907 (I.IX.3), Rawls 1971, Brandt 1979, Singer 1979, Parfit 1984 (Appendix I), and Heathwood 2016. Throughout this paper, I focus on the welfare of persons, but my proposal for what the desire theorist should say about ill-being can be extended to whichever subjects of welfare the desire theorist wishes to accommodate with their theory.

[2] Ill-being has been largely neglected by philosophers. There appears, however, to be a burgeoning interest in the topic. Recent work includes Kagan 2014, Mathison 2018, Rice 2019, Bradford 2020, Sumner 2020, Bradford 2021. See also the papers collected in Volume 46 (2022) of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*.

I argue that this answer is a mistake that would commit desire theorists to a claim that is implausible by their own lights, namely that a state of affairs could be bad for you even if you were not at all bothered by it. Rather than saying that the frustration of your desires is basically bad for you, I maintain that the desire theorist should instead adopt the *aversion view*, according to which getting what you are averse to—what we might call *aversion satisfaction*—is the only thing that is basically bad for you. On this way of filling in the negative side of the theory, your level of welfare lowers when and only when you are averse to *p* and *p* is the case. The central claim of this paper is that if desire satisfaction is good for you, then aversion satisfaction, not desire frustration, is bad for you.[4] Though my proposal is given in terms of the desire theory, the considerations offered here also apply to other subjective theories of welfare as well as hybrid theories that appeal to attitudes other than desire.[5]

The plan for the paper is as follows. In section two, I offer preliminary remarks. In section three, I explain why the desire theorist should reject the frustration view, and in section four, I explain why the desire theorist should instead endorse the aversion view. Section five concludes.

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[3] Examples of philosophers thinking of the desire theory according to the frustration view can be found in Parfit 1984 (p. 495), Shafer-Landau 2012 (pp. 42-43), Bradley 2015 (p. 36), Heathwood 2016 (p. 135), and Fletcher 2016 (p. 23).

[4] I am not the first to think of the desire theory according to the aversion view. Others include Hobbes (1994, p. 38), Brülde (1998, pp. 35-36), Bykvist (2002, pp. 478 and 489), Mathison (2018) Pallies (2022), and Heathwood (2022b). Furthermore, desire-based analyses of other phenomena tend to be formulated in terms of desire satisfaction and aversion satisfaction rather than desire satisfaction and desire frustration. Consider, for example, desire-based theories of sensory pleasure and pain. On a standard account, roughly, a sensation is a pleasure in virtue of your wanting to be experiencing it, and a sensory pain is a sensation you are averse to experiencing. See Heathwood 2007. For an aversion-based theory of unhappiness, see Heathwood 2022a.

[5] My central argument against the frustration view may not appeal, however, to objectivists who include desire satisfaction on their list of basic welfare goods since the argument starts from the assumption that you must have a positive attitude towards a state of affairs in order for it to be basically good for you, which is a doctrine these theorists deny.

2. Preliminaries

A theory of welfare says what the basic welfare goods and bads are.[6] A state of affairs is *basically* good (bad) for you if and only if it is good (bad) for you as an end, in itself, and not just because of how it is related to something else that is of value (disvalue) for you. All else equal, the obtaining of a token basic good (bad) raises (lowers) your level of welfare. A theory of *well-being* says what the basic *goods* are, and a theory of *ill-being* says what the basic *bads* are. A comprehensive theory of welfare includes both a theory of well-being and a theory of ill-being.[7]

A comprehensive theory will also tell us how to calculate how well you are faring at a time and during an interval of time, including the interval of time that encompasses your life as a whole. Your overall level of welfare at a time is a function of all the basic goods and basic bads that accrue to you at that time. How well you fare during an interval of time is, at least in part, a function of how you fared at each moment during that interval. Thus, in order to say how you are faring at a time and over a period of time, we have to take into account everything that is basically good for you *and* everything that is basically bad for you. This is one important reason why we need a theory of ill-being to pair with our theory of well-being.

The desire theory says that getting what you want is good for you. There are a number of questions that arise when we attempt to formulate the theory more precisely. Are all desires such that their satisfaction is good for you or should we count only your intrinsic desires?[8] Should the theory make reference to your actual desires or the desires that you would have under some set of counterfactual conditions, such as the idealized conditions of full information and full rationality?[9] Also, what exactly does the theory say is good for you? Is it simply the object of your desire, *p*, or is it the combination state of affairs of your desiring that *p and p*? We can call the theory specified according to the first option the *object formulation* and the theory specified according to the second the *combo formulation*.[10] For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss the theory as if it should be formulated according to the object formulation and as making reference only to your actual, intrinsic desires. *Mutatis mutandis* with respect to the frustration view and the aversion view. However, I do not argue that these are the correct ways to formulate these views. The central problem I discuss for the frustration view is not avoidable on other interpretations, nor does the aversion view lose its central attraction if it is understood differently.

