

Mood and Wellbeing

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Forthcoming in *Inquiry*
(special issue on emotion and value)

Introduction/Abstract

The two main subjectivist accounts of wellbeing, hedonism and desire-satisfactionism, focus on pleasure and desire (respectively) as the subjective states relevant to evaluating the goodness of a life. In this paper, I argue that another type of subjective state, mood, is much more central to wellbeing. After a general characterization of some central features of mood (§1), I argue that the folk concept of happiness construes it in terms of preponderance of good mood (§2). I then leverage this connection between mood and happiness to argue that having certain mood patterns in one's life is *sufficient* for having a good life (§3), and explore their potential *necessity* for a good life (§4). I close with discussion of the role that mood patterns might play within the three leading philosophical theories of wellbeing: hedonism (§5), desire-satisfactionism (§6), and objective-list theory (§7).

1. Mood

Moods include depression and euphoria, anxiety and serenity, irritability and calmness, melancholia and elation, gravity and levity, gloominess and giddiness.¹ What do such states have in common that *makes* them moods? Different theories of mood will offer different answers (see Kriegel 2019 for mine). But certain general characteristics of moods are relatively theoretically neutral and could be accepted by a variety of different theories. I describe six such characteristics, which I call *longevity*, *peripherality*, *generality*, *ubiquity*, and *elusiveness*.

Longevity. Often I feel vaguely elated for about an hour after watching a powerful film. And yesterday I felt anxious for a few hours before my afternoon meeting with the Dean. These are extraordinarily long time periods for an experiential state.² Our perceptual

experiences change constantly, our conscious thoughts fly in and out, typically persisting 2–3 seconds at most. Processes of conscious deliberation likewise involve a succession of rather fleeting conscious states. But moods, although experiential, can persist with barely any change to their qualitative character for hours upon hours. (Sometimes they change ever so slightly in felt intensity, but that’s quantitative more than qualitative change.) Emotional experiences such as frustration or shame often last longer than perceptual experiences and occurrent thoughts – sometimes they can last for long minutes. But if they persist for hours they shade into moods. More generally, many experiential episodes are temporally shaped by the specious present, which creates an undulating flow in the stream of consciousness; whereas moods fill and submerge the specious present without being affected by it, like the barely changing waters at the ocean bottom.

Peripherality. Conscious experience has a center-periphery structure. Right now, at the forefront of my conscious awareness are my perceptual experience of the laptop before me and occurrent thoughts about how to put in words the point of this paragraph. In the “experiential background” is a dizzying multitude of elements: visual impressions of the espresso machine to my right, my kids’ photos behind the laptop, and any number of other visual elements; auditory experience of the humming air conditioner in the hallway; tactile sensations of the sole of my shoes and the seat under me; fleeting thoughts about having to prepare the class I am teaching later today; and much besides. Within this center-periphery structure, moods are ranged almost always on the peripheral side of things. We can, with some difficulty, *decide* to turn our attention onto our concurrent mood. But moods rarely force this decision on us in the way perceptual experiences, occurrent thoughts, and emotional experiences do. For the most part, moods remain in the experiential periphery – what William James (1890) called “the fringe of consciousness.” (Sometimes moods like anxiety can “crystallize” into emotional experiences, and then they stand a better chance of drawing our attention; but in their moody state they do so much less potently.)

Generality. It is a fixture in discussions of moods that they can be “undirected.” Sometimes the thought is put by saying that moods seem to be about “nothing and everything.” In reality, I think what is true here is that moods are about nothing *in particular* and about everything *in general*. Here I follow the lead of William Seager (1999: 183), who writes: “Being depressed is a way of being conscious of things in general: everything seems worthless, or pointless, dull and profitless.” What it means exactly that moods are about “things in general,” and how precisely we should understand their intentional structure to capture this, are matters for theoretical investigation; I make my own suggestions in Kriegel 2019. Here I leave the point at this surface level, to stay comparatively neutral.

Ubiquity. (Warning: of the six features of mood I want to affirm, of this one I am least confident.) We are in some mood or another throughout our waking life. There is always a

“background tune” to our overall state of consciousness. Some moods are very mildly valenced, and those impose themselves on our self-awareness even less than usual. Still, one is always in some mood or another. You might say: sometimes I am neither in a good mood nor in a bad mood – I just feel neutral. I reply: there is in our psychological repertoire something we might call the “neutral mood,” and that is the mood you are in at those times. Feeling neutral is a certain way of feeling – it is the experiential presence of moodly neutrality rather than the absence of any mood. Thus although most moods are valenced, however mildly, there is such a thing as an entirely unvalenced mood – the “neutral mood.” What is this neutral mood? Like every mood, it is difficult to describe. We might say, metaphorically but hopefully helpfully, that if a good mood “says” that things are good and a bad mood “says” that things are bad, the neutral mood “says” that things are what they are, and that’s that. (Perhaps, like me, you are not entirely sure about the existence of this “neutral mood.” Then at least you should agree that moods, although not quite *ubiquitous*, are *pervasive* in our mental life: we are *almost* always in some mood or another.)

Valence. Moods fall in general into two groups: the good moods and the bad moods. They are hedonically valenced, in this sense. If there is also a neutral mood, then all but one moods are valenced. This does not mean that there are not different ways to be in the neutral mood: just as there are different shades of anxiety, different shades of boredom, and so on, there would presumably be different shades of neutral or “even” mood. In addition, some moods we feel may be admixtures of other moods: my own mood seems all too often to be the resultant of irritability and excitement. What valence such composite moods have when their component moods are of opposing valences will depend of various factors that belong more properly to phenomenological psychology than philosophy.

