

1



2 **Objectivity/Subjectivity of Values**

3 Jason Raibley
4 Philosophy Department, California State
5 University, Long Beach, Long Beach, CA, USA

6 **Synonyms**

7 [Objective/subjective distinction](#)

8 **Definition**

9 In general, evaluative facts (e.g., the fact that
10 knowledge is good, the fact that stealing
11 is wrong) are called *objective* if they obtain
12 independently of the beliefs and other attitudes
13 (e.g., desires, approvals, hopes, wishes, fears,
14 likings) of subjects. By contrast, evaluative facts
15 are *subjective* if they depend for their existence
16 on the beliefs or attitudes of subjects.

17 **Description**

18 The objective/subjective distinction is deployed
19 in several related ways within the philosophical
20 and psychological literature on welfare,
21 ► [well-being](#), ► [happiness](#), prudential value,
22 and ► [quality of life](#) (hereafter, “welfare”).
23 There is controversy about whether the welfare
24 of human beings and other sentient creatures is
25 itself objectively or subjectively good. More

prominently, there is a debate about whether the
true theory of welfare treats welfare as objective
or subjective. There is also considerable contro-
versy concerning what makes theories objective
and subjective in the first place. 26 27 28 29 30

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Value Theory

31 In general, evaluative facts (e.g., the fact that
32 knowledge is good, the fact that stealing
33 is wrong) are called *objective* if they obtain
34 independently of the beliefs and other attitudes
35 (e.g., desires, approvals, hopes, wishes, fears,
36 likings) of subjects. By contrast, evaluative
37 facts are *subjective* if they depend for their
38 existence on the beliefs or attitudes of subjects.
39 For example, if knowledge is good simply in and
40 of itself, irrespective of whether people actually
41 do or would desire it, then the fact that knowledge
42 is good is objective – or equivalently, knowledge
43 is an objective good or value. By contrast, if what
44 makes stealing wrong is that certain people do
45 or would disapprove of it, then the relevant
46 evaluative fact is subjective – or equivalently,
47 stealing is subjectively bad. 48

Historically important ► [ethicists](#) can be
classified as objectivists or subjectivists
depending on whether they hold that the most
important and fundamental evaluative facts are
objective or subjective. Plato, Aristotle, Henry
Sidgwick, G. E. Moore, and W. D. Ross are
usually classified as objectivists. Moore in
particular appears to hold a very strong form of
objectivism according to which evaluative facts
obtain independently of the very existence of 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58

59 creatures with minds or psychologies (Moore,
60 1903). On the other hand, Hume, James, Nietz-
61 sche, and Dewey are normally classed as subjec-
62 tivists. For such theorists, value and normative
63 reasons get into the world through the sentiments,
64 reactive attitudes, valuing activities, or purposes
65 of human beings. Other famous ethicists, such as
66 Hobbes, Kant, J. S. Mill, and Rawls, are more
67 difficult to classify, in part because there is con-
68 troversy about the interpretation of their views
69 and in part because their views combine objective
70 and subjective elements.

71 Objective and Subjective Theories of Welfare

72 Theories of welfare can also be classified as
73 objective or subjective or as hybrids. There is
74 more agreement among welfare theorists about
75 *which* theories are objective and subjective than
76 about precisely *why* they count as such.

77 Versions of the Objective List Theory, perfec-
78 tionism, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's
79 capabilities approach, Richard Kraut's
80 developmentalism, and Daniel Haybron's self-
81 fulfillment theory are all *objective* theories of
82 welfare (see Murphy, 2001, Hurka, 1993, Sen &
83 Nussbaum, 1993, Kraut 2007, Haybron, 2008).
84 This is because they allow that at least some
85 conditions and activities are directly good for
86 one, whether or not one desires them, enjoys
87 them, takes satisfaction in them, or believes that
88 they are good. Conditions and activities thought
89 to have this status include knowledge, friendship,
90 love, moral virtue, the appreciation of beauty,
91 sensory awareness, mobility, and emotional
92 health.