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[6] In what follows, I will sometimes drop the 'basic' qualifier and simply talk of states that are good or bad for you. All references to welfare value are references to basic welfare value unless otherwise indicated. I will also write as if states of affairs are the bearers of basic welfare value, but you can translate everything I say here in terms of events or whatever else.

[7] The use of this terminology in the literature is unstable. Some philosophers may prefer to use 'well-being' and 'welfare' interchangeably. I have chosen to use the terms as indicated in the main text in order to emphasize the need to theorize about both the basic welfare goods and the basic welfare bads when constructing a comprehensive theory of welfare.

Our question concerns what the desire theorist should say about ill-being. If we say that getting what you want is good for you, what should we say is bad for you? I have presented the issue as if there are only two options: the frustration view and the aversion view. But these two views do not exhaust the logical space available to the desire theorist. I make two assumptions that explain this restricted focus.

First, I assume that the desire theorist will want to say that there are at least some *robust* bads—i.e., states of affairs that actually lower your level of welfare rather than merely fail to raise it.[11]

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[8] For discussion, see Heathwood 2016 (pp. 138-139).

[9] For examples of two different kinds of idealized theories of welfare, see Brandt 1979 and Railton 1986. For criticism of idealized theories, see Rosati 1995 and Enoch 2005. See Heathwood 2005, Lin 2019, and Murphy 1999 for papers in which it is argued that desire theorists do not need to idealize.

[10] For discussion, see Van Weelden 2019.

[11] This characterization of robust bads, which I borrow from Kagan (2014, p. 263), is subject to putative counterexamples. Suppose, for example, that I am not currently enjoying an innocent pleasure that I was

Second, I assume that the desire theorist will want to maintain symmetry between the positive and negative sides of the theory. There are two kinds of symmetries I have in mind. The first symmetry is that if x is a basic good kind, then, in some suitable sense, the *opposite* of x is a basic bad kind. For example, hedonism is a symmetrical theory in this sense because it says that pleasure is basically good for you and that its opposite, pain, is basically bad for you. Desire frustration and aversion satisfaction are the most plausible candidates for the opposite of desire satisfaction.[12] The second symmetry is that the number of basic good kinds posited by the theory should match the number of basic bad kinds posited. Desire theorists are monists about well-being, and I assume they would want to be monists about ill-being too. Respecting this symmetry would rule out, for example, the desire theorist claiming that *both* the frustration of your desires *and* the satisfaction of your aversions are bad for you.[13]

Assuming that the desire theorist would want to say that there are *at least some* robust bads, that the *opposite* of desire satisfaction is bad for you, and that *nothing else* is bad for you, it is reasonable to restrict our attention to just two theories: the desire theory paired with the frustration view and

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enjoying just a moment ago. If all else is equal, I am faring less well now than I was a moment ago, so it appears that the mere absence of the pleasure lowered my level of welfare from the previous moment to the current one. But the mere absence of pleasure is not supposed to count as a robust bad. There are thus difficulties with properly characterizing robust bads. I pursue these issues further in Kelley 2022.

[12] However, it might be thought that the relevant sense of "opposite" is that of being the *polar opposite* rather than the *complement* or *privation* of desire satisfaction. Two items are polar opposites if they are the "inversely charged flipside" of the other, whereas two items are complements if each is the absence or lack of the other (see Berker 2022). Desire frustration is merely the complement of desire satisfaction, but aversion satisfaction is the polar opposite of desire satisfaction since desires and aversions are polar opposites. Thus, the aversion view seems to enjoy the advantage of being uniquely suited to preserve this particular symmetry with the positive side of the desire theory. Heathwood (2022b, pp. 40-41) makes a similar point, though his distinction is between contraries and contradictories.

[13] See Heathwood 2022 (pp. 46-52) for discussion of a pluralist view of this kind. The argument I offer below against the frustration view undermines this view as well.

the desire theory paired with the aversion view. Our question is which is more likely to be true. In other words, what should the desire theorist say about ill-being?

3. The Frustration View

Suppose that Jason wants to be an architect. Though he has put in a good effort and sought out specialized and expensive training from experts, he is not getting the hang of it. Regrettably, he simply does not have what it takes. Nonetheless, Jason's desire is long-standing and intense; it is what he has always wanted to do for as long as he can remember. Jason has other talents, but he is unable to fully develop them because of his intense focus on becoming an architect. Over time and after many heartfelt discussions with his husband, his friends, and his mentors, he has reluctantly come to realize that he is never going to be an architect.

Intuitively, from the perspective of the desire theorist, there is something tragic about Jason's life. The frustration view offers an explanation. According to the frustration view, not getting what you want is bad for you, and since Jason wants to one day be an architect, the theory implies, intricacies aside, that the fact that he will never be an architect is bad for him.

In the remainder of this section, I will first explain and then reject the objection that the theory violates a robustness requirement, which says that a theory of ill-being must postulate at least some robust bads. Then I will explain what I take to be a genuine problem for the theory: namely that it violates what I call the *dissonance constraint*, the doctrine that you must have a negative attitude towards that which is basically bad for you.[14]

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[14] Elsewhere, I refer to this claim as "subjectivism about ill-being." See Kelley 2022.