Elusiveness. Because of their ubiquity, generality, peripherality, and longevity, moods are harder to notice than most other aspects of our conscious experience. They live in the shadows of our introspective self-awareness. Compare: I notice the hum of the air conditioner in the hallway only when it *stops* whirring. Nonetheless, the hum makes an ever so subtle contribution to my overall phenomenology, as attested by the fact that I *do* notice the change when the whirr ceases. Mood is the same. It makes an understated contribution to our overall phenomenology, but this contribution is easy to miss because it is so steady (ubiquity, longevity), diffuse (generality), and faint (peripherality). Even when moods are qualitatively substantial they can be missed due to these structural features. The first time I smoked opium, I was *stunned* to discover the intensity of the anxiety I was laboring under before – the complete and sudden annihilation of that anxious mood, brought forth by the witchcraft of opium, was *very* palpable.

These six characteristics should help focus the mind on the phenomenon in which we are interested. Later, some of them will occasionally also do some *explanatory* work for us, including in explaining the centrality of mood to wellbeing. But first we should get

clearer both on why we should believe in such centrality, and on what “centrality” actually means in this context.

2. Mood and Happiness

2.1. Happiness: A Conceptual Analysis

When discussing the phenomena of mood, an initial terminological clarification is indispensable and, as we'll see, highly instructive: many expressions denoting moods, including notably 'depression' and 'anxiety,' are systematically ambiguous as between a phenomenological and a clinical sense. In one usage, 'anxiety' denotes an experienced dimension of a person's state of mind at a time, typically a time that lasts anywhere between a few minutes and a whole day. Anxiety in this sense is *felt* by its subject, is part of her overall *experience*, and makes a difference to what it is like to be her at the time. But 'anxiety' can also be used to denote a more persistent *condition* of a person, one which may last anywhere between a few days and many years. Depression and anxiety in this more clinical sense are not themselves experiential episodes, but rather conditions *responsible for*, or at least *correlating with*, the systematic recurrence – a *preponderance* – of the corresponding experiential episodes. (I am not taking a stand on the 'responsible for' vs. 'correlating with' options, not because it is not an important question, but because I am unsure of the answer. One option is to think of depression in the clinical sense as the *disposition* to undergo the relevant experiential episodes; another is to think of it as the *categorical basis* of that disposition. The former suggests 'corelating with,' the latter 'responsible for.' But I am unsure which is the more plausible view.)

As I will use the term, only the experiential episodes qualify as moods. The persistent conditions may be called 'mood conditions,' or 'mood propensities,' but they are not strictly speaking moods. This seems to me consistent with everyday usage: it is awkward, probably infelicitous, to describe a depressed person in dreamless sleep as in any mood. She may have an inclination to *enter* a mood, indeed may very well enter that mood immediately upon waking, but while in a dreamless sleep she is not in any mood. Still, this sound-asleep person is depressed in the clinical sense, precisely because of her disposition to experience a depressive mood in her waking hours.³

We may use the locutions 'feeling anxious' and 'being anxious' to capture respectively the experiential phenomenon (anxiety the mood) and the persistent condition (anxiety in the clinical sense); and likewise for 'feeling depressed' and 'being depressed', 'feeling bored' and 'being bored' (as a sort of “existential” state), and so on.

Feeling depressed and feeling anxious are two prominent *bad* moods. Unfortunately there are many others – feeling bored, feeling irritable, and so on. Happily, though, there are also many *good moods*: cheerfulness and euphoria, calm serenity, and lighthearted levity are four quite different examples. Thus the sphere of mood appears to divide into positive and negative, just as the realm of emotion notoriously does.

Corresponding to the above good-mood experiential episodes are matching persistent conditions – as before, lasting anywhere from a few days to several years – marked by the preponderant recurrence of the relevant mood. For instance, a person experiencing a preponderance of calm serenity over a few months is in a calm/serene period in their life. Here too, we may use the locution ‘feeling serene’ for the mood and reserve ‘being serene’ for the corresponding persistent condition. Calm serenity as persistent condition is in some respects the positive counterpart of anxiety the persistent condition. On the negative side of the mood divide the term ‘clinical condition’ is fitting for these persistent conditions; it is odder for the positive side of the divide, because aside from certain exceptions, mainstream clinical psychology has not typically concerned itself with that part of the divide. The standard conception of clinical psychology in contemporary Western culture is as something you avail yourself of when you are not doing well to get back to a more or less neutral point, but not something you avail yourself of to move from a neutral place to a good place. (Why this asymmetry? Ask cultural analysts.)

There is also a persistent condition in which a person experiences a preponderance of positive moods *of all types* – they feel serene relatively often, lighthearted at many other times, euphoric more often than you’d expect, and so on. This is the persistent condition marked by the *preponderance of good mood* of some kind or another – good mood generically understood. What should we call this persistent condition? I think natural language has a familiar name for it – *happiness*. There may be other legitimate uses of the word ‘happiness’, but one of the central uses is precisely to denote this kind of condition – the relatively stable and persistent condition wherein one finds oneself *feeling good* more often than not (cf. Haybron 2001).⁴

Whenever I reminisce about the six months I spent in Oxford twenty years ago, I always think to myself: I was so happy back then! Regardless of whether I am right about this, what I represent to myself when I represent that I was happy during those months is that I was unusually often in a good mood (often, as it happens, of serenity or calm content). I very clearly do *not* represent to myself any specific experiences of particularly intense punctate pleasure – there is no amazing meal I can recall, no stand-out orgasm, no epic night out. (Nor do I recall any particular achievements, or specific desires being fulfilled.) No, what I represent to myself is the striking preponderance of good mood that characterized my life during those months. This is what the folk concept of happiness chiefly consists in.

As counterpart to this notion of happiness as the persistent condition marked by preponderance of good mood, there is also a notion of *unhappiness* as the persistent condition in which we experience a preponderance of *bad* moods. When the bad moods one experiences are preponderantly of the depressed variety, we call that persistent condition (clinical) depression. Being depressed is one way of being unhappy. There are others, however, corresponding to the other kinds of bad mood we can experience. But unhappiness as such is just the preponderance of bad mood generically understood (i.e., some bad mood or other).