93 By contrast, desire satisfactionism,
94 preferentism, L. W. Sumner's life satisfactionism,
95 Valerie Tiberius's values-based theory, and Dale
96 Dorsey's judgment subjectivism are *subjective*
97 theories of welfare (see Feinberg, 1984, Sumner,
98 1996, Tiberius, 2008, Dorsey, 2012). This is
99 because they say that in order for something to be
100 directly good for one, one must desire or prefer or
101 enjoy it, or else derive satisfaction from it, or else
102 believe that it is good.

103 ▶ **Hedonism** is a more controversial case. Fred
104 Feldman's *attitudinal hedonism* construes the
105 building blocks of welfare as episodes of

106 enjoyment taken in propositional objects 106
(Feldman, 2004). This form of hedonism resem- 107
bles other forms of subjectivism because it is 108
based on personal attitudes; additionally, these 109
attitudes may be conceptually linked with desire 110
(Heathwood, 2006). However, other forms of 111
hedonism construe pleasure as an experiential 112
state or a family-resemblance class of such states 113
(Crisp, 2005). These resemble the Objective List 114
Theory, insofar as they claim that a particular 115
experience is good for one, no matter whether 116
one desires it, enjoys it, takes satisfaction in it, 117
or believes it is good. For this and other reasons, 118
some theorists have doubted hedonism's subjec- 119
tivist credentials (Dorsey, 2011, Fletcher, 2012). 120

121 Other theories of welfare count as *hybrids* 121
insofar as they combine objective and subjective 122
elements. Of course, looked at in one way, most 123
of the objective theories already mentioned are 124
hybrids: for most of them allow that ▶ **desire** 125
satisfaction, ▶ **pleasure**, or aim achievement is 126
welfare-enhancing, but insist that other things 127
like knowledge and friendship are also welfare- 128
enhancing. Still, these are usually classed as 129
objective theories. Paradigmatic hybrid theories, 130
by contrast, require that the individual building 131
blocks of welfare each have subjective and objec- 132
tive elements. For example, Robert Adams pro- 133
poses that welfare consists in the enjoyment of 134
things that are objectively excellent or worth- 135
while (Adams, 1999; cf. also Parfit, 1984; 136
Scanlon, 1998; Arneson, 1999; Feldman, 2004; 137
Appiah, 2005). Other approaches, while largely 138
subjectivist, count as hybrids insofar as they 139
claim that the preservation of the systems that 140
make conation and goal-directed action possible 141
is good for one (Raibley, 2012). 142

143 Before examining the reasons for thinking that 143
welfare must be either objective or subjective, let 144
us further consider the nature of this distinction. 145
Formulating it precisely has proven somewhat 146
difficult. 147

148 David Brink writes that "Subjective theories 148
of value claim that the components of a valuable 149
life consist in or depend importantly on certain of 150
the individual's psychological states. . . . By con- 151
trast . . . objective theories of value claim that 152
what is intrinsically valuable neither consists in 153

[Au1]



154 nor depends importantly on such psychological
155 states” (pp. 220–1). One worry with this proposal
156 is that “psychological states” form a broad
157 category. A theory that says that the only
158 welfare goods are knowledge and the
159 appreciation of beauty would effectively say
160 that the valuable life consists in psychological
161 states. But this would not be a characteristically
162 subjective theory.