3.1 The robustness requirement

According to a plausible robustness requirement, a theory of ill-being must say that there are robust bads, which are states of affairs that lower your level of welfare rather than merely fail to raise it. But it appears that if we fill in the negative side of the desire theory with the frustration view, the resulting theory fails this test. For any desire, either it is or is not satisfied. If it is, you are benefited, but if it is not, you have merely failed to procure a benefit. Thus, the theory fails to identify any robust bads.

This objection rests on a misunderstanding of the theory. The theory does not say that when your desire is frustrated you have *merely* failed to procure a benefit. According to the frustration view, when your desire is frustrated, in addition to failing to procure a benefit, you have also suffered a harm (your level of welfare is lowered). On the frustration view, the frustration of your desires is robustly bad for you.

Despite this, we might still be skeptical that the theory meets the robustness requirement. Shelly Kagan argues:

> After all, consider the case where I don't have any desire with regard to X at all. Then even if X does obtain, here too I will fail to get an improvement in well-being; I will fail to get the improvement to well-being that I would have gotten if I *had* wanted X. But it seems pretty clear that this does not yet introduce any sort of robust bad—it is only the absence of a robust good. Similarly, then, it seems to me that the most plausible thing to say about the situation in which I *do* want X, and X fails to obtain, is that I have once again failed to gain the improvement in well-being that I might conceivably have gained. But that doesn't yet introduce anything that constitutes a robust bad in its own right.[15]

The desire theorist says that there are two ways to fail to procure a benefit: either by lacking the desire or by having the desire but not its object. The desire theorist who wishes to adopt the frustration view says that only one of these ways of failing to procure a benefit is robustly bad for you. Perhaps one way of characterizing Kagan's concern is that there does not appear to be a relevant difference between these two different ways that you could fail to procure a benefit; either both ways should count as robust bads or neither should. Since it is relatively clear that lacking the desire for *p* when *p* obtains is not a plausible candidate for a robust bad, then neither is desire frustration. Kagan's challenge may thus be to identify a relevant difference between the two cases such that desire frustration is robustly bad for you even though lacking a desire for some obtaining state of affairs is not.

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[15] Kagan 2014 (pp. 268-269, emphasis in original). Bradford (2020) also expresses skepticism that the frustration view meets the robustness requirement.

It seems to me that there is a viable candidate for a relevant difference here, at least from the perspective of the desire theorist. The desire theorist thinks that your relationship to the prospect of *p*'s obtaining is fundamentally altered when you come to desire that *p*. The relationship is now this: you would try to bring it about that *p* if you could, you would be delighted that *p* if you were aware of it, you would welcome its obtaining, and so on. When you desire that *p*, whether *p* obtains *matters* to you. When you do not desire that *p*, you may be indifferent to the prospect of *p*'s obtaining, but according to the spirit of the desire theory, the fact that whether *p* obtains matters to you is part of what makes whether *p* obtains affect how well you are faring. This is one way the desire theorist who adopts the frustration view can explain why desire frustration would be bad for you even though failing to desire that *p* when *p* is the case is not. Thus, though I think desire theorists should reject the frustration view, I do not think they should do so on the basis of Kagan's challenge.[16]

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[16] Despite his concern that the frustration view violates the robustness requirement, Kagan (2014, p. 272) tentatively arrives at the conclusion that the desire theorist should adopt the frustration view rather than the aversion view. I address Kagan's concerns about the aversion view in section four below.

3.2 The dissonance constraint

The desire theorist should instead reject the frustration view because it violates the dissonance constraint. The dissonance constraint is to ill-being as the resonance constraint is to well-being. The resonance constraint is the doctrine that a state of affairs is basically good for you only if it resonates with you, where resonance is typically understood as a connection to your positive attitudes. An early statement of this doctrine comes from Peter Railton:

> [I]t does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.[17]

Railton's worry is that if you do not find a state of affairs at all compelling or attractive (at least if you were rational and aware), then a theory that says it is good for you would be intolerably alienating. One way to put this point is to say that such a theory would fail to respect the positive relationship that, intuitively, must obtain between token welfare goods and the person they benefit. In other words, such a theory would violate the resonance constraint.

Railton suggests that at least part of the fix is to require that a theory imply that a state of affairs is good for you only if you would find it to some degree compelling or attractive, at least if you were rational and aware. In other words, a theory of well-being must imply some suitable version of the resonance constraint. Indeed, the resonance constraint is one of the central motivations for subjective theories of well-being in general and the desire theory in particular. Desire is a positive attitude, and if the constraint is interpreted as requiring that you have a positive attitude towards each state of affairs that is basically good for you, then the desire theory respects it.[18] This feature of the desire theory is thought to be an advantage it enjoys over objective theories, which violate the constraint.[19]

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[17] Railton 1986 (p. 9). For an in-depth, canonical discussion of the resonance constraint, see Rosati 1996.