To be clear, what I'm proposing here is not a substantive normative account of happiness and unhappiness, but a *conceptual analysis* of the folk notions of happiness and unhappiness. When the folk speak of happiness, what they are speaking of in the first instance, I am claiming, is the preponderance of good moods over a longish period of time; and likewise for unhappiness.

2.2. Details and Consequences

I have mentioned a happy period I spent in Oxford 20 years ago. In asserting this so confidently, I do not mean to imply that I am infallible about the state of my happiness, much less about the comparative degrees of happiness at different phases of my life. It's just that that period stands out as exceptionally happy. But much of my life it is not easy for me to tell just how happy I am – the point may resonate with you as well.

Our conceptual analysis has the resources to *explain* this familiar uncertainty about the state of our happiness. If happiness consists in the preponderance of good mood, and if mood is peripheral and elusive in the sense set out in §1, then it stands to reason that we should find it difficult to introspectively keep track of that which makes it the case that we are happy or unhappy. And keeping track of a *preponderance* of mood of a certain type over long stretches of time requires also memory and reflection, which bring their own limitations. Thus it is quite difficult to form entirely trustworthy judgments about the state of one's happiness at a certain period of one's life. This is not yet, however, a ground for wholesale skepticism in this area: here as elsewhere in life, with proper attention and cognitive effort, and with due care to avoid wishful thinking and the like pitfalls, it should be possible for us to form non-arbitrary, *reasonable* judgments about the state of our happiness (essentially, by taking into account the variety of evidence available to us and doing our epistemic best with it).

Our analysis also explains why, although we have no problem saying that a rat feels pleasure or pain, we do find it rather odd to say that the rat is happy or unhappy. The reason is that we don't have a clear conception of what kind of mood life the rat might have. We have no problem attributing pain and pleasure to a rat – if forced to contemplate a rat's

orgasm, we can readily imagine that what the rat experiences resembles to some extent what we do in parallel circumstances. We are also very confident the rat *cannot* entertain the propositions of Newtonian mechanics or even market economics. With moods, though, we really don't know what to think about the rat. And so we feel uneasy saying that the rat is in a good mood, and by extension, that she is happy. (This does not mean the matter is scientifically intractable; merely that it's hard to address from a folk perspective.)

The analysis further explains why it sounds odd to describe oneself as having been happy last Monday from noon to quarter past. This is just too short a period of time to "host" a preponderance of moods. And so this kind of period is not an eligible bearer of happiness.⁵ (It is possible to use the adjective "happy" also to describe a kind of short-term emotion – essentially: *joy* – and in *that* sense to describe oneself as having been happy for 15 minutes. But then all it means is that one experienced joy for 15 minutes.)

The goodness of a mood is something that comes in degrees, and so the notion of happiness we are speaking of here – the folk notion, as I claim it is – is a gradient notion. A person is more or less happy during a period of their life, more or less unhappy. When I said that I was happy during my six months in Oxford, what I meant more precisely is that the degree of my happiness was high as compared to other periods of my life – just as in calling someone tall we mean that their degree of tallness is high as compared to other people. Wherefore the absolute adjective "happy" is infected with the same vagueness such adjectives as "tall" and "bald" are, and involves a no-fact-of-the-matter gray area between clear cases of happiness and unhappiness.

Happiness as preponderance of good mood is a persistent condition, but it rarely if ever persists a lifetime. A normal human life features a succession of relatively happy and unhappy periods, with an undulating pattern of ebbs and flows of happiness. Still, some lives appear to be marked by greater happiness than others. They feature more, longer, or deeper periods of preponderance of good moods: the persistent condition I called happiness occurs with higher frequency, the periods in which it occurs persist longer, or the good moods occurring during them are specially good. In this respect, just as a person's being happy over a period of a few months is a matter of the preponderance of good mood during that period, a person's having a *happy life* is a matter of the preponderance of happiness in their life – in other words, the preponderance *of preponderances* of good mood.

Most of us, I think, will have been happy at some points in our life and unhappy at others. Leveraging this acquaintance with a persistent condition of happiness and a persistent condition of unhappiness, we can form a more or less vivid conception of what it would be like to live a life marked by decades of happiness, or alternatively dominated by

lifelong clinical depression. When we do this, what we're imagining is a happy life in one case and (one type of) unhappy life in the other.

Happiness as a property of a life has been the topic of much philosophical reflection. Again, what I just offered is not intended as a substantive philosophical theory but as a conceptual analysis of the folk conception of a happy life. A happy life in that conception, I claim, is the preponderance of preponderances of good mood – a life marked by high incidence of the persistent condition the folk call happiness (and low incidence of the persistent condition they call unhappiness). To say that this is what the folk mean when they speak of a happy life is consistent, *prima facie*, with any number of philosophical accounts of the ultimate nature of wellbeing, eudaimonia, the good life, or what have you. Nonetheless, I now want to make two claims regarding the connection between happiness-as-preponderance-of-good-mood and the good life – a confident claim in §3 and an unconfident one in §4.

3. Mood and the Good Life: Sufficiency

3.1. Happiness sufficient for a good life

One thing that's clear to me as I contemplate a life marked by decades of happiness, *the happy life*, is that it is a *good* life – good for the one who has it, that is. I say “a good life,” not “*the* good life.” To say that a happy life is a good life is not to say that leading a happy life, a life marked by the preponderance of (preponderance of) good mood, is the *only* way to lead a good life. Consider a poet of tortured soul and shining genius – a Rimbaud or a Pessoa – who is mostly unhappy in their life but leads a raw, intense, authentic existence and produces works of astounding aesthetic value that bring solace and delight to millions of readers for centuries. It is hard to resist the thought that such a poet has led a *good* life – certainly a *valuable* life – even if it wasn't a *happy* life.