163 L. W. Sumner has written that, according to
164 subjective theories, having a favorable attitude
165 towards one’s life or some of its ingredients is
166 a *necessary condition* for one’s life to be going
167 well for one (Sumner, 1996, p. 38). By contrast,
168 he says, objective theories allow that one could be
169 well-off without favorably regarding one’s own
170 life or any of its ingredients (p. 38). Sumner does
171 not provide both necessary and sufficient condi-
172 tions for subjective theories, so this analysis is at
173 best incomplete. This necessary condition for
174 subjective theories may be approximately cor-
175 rect. However, it is not entirely clear that one
176 must have favorable attitudes towards the ingre-
177 dients of one’s life to be faring well on some
178 forms of desire satisfactionism and aim
179 achievementism: if one is satisfying one’s desires
180 (or getting what one aimed for), it may not matter
181 that one does not enjoy (or is not satisfied with)
182 what one gets. Furthermore, most objective the-
183 ories that have actually been defended *do* require,
184 at least for high levels of welfare, that one favor-
185 ably regard aspects of one’s life.

186 Sobel (2009) recommends a different way of
187 distinguishing between objective and subjective
188 theories. He writes: “Subjective accounts of well-
189 being maintain that one’s rationally contingent
190 non-truth-assessable pro-attitudes ground true
191 claims about what is good for one” (p. 336).
192 A problem is that this criterion may not correctly
193 classify versions of life satisfactionism and judg-
194 ment subjectivism. This is because judgments
195 that one’s life is satisfactory or that one is faring
196 well *do* seem to be truth-apt. Some forms of
197 subjectivism base welfare on *truth-assessable*
198 pro-attitudes.

199 Dorsey proposes that subjectivism requires
200 that “prudentially valuable states be endorsed by
201 the person for whom these states are valuable”

(2011); he also writes that “subjectivism [states 202
that] a person’s evaluative perspective, under the 203
right conditions, determines that which is good 204
for her, and how good it is for her” (2013, p. 1). 205
While these formulations are suggestive and 206
plausible, it is a little unclear what endorsement 207
and a person’s evaluative perspective amount to. 208

On account of the difficulties noted in this 209
section, there may be no neat and precise way to 210
distinguish between objective and subjective the- 211
ories of welfare. Perhaps this is to be expected: as 212
Fletcher notes, our taxonomies of welfare theo- 213
ries are interest relative, and so they are not likely 214
to reflect perfect joints in nature (Fletcher, 2012). 215
Perhaps if some of the building blocks or main 216
determinants of welfare are partly constituted by 217
pro-attitudes (desires, attitudinal pleasures, lik- 218
ings, values – perhaps also aims and intentions) 219
or by judgments of satisfaction or beliefs that 220
things are good for one, this is sufficient for 221
a theory to be partially subjective. Of course, 222
there are hybrid theories that are partially but 223
not wholly subjective, insofar as they say that 224
the contribution made by the building blocks of 225
welfare to the value of one’s life depends on the 226
objects of one’s pro-attitudes. Roughly speaking, 227
the more a theory says that one’s welfare level 228
depends on the objects of one’s pro-attitudes – or 229
on things besides one’s pro-attitudes, judgments, 230
and beliefs – the more objective the theory is. 231

Is Welfare Objective or Subjective? 232

Arguments for welfare’s objectivity aim to show 233
that subjective theories have unacceptable impli- 234
cations about the welfare of individuals who pur- 235
sue trivial, worthless, masochistic, or immoral 236
ends. A person who simply desires – and enjoys – 237
scratching an itch, counting blades of grass, or 238
knocking down icicles is surely not faring well 239
(Plato’s *Philebus*; Rawls, 1971, Kraut, 1994). 240
Those who aim for, achieve, and enjoy great 241
fame and wealth – or revenge upon their ene- 242
mies – do not seem to benefit proportionally 243
(Kraut, 2007). A person who desires and enjoys 244
pain, bodily mutilation, and humiliation – and 245
gets all these things – is not normally thought to 246
be faring well (Carson, 2000; Raibley, 2012). 247
Finally, a person who desires and enjoys 248

249 inflicting harm on others does not appear to be
 250 faring especially well.