There is an analogous constraint about ill-being that has surprisingly gone unnoticed in the literature. Whereas the resonance constraint is a claim about what can count as basically *good* for you, the dissonance constraint is a claim about what can count as basically *bad* for you. It says that in order for a state of affairs to be basically bad for you, you must have a negative attitude towards it. Just as the resonance constraint captures the intuitive idea that there is a *positive* relationship between welfare *goods* and the person they benefit, the dissonance constraint captures the intuitive idea that there is a *negative* relationship between welfare *bads* and the person they harm. If desire theorists are concerned to respect the resonance constraint about well-being, they should be equally concerned to respect the dissonance constraint about ill-being.[20]

The central problem for the frustration view is that it violates the dissonance constraint. Suppose that you desire that *p* and *p* is not the case. According to the frustration view, *p*'s not being the case is bad for you. But notice that the theory says that this state of affairs is bad for you irrespective of whether you have a negative attitude towards it; the mere fact that you desire that *p* wholly explains why not-*p* is bad for you. Formulating the theory instead according to the combo formulation is of no help. According to the combo formulation, the combination state of affairs of your desiring that *p* and *p*'s not being the case is bad for you irrespective of whether you have a negative attitude towards that state.[21]

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[18] What if the desire theorist instead goes in for the combo formulation of the theory mentioned earlier? It seems that this formulation of the theory violates the constraint because it implies that a state of affairs—the combo state of your desiring that *p* and *p*'s being the case—could be good for you even if you do not have a positive attitude towards it. It might be thought, however, that the combo formulation should count as respecting the resonance constraint. We might take inspiration from Heathwood's discussion of subjectivism (2014, p. 205) and formulate the resonance constraint disjunctively so that to respect it a theory must imply that *either* you must have a positive attitude towards each state of affairs that is good for you *or* each state that is good for you must involve a positive attitude of yours. The combo formulation respects this disjunctive version of the constraint because it satisfies the second disjunct. One difficulty with this approach is that it might classify as subjectivist other views that intuitively are not. For discussion, see Lin 2016.

[19] I argue elsewhere, however, that even subjective theories, as they have been traditionally formulated, violate the constraint and thus enjoy no advantage over objective theories in this respect. See Kelley Manuscript.

[20] For more on the dissonance constraint, see Kelley 2022.

It is open to the desire theorist who wishes to adopt the frustration view to simply reject the dissonance constraint, but doing so would come at a high price. Some of the same kinds of considerations that support the resonance constraint also support the dissonance constraint. One standard kind of case we might give to motivate the resonance constraint is one in which we are left puzzled as to how a state of affairs could be good for a person who is not at all interested in it. Suppose that Henry studies an entomology textbook and learns a lot about insects.[22] Afterwards, his new knowledge leaves him completely cold, and, as Henry puts it, "it does nothing for me." The desire theorist would ask, skeptically, How can Henry's new knowledge be good for him if he is not at all interested in it? The desire theorist wants to say that Henry's new knowledge is of no benefit to him precisely because it does not resonate with him.

An analogous kind of case motivates the dissonance constraint. To use an example from Wayne Sumner, suppose that you are enjoying a moderately priced bottle of wine, but you realize that you could be enjoying a more expensive bottle.[23] You desire to be drinking the more expensive bottle, but you are perfectly content with the bottle you have. You are not at all bothered by the fact that you do not have the more expensive bottle. It seems to me that the desire theorist should ask, skeptically, How can not having the more expensive bottle of wine be bad for you if you are not at all bothered by not having it? Of course, the desire theorist can say that having the more expensive bottle would be better for you than having the less expensive bottle. After all, you prefer the more expensive bottle. But I submit that the desire theorist should say that not having the more expensive bottle is not robustly bad for you precisely because you do not have a negative attitude towards not having it. Therefore, in the absence of considerations to the contrary, it is reasonable to think that the resonance constraint and the dissonance constraint stand or fall together. The desire theorist should look for a better option to fill in the negative side of their theory.

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[21] Related to fn. 18 above: Just as the combo formulation of the positive side of the theory respects a disjunctive version of the resonance constraint, perhaps too it could be maintained that the combo formulation of the frustration view respects a disjunctive version of the dissonance constraint. The disjunctive version of the dissonance constraint that would be analogous to the disjunctive version of the resonance constraint says that a state of affairs is bad for you only if *either* you have a negative attitude towards it *or* it involves a negative attitude of yours. As I argue in the main text, the combo formulation of the frustration view does not satisfy the first disjunct. But notice that it does not satisfy the second disjunct either since the combo state it says is bad for you does not involve a negative attitude of yours. Thus, even if we understand the dissonance constraint disjunctively, the combo formulation of the frustration view still violates it.

[22] I borrow this example from Heathwood (2014, p. 203).

[23] Sumner 2020 (p. 422).