If this is right, then there are unhappy lives very much worth living. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that a life devoid of any achievement or value can still be a *good* life, and all it requires is for the person whose life it is to have been by and large happy. Thus happiness, understood as the tendency to be in persistent conditions marked by preponderance of good mood, appears to be a *sufficient condition* for having a good life.

Susan Wolf (1997) famously argued that happiness is just one aspect of the good life, while *meaningfulness* is a second and independent aspect.⁶ This seems right, and indeed our *poète maudit*'s life seems to be good mainly in virtue of being meaningful. But Wolf gives the impression that she takes the good life to be a vector of two forces: happiness and meaningfulness. Yet on the face of it, a happy life would appear to be a good one even

without being meaningful. It seems to me antecedently plausible that a meaningful but unhappy life can also be a good life, but I am not so sure that *every* meaningful-yet-miserable life would be good for the one who lives it. Intuitively, however, every happy life is a prudentially good life (good, that is, *to the one who lives it*), whatever else happens in it.⁷

3.2. Mood and the good life

The announced thesis of this paper was that mood is central to wellbeing. That is annoyingly vague. What does ‘central’ mean? Now I can assert something much more precise:

[T1] Some mood patterns are sufficient for a life being a *good* life.

Our argument for this is simple:

- (1) A life being happy is sufficient for it being a good life (argument of §3.1);
- (2) A life dominated by long periods of persistent preponderance of good mood is a happy life (argument of §2.2);
- (3) Some mood patterns constitute the persistent preponderance of good mood (argument of §2.1); therefore,
- (4) Some mood patterns are sufficient for a life being a good life.

Call this the *argument from happiness*. The argument from happiness is an argument for [T1], and to that extent for the centrality of mood to the good life.

It might be objected that [T1] is undermined by Nozick’s experience-machine thought experiment (1974). Nozick argued that if experiential accounts of the good life were right, then from a purely prudential point of view we would have no reason to turn down an invitation to enter an experience machine that would feed us pleasanter experiences than we are likely to undergo outside it; but in fact we have the strong intuition that we do have reasons – prudential reasons – to decline the invitation. Since Nozick’s thought experiment applies to experience generically, it applies to mood experience as well. Thus, we could tinker with the experience machine so it ensures a greater preponderance of good mood inside the simulation than outside it. Still most of us would feel an intuitive resistance to giving up what we feel is our “authentic” life for the luxuriant moods of the simulation.

Setting aside questions about the validity of the intuitions pumped by the experience-machine (see Silverstein 2000, Crisp 2006), this objection involves a misunderstanding of what the thought experiment purports to show. It does *not* purport to show, and *cannot* show, that a life inside the experience machine is *not worth living*, or is

not a good life. It cannot show this because it does not pump any remotely relevant intuition. The intuition it pumps is just that the life outside the machine is *better* (more worth living) than the life inside it. But this is consistent of course with both lives being good (worth living). Compare: 12 is larger than 7, but that doesn't show that 7 is a negative number. In fact it isn't. Thus the fact, as it is claimed to be, that an extra-machine life is preferable to an intra-machine life dominated by good mood in no way suggests that the intra-machine good-mood life is not a good life. And that is all that [T1] claims: that a good-mood life is a good life.

4. Mood and the Good Life: Necessity?

Might mood somehow provide also a *necessary* condition for a life being good? As we saw, this doesn't seem plausible: as we survey Rimbaud's life it seems like a good life, one the likes of which many of us would not mind exchanging their own for – even though it was marked by much more, and deeper, bad mood than good. More generally, an unhappy life in which achievements of great value have been accomplished strikes us intuitively as a valuable life, an admirable life, and thus a life worth living.

Consider, however, the case of Fernando Pessoa, who not only led a gloomy, depressive life, but led it with an abiding conviction in the worthlessness of his writing and indeed existence. When he died in 1935, alone and liver-sick, a trunk was found in his room containing mind-boggling amounts of wondrous material. Much of this material was later found to pertain to a single work, published first in 1982 as *The Book of Disquiet* and now widely recognized as among the greatest works of 20th-century literature. Unfortunately, Pessoa himself, although he wrote compulsively throughout his life, never derived any sense of achievement or meaning from anything he wrote. The opening stanza of his great poem "The Tobacco Shop" reads:

I'm nothing.
I'll never be anything.
I can't wish I were anything.
Even so, I have all the dreams of the world in me.

All this *could* be an artistic posture or gambit, of course. But regardless of the contingencies of Pessoa's own case, we can readily envisage someone whose lifework is incredibly meaningful but who derives not the slightest sense of subjective meaning from it at any point, perhaps due to a deep and abiding conviction in its worthlessness. Is this person's life really so very good? Intuitively, there is a sense in which it is and another in which it isn't. Viewed from the outside – from the *third-person perspective*, as it were – it is still natural to describe such a life as good. It is certainly an *admirable* life, and may even be an *enviable*

one – all indicators of a life well worth living. All the same, we cannot ignore the fact that *from the first-person perspective* this life is not experienced positively by the person whose life it is. There is something vaguely insensitive, even disrespectful, about bracketing a person’s experience of their own life and declaring it a success from the outside.

One way to capture this set of intuitions might be to say that this kind of life may be good “objectively,” or from the *third-person* perspective, but is not subjectively good, not good from the *first-person* perspective. This introduces a distinction between a third-personal and a first-personal notion of the good life.⁸ In these terms, I think it is fair to say that the life of our Pessoa-like figure is third-personally good but not first-personally good. Indeed it is quite first-personally bad.

If all this is right, then a necessary-condition thesis becomes plausible for *first-person wellbeing*. It would read:

[T2] Some mood patterns are necessary for a life being a *first-personally* good life.

The argument for this would focus on mood patterns constitutive of *unhappiness* – perhaps as follows:

- (1) Some mood patterns constitute the persistent preponderance of bad mood;
- (2) A life dominated by long periods of persistent preponderance of bad mood is an unhappy life;
- (3) A life being unhappy is sufficient for it not being a *first-personally good* life; therefore,
- (4) Some mood patterns are sufficient for a life not being a first-personally good life; or contrapositively,
- (5) Some mood patterns are necessary for a life being a *first-personally* good life.

Call this *the argument from unhappiness*. It is an argument for [T2] – the necessity of certain mood patterns to a (first-personally) good life.

To sustain the argument from unhappiness, a fuller case for Premise 3 would have to be mounted, as well as for the very distinction between third- and first-personal wellbeing. Because I offer neither of these, I am asserting [T2] much more hesitantly than [T1]. Naturally, if [T2] is accepted, this deepens the sense in which mood is “central” to the good life. Together, [T1] & [T2] amount to the notion that mood patterns are necessary and sufficient for a first-personally good life and sufficient for a third-personally good life. All this is consistent, of course, with mood patterns being unnecessary for a third-personally good life. And even for first-personal wellbeing, happiness being both necessary and sufficient does not mean that happiness is *the only* intrinsic prudential good, as required by what Guy Fletcher (2016: 95) calls the “happiness theory of wellbeing” (even if restricted to

first-personal wellbeing). Consider a theory in which happiness is necessary for wellbeing, and suffices for it as well, but some happy lives are better than others, not in virtue of being happier however, but in virtue of the meaningfulness or value of what happens in them. What accounts for the betterness of one happy life over an equally better life in such a view is the intrinsic prudential value of something other than happiness.

As noted, I am less confident of [T2] than of [T1]. The sufficiency of happiness to a life's goodness seems to me so evident, in fact, that I think it should be a constraint on the adequacy of a theory of wellbeing that it be consistent with it. In reality, however, defenders of none of the three leading approaches to wellbeing – hedonism, desire-satisfaction theory, and objective-list theory – appear to put the slightest emphasis on mood, and this may raise the suspicion that we have taken a wrong turn somewhere in our argumentation. Let us take a closer look, then, at the role mood could or should play within each of these theories.

5. Mood and Pleasure

Hedonism is the view that a life's goodness is a function of the amount of pleasure and displeasure in it. The more pleasure a person experiences, the better their life; the more displeasure, the worse. What place for moods in this picture of wellbeing?

I think it depends on how the term '(dis)pleasure' is used. In everyday life, the noun 'pleasure' is used to pick out paradigmatically relatively short-lived episodes of somewhat intense good feeling. Prominent examples from my own life include the pleasure I experience while and immediately after eating uni sushi; the aesthetic delight that descends on me in front of a beautiful painting; the joy of witnessing my child do something funny and charming; the delight upon reading a creative turn of phrase in George Eliot or David Lewis; and orgasm. These paradigmatic pleasures last typically, oh, between three and six seconds. I have read in books that women's orgasms last longer, and sometimes at the museum I make an effort to sustain longer my delight before an artwork. But it is hard to imagine these kinds of pleasure lasting much longer than half a minute.

Under this restrictive notion of pleasure, moods don't qualify as pleasures; and a hedonism that assessed wellbeing by the tally of such punctate pleasures, taking into account their duration and intensity, say, would give moods no constitutive role in wellbeing. It could still give them an important *instrumental* role: stepping in dog feces when you're in a bad mood will tend to *cause* intense punctate displeasure, whereas in a good mood it might be brushed off lightheartedly. Still, moods would not in this picture be either sufficient or necessary for a good life: not sufficient because all the good mood in the world will not make for a good life if it doesn't yield punctate pleasures; not necessary

because a sufficiently large collection of punctate pleasures would make for a good life regardless of the subject's underlying mood.

Contemporary hedonists, however, typically have in mind a more liberal notion of pleasure, which covers any kind of pleasant or pleasurable experiential episode, not only the kinds of episode I've called punctate pleasure (this is perhaps why some prefer the term 'enjoyment' – see notably Crisp 2006). It seems entirely arbitrary, given the hedonist's fundamental sensibilities, to exclude non-punctate experiential episodes that feel good from the constitution of a good life. The determinants of wellbeing are not restricted, on the resulting view, to experiences that intuitively fall under the ordinary-language noun 'pleasure,' but extend to all experiences that can intuitively be described with the *adjectives* 'pleasant' or 'pleasurable.' This is a wider class of phenomena that includes many affectively valenced experiences, such as awe, satisfaction, hope, joy, nostalgia, gratitude, affection, contentment – as well as various hues of good mood. (Many of these it is awkward to call pleasures, but all are typically pleasant to experience.⁹) For this more liberal hedonist, experiences of all these types contribute positively to the subject's quality of life. This will include, of course, the good moods that constitute the folk notion of happiness: any good mood makes life better, and a preponderance of good mood makes life a *lot* better.

This kind of liberal hedonism can then take two different stances on the role of happiness in the good life: (a) accept the claim that happiness consists in a preponderance of good mood and claim that wellbeing is determined *in part* by happiness but in part also by pleasant experiences not constitutive of happiness; (b) redefine happiness as consisting not only in the preponderance of good mood but also in the preponderance of pleasant experiences of other types, including punctate pleasures, and then identify wellbeing with happiness so defined. Either way, though, mood will not be the *only* determinant of the good life, and this makes it unfit to be a *necessary* condition for the good life: even in the first-personal sense, a person would have a good life who spent her entire life in the neutral mood but experienced considerably more punctate pleasure than displeasure.¹⁰