4. The Aversion View

Let us return to the case of Jason, the failed architect. We said that the desire theorist would want to say that the fact that Jason will never be an architect is bad for him. That initially seemed like the correct judgment about the case, but we may have been helping ourselves to details about the case that were never explicitly stated. It is natural to think of Jason as having an aversion to the fact that he will never become an architect. After all, Jason's desire is long-standing and intense. But suppose that we imagine the case differently. Suppose that we instead imagine Jason as completely unbothered by the fact that he will never become an architect. Maybe in a cool moment of reflection Jason would report the following:

> I really want to be an architect. I can imagine how good that would be for me, but I am not at all bothered by the fact that I will never be an architect. I understand that sometimes a person's life ambitions do not work out. I am sure I can find other meaningful things to occupy myself with.

When I reflect on these new details of the case from the perspective of the desire theorist, I find myself thinking that the fact Jason will never be an architect is regrettable in the sense that he will never get the benefit of having his desire to be an architect satisfied. But because Jason is perfectly at peace with the situation, it no longer seems to me that the desire theorist should say that the fact he will never be an architect is robustly bad for him. Why would it be bad for Jason if it does not at all bother him? The fact that our intuition about the case is sensitive to whether Jason is averse to never becoming an architect is good evidence that his aversion, or lack thereof, is the axiologically relevant feature of the case.

I submit that the desire theorist should adopt the aversion view. According to this way of filling in the negative side of the desire theory, getting what you are averse to is the only thing that is basically bad for you. According to the aversion view, the fact that Jason will never be an architect is bad for him but not because he desires to be an architect; instead, it is bad for him because, let us now suppose, he is averse to never becoming an architect.

The aversion view succeeds where the frustration view fails. Recall that desire theorists accept the resonance constraint, and I have argued that they should also accept the dissonance constraint, the doctrine that a state of affairs is bad for you only if you have a negative attitude towards it. The frustration view violates this constraint since it says that when you desire that *p*, not-*p* is bad for you, irrespective of whether you have a negative attitude towards not-*p*. The aversion view, however, respects the dissonance constraint. According to the aversion view, each state of affairs that is bad for you is a state towards which you are guaranteed to have a negative attitude. Aversion is a negative attitude, and the theory says that all and only the states that satisfy your aversions are bad for you. Thus, the aversion view is compatible with the thought that never becoming an architect would not be bad for Jason if he were not at all bothered by it. The dissonance constraint is plausible by the desire theorist's own lights, and the aversion view, but not the frustration view, respects it.[24]

In the remainder of this section, I will respond to the objections that the aversion view is not a genuine alternative to the frustration view and that the desire theory paired with the aversion view implies, implausibly, that a state of affairs can be both basically good and basically bad for you.

4.1 Does the aversion view collapse into the frustration view?

Wayne Sumner argues that a desire for *p* is just an aversion to not-*p*. On Sumner's view, to desire *p*'s obtaining is to be averse to *p*'s not obtaining. In other words, '*S* desires that *p*' and 'S is averse to not-*p*' are just different ways of characterizing the very same state of affairs.[25] For Sumner, the problem for the aversion view is simply this: if a desire that *p* is just an aversion to not-*p*, then there is no important difference between the frustration view and the aversion view. The state of affairs that would frustrate your desire that *p* is the same state of affairs that would satisfy your aversion to not-*p*. The two theories would never disagree about whether a state of affairs is bad for you nor would they disagree, when paired with the positive side of the desire theory, about how well you are faring at a time or during an interval of time. Thus, according to Sumner, there is no important difference between the frustration view and the aversion view.

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[24] I am thinking of the aversion view on an object formulation, according to which it is the states that satisfy your aversions that are bad for you. On a combo formulation, it would be your aversion to *p* and *p*'s being the case that is bad for you. This combo formulation of the aversion view violates the dissonance constraint as I have formulated it since the theory implies that this combo state is bad for you even if you do not have a negative attitude towards it. A similar issue arose with respect to whether the combo formulation of the positive side of the desire theory respects the resonance constraint (see fn. 18 above). The strategy there was to formulate the resonance constraint disjunctively so that the combo formulation of the positive side of the theory respects it. A similar strategy could be employed here. The disjunctive dissonance constraint says that a state of affairs is bad for you only if *either* you have a negative attitude towards it *or* it involves a negative attitude of yours. The combo formulation of the aversion view satisfies this disjunctive version of the dissonance constraint because it satisfies the second disjunct.

[25] Sumner 2020 (p. 428).