This is consistent, however, with the claim that as a matter of contingent fact, moods play a significantly larger role than punctate pleasures in determining a life's overall quality. This is especially plausible if hedonic value is taken as the vector of intensity and duration. Punctate pleasures and displeasures are typically more intense than moods, but they are also much shorter-lived, while moods are with us always (see "ubiquity" in §1), and more often than not are at least somewhat valenced. In the hours that I spend every morning in my office, writing, reading, or preparing my classes, punctate pleasures and displeasures visit me rather infrequently. Sometimes I am annoyed by yet another pointless lengthy email from upper administration; sometimes I enjoy a sip of espresso or an exciting new idea. But most of the time my valenced experience is constituted entirely by my

underlying mood. Although comparatively mild, then, moods may well contribute, in virtue of their longevity and ubiquity, the lion's share to the overall hedonic value of a life.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that from the perspective of our contingent moral psychology, causal influence runs not only from mood to punctate pleasure but also in the opposite direction: we value and seek sustained successions of punctate pleasures, in large part, because we trust them to reliably instill and sustain good moods; we fear successions of punctate displeasures not only intrinsically, but also because they are liable to instill a depressive or irritable mood. To that extent, punctate pleasures and displeasures may well have more instrumental than intrinsic value!

6. Mood and Desire

According to the desire-satisfaction theory, wellbeing is a function of a person's desires being satisfied or frustrated. In some versions all desires count, in others only certain desires do. But on all versions the key to a good life is *getting what you want*.

One style of argument for desire-satisfactionism starts from the intuitive idea that getting what you want is certainly good for you, in and of itself and regardless of consequences, and then considering whether there's *anything else* that's good for you in this way, arguing that in fact there isn't (Heathwood 2016: 138). Here it is taken for granted that desire-satisfaction is an intrinsic prudential good and the bulk of the argumentative effort is to show that there is no other. For example, it is argued that pleasure is not good for us simply because of what it's like, but rather because we *like* what it's like and therefore *want* to have it. If we did not want to have pleasure, getting pleasure would not make our lives better. And likewise for any number of other potential goods: achievement, knowledge, love, and so on. Each is good for a person only if the person wants it – so goes the argument.

But is it so obvious that getting what you want is intrinsically good? Consider cases, not uncommon after all, in which we are wrong about what would make us happy. In 2011 I had a tenured position at the University of Arizona, which was an excellent department to be at both intellectually and socially. But I missed living in a bustling metropolitan, so I formed the desire to get a job in New York, Paris, London, or Berlin. Soon thereafter I applied for jobs in Paris and London. I didn't get the job in London, but I did get the one in Paris. An important desire of mine was thereby fulfilled. I knew the Paris job paid less well, and did not come with a philosophical community as strong as Arizona's, but it was a full-time research position in a beautiful, cultured city, so I very much wanted to move there and start a new chapter in my life as soon as possible. Why did I want this? Ultimately, because I thought I would be happier in Paris than in Arizona. But in fact I wasn't. Thus I was wrong to think I'd be happier in Paris than Arizona. I got what I wanted, but for

whatever reason, it didn't make me happier – in fact it made me less happy. Intuitively, this is a case where I simply made a prudential mistake.

This kind of case is not all that uncommon. “Beware what you wish for” exists for a reason! Henry Sidgwick (1907: 110) already pointed this out:

... it would still seem that what is desired at any time is, as such, merely apparent Good, which may not be found good when fruition comes, or at any rate not so good as it appeared. It may turn out a 'Dead Sea apple', mere dust and ashes in the eating; more often, fruition will partly correspond to expectation, but may still fall short of it in a marked degree.

Many people, for instance, strongly desire professional success early in their career, only to get a midlife crisis when they realize it didn't make them happy. I'm sure you can find less dramatic examples from your own life – cases where you formed desire D because you thought D's fulfilment would make you happier, but it turned out you were wrong.

The question, now, is whether getting what you want in such cases makes your life better, purely because it is a case of getting what you wanted, regardless of whether getting what you wanted ended up making you happy or unhappy. The intuition, I think, is unequivocally that it does not. The real issue is only whether the desire-satisfactionist has resources to accommodate this intuition.

The desire-satisfactionist's most natural response, I suspect, is that in such cases the desire that was fulfilled was only a *derivative* desire: it was formed on the supposition that fulfilling it would lead to the fulfilment of another, more fundamental desire. I want to brush my teeth tonight. But I want this not because I think the brushing of teeth is an inherently marvelous thing. I want it because I want to avoid bad breath and unnecessary trips to the dentist. And I want to avoid bad breath because I want people to like me, and I want to avoid trips to the dentist because I want to avoid pain and anxiety – and so on and so forth. Following such chains of desires, we eventually reach some *fundamental* desires – desires for things we want for their own sake, not just because they lead to other things we want. The natural desire-satisfactionist response to the cases we are considering is that they involve merely derivative desires, desires for things we want not for their own sake but for the sake of something else. I wanted to live in a bustling metropolitan because I thought this would bring me X, and X is something that I wanted; and so my desire to live in a bustling metropolitan was derivative upon my desire for X. What I was wrong about, though, is precisely this: that living in a bustling metropolitan would bring me X. It did not. And this is why satisfying the desire to live in a bustling metropolitan did not make my life better.

This response amounts to adopting a version of desire-satisfactionism that restricts intrinsic prudential value to the satisfaction of *fundamental, non-derivative* desires; the satisfaction of all other desires is a merely instrumental good. But what *was* my fundamental desire when I decided to move Paris? What was the X that I wanted fundamentally and non-derivatively? I already told you: *to be happy*. I thought moving to Paris would make me happy, and this is why I formed the desire to move to Paris. My desire to be happy, in contrast, was not derivative upon some other desire. No, I wanted happiness *for its own sake*, not (only) because happiness was an expedient for the satisfaction of some ulterior desire.¹¹ This too, I think, is quite common: very often, people want what they do *because they think it would make them happy*, and being happy – that is, being mostly in a good mood – is the thing they want for its own sake. (Ask anyone what they want most for their children. 99.99% of the time they’ll say “that they be happy.” If this is so desirable for one’s children, presumably it is also desirable for oneself.)

If all this is right, then we can readily envisage a perfectly coherent version of desire-satisfactionism that combined the following two theses: (1) The only intrinsic prudential good is the satisfaction of fundamental desires; (2) for most people, the only fundamental desire is the desire to be happy. In *this* version of desire-satisfactionism, mood again plays a paramount role in the constitution of the good life: if I am right that the folk concept of happiness is the concept of preponderance of good mood, then whoever among the folk fundamentally desires happiness desires fundamentally (*de re*) a preponderance of good mood. And if the satisfaction of this desire is what would make their life good for them, then what would make their life good for them is the preponderance (of preponderances) of good mood in their life.

Two reservations must be flagged immediately, though. First, it may well not be *everybody’s* fundamental desire to be happy. For instance, some artistic personalities, such as our tortured poets from §2, find that happiness weakens their art, and that producing the best art they can is more important to them than happiness. And many broadly depressive individuals have given up on the hope of being happy, and rather than commit suicide have decided to dedicate their lives to some valuable goal, be it aesthetic, moral, or other. In this mindset, one’s life becomes a mere means or medium for the production and promotion of some adopted value, and one’s time on earth is taken as a *resource*, a *capital* of sorts, that one may use freely in this pursuit. (I have experienced my own existence in this way at different points in my life.) Here one’s ultimate desire is not (only) one’s happiness, but (also) that adopted value. This shows that the desire for happiness is not always and everywhere *the* fundamental desire. Still, I think it is certainly *a* fundamental desire, and for much of humanity the only one.

Second, even where the only fundamental desire is to be happy, there is still a Euthyphro-style question surrounding intrinsic prudential value: is (a) the prudential value

of happiness grounded in the prudential value of the desire for happiness being satisfied, or is (b) the prudential value of the desire for happiness being satisfied grounded in the prudential value of happiness? As I reflect on my own case, I find myself hoping that my desire to be happy be satisfied *so I be happy*, not that I hope to be happy so that my desire to be happy be satisfied. The latter would in fact be somewhat perverse. So to me it certainly seems that happiness is the real bearer of intrinsic prudential value here, not desire-satisfaction. The result, of course, is not a desire-satisfaction theory of wellbeing at all, strictly speaking. Still, it is a *mood-centric* theory of wellbeing, and that is what I ultimately want to argue for: that mood has a central role in the constitution of wellbeing.

7. Mood and Objective Goods

According to objective-list theories of wellbeing, (i) there is a list of elements E_1, \dots, E_n , such that a person's life is better to the extent that it features more of E_1, \dots, E_n , and (ii) this is so regardless of whether the person *enjoys* or *desires* E_1, \dots, E_n . Clause (i) makes this a *list* theory, Clause (ii) makes it an *objective* theory.

Given how objective-list theory brackets persons' subjective attitudes toward E_1, \dots, E_n , it might be expected to have no role for mood in its account of the good life. Interestingly, however, objective-list theorists often list happiness among E_1, \dots, E_n . Here, for instance, are the official lists provided by Mark Murphy (2001) and Guy Fletcher (2013) respectively:

[Murph] Life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in play and work, excellence in agency, inner peace, friendship and community, religion, happiness

[Fletch] Achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, virtue

The reason happiness can show up on an "objective" list, despite being a subjective condition, is that both Murphy and Fletcher take happiness to make your life better not in virtue of your enjoying it (when you have it) or desiring it (when you don't), but simply in virtue of its *occurring*.

If happiness indeed consists in a preponderance of good mood, then, a preponderance of good mood would be among the things that make for a good life according to [Murph] and [Fletch]. (And in [Murph], another element of wellbeing, "inner peace," sounds very much like the persistent condition consisting of a certain mood pattern, perhaps the absence of anxiety.)

Now, objective-list theory is *not* in itself a theory of the good life. All it does is list non-instrumental prudential goods. What mix of these is necessary or sufficient for a good life is left open by the list. At the extremes are what we might call *conjunctivist* and *disjunctivist* objective-list theory. The former requires the compresence in one's life of *all* elements on the list for it to qualify as good; the latter allows that the presence of any one of them (perhaps to a sufficient degree) makes life good. More plausible versions will presumably lie in between these extremes, employing some complicated weighing system to determine a life's quality. It is thus difficult to assess the role of happiness *in a good life* within objective-list theory even if happiness shows up on the list. The disjunctivist version would *entail* [T1], i.e. that happiness is sufficient for a good life; whereas the conjunctivist version would deny it. What the in-between versions would do depends on the specific weighing system they would employ. Still, by the nature of objective-list's theory commitment to pluralism, it might seem unlikely that a happy life devoid of any achievement and excellence, friendship and community, aesthetic pleasure, knowledge or virtue could come out a good life.

I confess this strikes me as flatly counterintuitive: the life of a happy fool, for instance, does seem worth living, meaning that its prudential value is above zero. This is why I suggested in §3 that respecting [T1] ought to be a constraint on the adequacy of a wellbeing theory. As objective-list theory matures into a full-blown theory of the good life (as opposed to just a theory of what is non-instrumentally prudentially good), my recommendation would be that versions of it would be explored that meet this constraint.

One natural way for the theory to mature in this way is through (potentially quite complex) disjunctions-of-conjunctions. In a first stage, every conjunction of non-instrumental prudential goods the compresence of which (in specified amounts) would be *sufficient* for a good life would be formulated. In a second stage, a long disjunction of all these conjunctions would be formed, with the implication that satisfying one of these conjunctions is a *necessary* condition for having a good life. The theory would then proffer this long disjunction-of-conjunctions as its account of the good life (this is how a theory of the good life would be produced from the theory of non-instrumental prudential goods). Within this framework, my recommendation could be summed up simply thus: one of the long disjunction's disjuncts should consist of just one item – a happy life (hence: a life marked by preponderance of preponderances of good mood).