Against this, I argue that the two theories are genuine competitors because aversions and desires are distinct kinds of propositional attitudes. To desire *p* is not simply to have an aversion to not-*p* nor is the desire for *p* always accompanied by the corresponding aversion to not-*p*. To see why, consider a case from Sumner in which you want it not to rain on your picnic this afternoon. It is possible to imagine the case as one in which your desire that it not rain is accompanied by an aversion to its raining. But it is also possible to imagine it as one in which though you desire that it not rain, you do not have an aversion to its raining. Suppose, for example, that it rains nearly every day where you live. A rain-free afternoon is such a remote possibility that you know better than to get your hopes up. Though you want it not to rain, you would not at all be bothered by its raining. You are perfectly accustomed to and content with the status quo. Nonetheless, you would welcome and be delighted by its not raining. This case shows that you can desire that *p* without being averse to not-*p*.[26]

Now it might be argued that I have constructed a merely possible case in which desiring that *p* is not accompanied by an aversion to not-*p* and that I have not shown that this ever actually happens. In fact, you might think it is just a simple fact about human psychology that our desires and aversions always line up in this way: if you truly desire that *p*, you cannot help but to be at least somewhat averse to not-*p*. Our context, however, requires that I demonstrate only that desiring that *p* without also having an aversion to not-*p* is metaphysically possible. Theories of welfare are not just theories about how you are faring in the actual world. They also tell us how you would be faring in every metaphysically possible situation in which you exist. In the possible worlds in which you desire that *p* without having an aversion to not-*p*, the frustration view and aversion view will disagree about whether not-*p* is bad for you in those worlds. There would be no such disagreement if there were no important difference between the theories.

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[26] Other cases can be used to argue for this conclusion, such as Sumner's case of the moderately priced bottle of wine and the case of Jason the architect. Mathison (2018) also uses this and similar cases to establish the same point. Heathwood (2022) uses a case involving simple minds to the same effect.

Furthermore, even if the theories were extensionally equivalent, they would still be importantly different, provided that desires and aversions are distinct attitudes. The theories would differ in terms of the explanation of why a particular state of affairs is basically bad for you. In other words, though they would agree about the basic bad *tokens*, they would disagree about the basic bad *kinds*. For example, suppose that we imagine Jason both as desiring to one day be an architect and as having an aversion to never becoming an architect. Both the frustration view and the aversion view imply that the fact that Jason will never be an architect is bad for him, but they disagree about *why* it is bad for him. On the frustration view, the fact that Jason will never become an architect is bad for him because it frustrates his desire to one day be an architect. In contrast, on the aversion view, it is bad for him because it satisfies his aversion to never becoming an architect. There is thus at least this explanatory difference between the two theories, and an explanatory difference is an important difference.[27]

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[27] Indeed, I have argued that the aversion view delivers the more plausible explanation because it respects, whereas the frustration view violates, the dissonance constraint. One might be worried, however, that if a desire for *p* is always accompanied by the corresponding aversion to not-*p*, then the frustration view really does respect the dissonance constraint. As I stated it, that constraint requires only that you have a negative attitude towards each state that is basically bad for you. But if the frustration of a desire is always accompanied by the satisfaction of the corresponding aversion, then it turns out that you will have a negative attitude towards each state of affairs the frustration view says is basically bad for you. The issue, however, is that the negative attitude is explanatorily idle. On the frustration view, it is the fact that not-*p* frustrates your desire, not the fact that it satisfies your aversion, that explains why it is bad for you. A more precise formulation of the dissonance constraint would require that the negative attitude figure in the explanation of why the harmful state is bad for you. Lin (2020) makes the analogous point about the resonance constraint.

Sumner could attempt to buttress his claim that the aversion view collapses into the frustration view by arguing that desires and aversions should be understood behaviorally. A behavioral desire for *p* is defined functionally as a mental state with a certain behavioral profile. Understood behaviorally, it might turn out that a desire for *p* is just an aversion to not-*p*. Perhaps the behavioral profile of desiring that *p*, which includes elements such as pursuing or being inclined to pursue courses of action to bring it about that *p*, is the same behavioral profile of having an aversion to not-*p*. If we understand desires and aversions behaviorally, the aversion view may collapse into the frustration view because there may be no distinction between desiring that *p* and having an aversion to not-*p* and thus no distinction between desire frustration and aversion satisfaction.

In contrast, we might understand desires and aversions phenomenologically. On this view, desires and aversions are individuated according to their phenomenology. When a subject has a *genuine-attraction* desire for *p*, the subject has enthusiasm and gusto for *p*.[28] We can define a companion notion for the negative side of the theory. If a subject has what we might call a *genuine-repulsion* aversion to not-*p*, the subject will be genuinely repelled by and have a distaste for not-*p*. Understood phenomenologically, desiring that *p* and having an aversion to not-*p* involve different phenomenological states directed towards different possible states of affairs, so they are not the same mental state, even if they are each associated with the same behavioral profile. If we understand desires and aversions phenomenologically, the aversion view does not collapse into the frustration view.

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[28] For more on the distinction between behavioral and genuine-attraction desires and for arguments in favor of understanding the desire theory as making reference to only genuine-attraction desires, see Heathwood 2019.