With some of the elements on Murphy's and Fletcher's lists, it may not be easy to imagine a happy life that lacks them. But the relationship there is after all causal, not constitutive: the elements listed are things that *reliably bring about*, and *sustain*, happiness, but are not what happiness *consists in*. What happiness consists in – what happiness *is* – is

the preponderance of good mood; the elements listed are just reliable causes of such preponderance. This means that it should be in principle possible to have the effect without the cause. And when we consider a life of that sort – a happy life caused not by achievement, friendship, aesthetic pleasure, knowledge, etc., but in some irregular way – it is hard to think that this would not be a life worth living.

Might the apparent plausibility of objective-list theories of wellbeing trade, at least in part, on a similar ambiguity between causal and constitutive relations? Perhaps knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence, achievement, friendship, self-respect, etc. are better thought of as reliable *causes* of wellbeing (in neurotypical humans, say) than what wellbeing consists in. In that case, it may yet turn out that the good life is just the happy life, that is, a life dominated by preponderances of good mood, with knowledge, achievement, friendship, etc. being some of our best shots at reaching and sustaining preponderances of good mood. It is worth keeping in mind Epicurus' warning that being happy for a fortnight is easy, and only requires stringing together enough activities one enjoys, but sustaining happiness for months and years is much harder and requires a more deliberate, intelligent approach. Some leader types spend a lifetime trying to make other people's life better, but I've always found that making *myself* happy is already an exceedingly difficult task, one I have more often failed at than succeeded. Kudos to those who have managed to live a happy life! They have had a good life. What the goodness of their life consisted in, I claim, is the pattern of moods it exhibited.¹²

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¹ Most or all of these words can be used to talk about something other than a mood, but all can *also* be used to pick out a mood.

² Standing beliefs and desires can also last long – indeed, they can last a lifetime – but they are not *experiential* states. A person's standing belief that 13.762 is greater than 9.5753 does not contribute anything to the overall way it is like to that person at the time (*constitutively*, at any rate – it may yet contribute causally!). But a person's depressive or anxious mood does make a difference to what it is like to be them, if only very subtly.

³ It might be objected that the notion of depression used by clinicians is not just the notion of a preponderance of depressive mood. It also, and crucially, refers to various motivational effects (notably a generalized *loss* of motivation), certain thought patterns (in particular hopelessness), a measure of anhedonia, and so on. But first of all, even if this were true, there would still *be* the narrower phenomenon I described in terms of the preponderance of depressive moods, and so there would still be a useful notion of that phenomenon; we would just need to re-label it. And secondly, although clinicians ply their trade, as they must, using an *operational* definition of depression, which refers to observable and reportable symptoms (notably the motivational and cognitive ones cited above), these are expressly considered to be *symptoms*, and thus are presumably symptomatic *of something*. Of what? I say: of depression as the persistent condition marked by a preponderance of depressed moods.

⁴ Some other uses include happiness as a short-term emotion (where 'happiness' is essentially synonymous with 'joy') and for one specific mood – something like cheerfulness.

⁵ Thanks to Guy Fletcher for pointing this out to me.

⁶ As Wolf stresses, the second aspect she has in mind is not just the *subjective sense* of meaningfulness, but *real* meaningfulness. Suppose Sisyphus derives a great sense of meaning and personal fulfillment from pushing his rock up the hill. This does not make Sisyphus' life meaningful, though it does give him the illusion of its being meaningful.

⁷ This is consistent, of course, with a happy life not being a *morally good* life. All I insist is that it is a *prudentially* good life – good for the one who lives it.

⁸ To me, it seems natural to reserve the locution ‘S’s life is good’ for the third-person variety and use ‘S’s life is good *for S*’ for the first-person variety. However, in the extant wellbeing literature the latter locution is used indiscriminately, and this use is by now entrenched. For this reason, I will use the otherwise unlovely ‘S’s life is third-personally good’ and ‘S’s life is first-personally good’ to track this distinction.

⁹ Or, at least, they have a pleasant *dimension*. Nostalgia and gratitude, for instance, have a pleasant dimension, even if additionally they can have an unpleasant one – missing the lost past in one case, the “debt of gratitude” in the other. Their pleasant dimension, in any case, will contribute positively to the subject’s wellbeing, even if their unpleasant dimension will also contribute negatively.

¹⁰ Note that just as we formulated above a brand of hedonism in which only punctate pleasures contribute to the good life, while good moods don’t, we could also formulate a version where only good moods contribute and punctate pleasures don’t; if we called the former ‘punctate hedonism,’ we might call the latter ‘humoric hedonism.’ Humoric hedonism is far stronger than [T1]: it doesn’t claim just that certain mood patterns are sufficient for a good life, but, in a sense, that the good life is *identical* to the life marked by those patterns. But just as we complained against the restrictive version of hedonism that it arbitrarily excludes some experiences that feel good from the hedonistic calculus, we could make the same complaint against humoric hedonism: there seems to be no good motivation, given the hedonist’s sensibilities, to discount punctate pleasures.

¹¹ I say “not only” because there are certain further benefits to being happy, which someone might appreciate, and this could make one’s desire for happiness not *merely* derivative. For instance, I did think that if I were happier, I would likely be more productive, and being more productive is something that I want. So being happy did have its instrumental lures. What matters, though, is that I wanted to be happy not only for its instrumental value but also for its own sake (i.e., quite independently of how productive it would make me). In fact, part of the lure of being productive is that it would make me happier to know that I have been productive.

¹² For comments on a previous draft, I am grateful to Roger Crisp, Guy Fletcher, Anna Giustina, and an anonymous reviewer for *Inquiry*. I also benefited from presenting the first part of the paper to the undergraduate philosophy club at Rice University. I am grateful to the audience there, in particular Diego Delgado, Jonathan Dunbar, Kathryn Flanagan, Amanda Lopatin, Charles Siewert, and Lily Wieland.