Thus, whether the aversion view collapses into the frustration view appears to depend on whether the desire theory should be formulated in terms of only behavioral desires and behavioral aversions or only genuine-attraction desires and genuine-repulsion aversions.[29] This appearance, however, is illusory. An aversion to *p* has a different behavioral profile than a desire for not-*p*. The frustration of the former and the satisfaction of the latter tend to give rise to different psychological responses on behalf of the experiencing subject. To use an example from Timothy Schroeder, if you desire Adam's timeliness, you will be delighted when he shows up on time, but if you are averse to his lateness, you would instead be relieved.[30] Such a difference in a subject's psychological responses are plausibly construed as a difference in the behavioral profile of the two kinds of attitudes.[31]

Even if the aversion view collapses into the frustration view on a behavioral understanding of desires and aversions, it clearly does not do so on the phenomenological understanding of these notions. The desire theorist has at least three good reasons for formulating their theory in terms of genuine-attraction desires and genuine-attraction aversions.[32]

First, the desire theorist must adopt a phenomenological understanding of desires and aversions in order for their theory to respect the resonance constraint and the dissonance constraint, respectively.[33] Railton's insistence that "what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree *compelling* or *attractive*" and that it must "*engage*" him suggests as much on the positive side of the theory.[34] One need not find *p* compelling or attractive or be engaged by *p* to have a behavioral desire for *p*. Analogous remarks motivate a phenomenological understanding of aversions for the negative side of the theory. Second, I have argued that we have independent reasons to think that to desire that *p* is not just to have an aversion to not-*p*, so the desire theorist should not adopt a behavioral understanding of desires and aversions if doing so would conflate these two distinct mental states. Third, formulating the desire theory in terms of only genuine-attraction desires may have a theoretical payoff, such as helping the desire theorist resolve certain problem cases involving idealistic desires, compulsive desires, prudential desires, and desires concerning unlikely possibilities.[35] Thus, if the desire theorist appeals to a phenomenological understanding of desires and aversions as he has independent reason to do, then it cannot be maintained that the aversion view collapses into the frustration view.

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[29] For a statement of this argument, see Heathwood (2022b, pp. 44-46).

[30] Schroeder 2004 (p. 132). See also Sinhababu 2017 (p. 48).

[31] One might be worried that rather than identifying a difference between the behavioral profile of *desires* and *aversions*, we have instead identified a difference between the behavioral profile of *desire satisfactions* and *aversion frustrations*. But because the very same state of the world, not-*p*, frustrates one's aversion to *p* and satisfies one's desire for not-*p*, the bare difference between the desire satisfaction and the aversion frustration that explains the difference in psychological response is the fact that the former involves a desire and the latter involves an aversion.

[32] Sumner himself maintains that the desire theory should be formulated in terms of only genuine-attraction desires. See Sumner 1996 (p. 120). If you think the desire theory should be understood in terms of behavioral desires in addition to or instead of genuine-attraction desires, then you are welcome to understand my central thesis as the claim that *if* we formulate the positive side of the theory only in terms of genuine-attraction desires, then we should formulate the negative side of the theory only in terms of genuine-repulsion aversions.

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[33] Heathwood (2019, p. 676) argues that the resonance constraint tells in favor of a phenomenological understanding of desires.

[34] Railton 1986 (p. 9, emphasis added). To draw this point out a bit more, consider Warren Quinn's radioman, a person who is in a functional state that disposes him to turn on radios but who lacks any genuine enthusiasm for doing so. See Quinn 1993 (p. 236). Though Quinn's radioman may be described as having a desire to turn on the radios, his desire is a mere behavioral desire that does not involve the engagement required by the resonance constraint. Plausibly, a theory which implied that turning on the radios is good for radioman would violate the resonance constraint because though radioman has a cold, behavioral desire for turning on the radios, he does not have a warm, affective desire for doing so (i.e., he does not find doing so compelling or attractive).

[35] An example of a case involving an idealistic desire is this. Suppose that, in order to be selfless, I give you the last slice of pizza even though keeping the slice for myself is the option I view with enthusiasm and gusto. I had a behavioral desire to give you the last slice, but I had a genuine-attraction desire to keep it for myself. Only the desire theory which makes reference only to genuine-attraction desires delivers the intuitively correct verdict that I acted against my interests by giving my friend the last slice. For discussion, see Heathwood 2019.

4.2 Can a single thing be both basically good and basically bad for you?

In order to address the previous objection, the desire theorist who wishes to adopt the aversion view should maintain that desires and aversions are distinct psychological attitudes. Following Kagan, we might be worried that doing so opens up the possibility that a person could have both a desire and an aversion for the very same state of affairs.[36] This feature of the view suggests a different objection. The objection is that if we choose to fill in the negative side of the desire theory with the aversion view, the resulting theory is one that implies, implausibly, that a single state of affairs can be both basically good and basically bad for you.

This is, in fact, Shelly Kagan's stated reason for tentatively thinking that the desire theorist should adopt the frustration view rather than the aversion view, despite his doubts that the frustration view meets the robustness requirement.[37] Kagan suggests that the situation might be different if we say of a thing that *one* of its features is good for you and that *another* of its features is bad for you. The problem for the aversion view, Kagan says, is that the theory implies that a *single* feature of an object can be both basically good and basically bad for you. Note also that the problem is supposed to be that the theory implies that a state of affairs can be both *basically* good for you and *basically* bad for you. It would not be a problem for the view if it implied that a state of affairs can be both basically good and *instrumentally* bad for you.[38] The theory has the resources to explain why, for example, eating cheesecake is basically good for you because you want it but instrumentally bad for you because it frustrates many other desires that would otherwise have been satisfied if you had not eaten the cheesecake.

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[36] Pace Kagan, it is not clear that treating desires and aversions as distinct psychological attitudes would open up the possibility that one could have both a desire and an aversion for the same state of affairs (in the same respect). See Tappolet 2005 and Pallies 2022 (p. 615).

[37] Kagan 2014 (p. 270).

[38] A state of affairs is instrumentally bad for you when it prevents you from getting something that would be (basically or otherwise) good for you or when it brings about a state that is (basically or otherwise) bad for you. Though I do not think the desire theorist should say that desire frustration is basically bad for you, I do think the desire theorist should say that desire frustration is sometimes instrumentally bad for you.

The desire theorist who wishes to adopt the aversion view should just bite the bullet.[39] The theory implies only that a single state can be both *pro tanto* basically good and *pro tanto* basically bad for you, but this, the desire theorist could argue, is the correct result. One thing that might make one resist this idea is that it is easily mistaken for other claims that are obviously false. Distinguish the claim that a state of affairs can be *pro tanto* basically good and *pro tanto* basically bad for you from the claim that a state can be both *overall* good for you and *overall* bad for you. We calculate a state's overall goodness or badness for you by taking the sum of its *pro tanto* intrinsic and extrinsic value. On a simple picture, if the sum is positive, then the state of affairs in question is overall good for you, and if instead the sum is negative, it is overall bad for you. But a single state could not be both overall good and overall bad for you. Also, distinguish the claim that a state of affairs can be both *pro tanto* basically good and *pro tanto* basically bad for you from the claim that a state can be both basically good for you and *not* basically good for you. That claim is a straightforward contradiction, so it is obviously false. These false claims are not the same claim as the true claim that a state can be both *pro tanto* basically good and *pro tanto* basically bad for you. Or so the desire theorist might argue.

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[39] Proponents of the combo formulation of the desire theory need not bite the bullet. Their view does not have the implication that a single state of affairs could be both basically good and basically bad for you. On the combo view, combination states of a desire of yours and its object are basically good for you and combination states of an aversion of yours and its object are basically bad for you. See Pallies 2022. Another strategy for the proponent of the object formulation would be to employ a companions-in-guilt argument and argue that the desire theory paired with the frustration view has the same (allegedly) implausible implication. After all, it is possible to both desire that *p* and desire that not-*p*, in which case *p*'s obtaining would be both basically good and basically bad for you according to the theory. This is how Mathison (2018) responds to the objection. Kagan (2014, p. 271) himself notes the possibility of this kind of response to the objection.

V. Conclusion

Both proponents and critics of the desire theory of welfare have virtually ignored the negative side of the theory. On the occasions when they have deviated from this pattern, they have tended to make the false assumption that the negative side of the theory should be filled in with the frustration view: that the sole basic bad for a person is the frustration of their desires. I have argued that the desire theorist should reject the frustration view because it violates the dissonance constraint, the doctrine that you must have a negative attitude towards that which is basically bad for you. The desire theorist should instead go in for the aversion view, according to which the sole basic bad for a person is the satisfaction of their aversions. I have defended the aversion view from the objection that it collapses into the frustration view and from the objection that it implies, implausibly, that a single state of affairs can be both basically good and basically bad for you. I have not attempted to say whether the desire-based approach to welfare is correct; my sole focus has been on determining whether the desire theory paired with the aversion view is more likely to be true than the desire theory paired with the frustration view. I have concluded that the desire theorist should fill in the negative side of their theory with the aversion view. If desire satisfaction is good for you, then aversion satisfaction, not desire frustration, is bad for you.[40]

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[40] I presented earlier versions of this paper at the Center for Values and Social Policy at the University of Colorado Boulder, to Eden Lin's well-being seminar at the Ohio State University, to my own well-being seminars at Coe College and LSU, at the 74th Annual Mountain-Plains Philosophy Conference, at the 2021 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, and at the 5th Annual Moral & Political Philosophy Workshop at Dartmouth College. I am grateful to those audiences for helpful feedback. For comments on earlier drafts, I thank Teresa Bruno, Nikki Fortier, Chris Heathwood, Michael Huemer, Eden Lin, Shaun Miller, Rebecca Mullen, Jack Murphy, David Sobel, Wayne Sumner, Rosa Terlazzo, Joseph Van Weelden, Xiang Yu. For helpful conversation, I thank David Boonin, Graham Oddie, Bodhi Melnitzer, and the members of the Well-Being Working Group.

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