251 But on the other hand, if a person does not like
 252 or enjoy his life – and if he does not get anything
 253 that he wanted or set out to achieve – it does not
 254 seem that it can plausibly be called a good life *for*
 255 *him* (cf. Adams, 1999, p. 95). And so it seems that
 256 there is also some kernel of truth in the neighbor-
 257 hood of subjectivism.

258 Sumner famously argues that objective theo-
 259 ries of welfare such as the Objective List Theory
 260 and perfectionism fail to capture welfare’s “char-
 261 acteristically positional or perspectival charac-
 262 ter” (Sumner, 1996, p. 43). He concludes that
 263 “subjectivity turns out to be a necessary condition
 264 of success in a theory of welfare” (Sumner, 1996,
 265 p. 27).

266 Sumner has several arguments for this conclu-
 267 sion. One, which we can call the weak argument,
 268 claims that any plausible theory of welfare must
 269 “make your well-being depend on your own con-
 270 cerns: the things you care about, attach impor-
 271 tance to, regard as mattering, and so on” (Sumner,
 272 1996, p. 42). It is then claimed that objective
 273 theories that accord no importance to a subject’s
 274 hedonic and emotional states, conative attitudes,
 275 or judgments of satisfaction cannot tie welfare to
 276 one’s own concerns in this way. Therefore, such
 277 objective theories are unacceptable. This argu-
 278 ment is persuasive, but it merely establishes that
 279 pro-attitudes or beliefs of the right sort be
 280 included among the direct determinants of wel-
 281 fare. But some objective and hybrid theories *do*
 282 include these states (Arneson, 1999; Adams,
 283 2003; Appiah, 2005; Fletcher, 2013).

284 A second argument can also be found in Sum-
 285 ner. The first premise of what we can call the
 286 strong argument states the subject relativity of
 287 welfare: “the prudential value of my life is its
 288 value *for me* . . .” (p. 42). That is, welfare value
 289 is a form of value *for* a subject, as opposed to for
 290 the world or for mankind or for no one in partic-
 291 ular; it has a “characteristically positional or per-
 292 spectival character” (p. 37, p. 43). Since
 293 subjective theories of welfare say that welfare is
 294 largely or wholly constituted by perspectival atti-
 295 tudes – i.e., attitudes anchored in a subject’s per-
 296 spective – they afford the best explanation of this

297 fact: “welfare is subject-relative because it is
 298 subjective” (p. 43). Accordingly, some subjective
 299 theory of welfare must be true: we could not have
 300 an account of welfare’s nature that made no ref-
 301 erence to the subjective experiences of the partic-
 302 ular subject. This argument seems
 303 inconclusive. It might establish that welfare
 304 does not turn entirely on non-experiential prop-
 305 erties of the subject. But whoever held that it did?
 306 Sumner seems to be claiming that the positional
 307 or perspectival character of welfare value (the
 308 fact that it is value *for* a subject) requires that
 309 welfare be given a *strictly* subjective treatment.
 310 But it is not explained why this is so (Sobel,
 311 1997).

312 Another popular argument for subjectivism
 313 about welfare turns on the internalism require-
 314 ment (Rosati, 1996). This requirement states that,
 315 if something, *x*, is good for a subject, *S*, then
 316 *S* must be capable of being motivated to pursue
 317 or promote *x*. Peter Railton explains the main
 318 idea behind this requirement as follows: “[W]
 319 hat is intrinsically valuable for a person must
 320 have a connection with what he would find in
 321 some degree compelling or attractive, at least if
 322 he were rational and aware” (Railton, 2002, p.
 323 47). Some reason that if this requirement is true,
 324 then some version of subjectivism is true. How-
 325 ever, the requirement itself is difficult to inter-
 326 pret. What precisely is it to “be capable of being
 327 motivated to pursue or promote” something?
 328 Additionally, there is a worry that this use of the
 329 internalism requirement is question-begging,
 330 because the requirement itself is just subjectivism
 331 stated in another way. For further discussion of
 332 these and related issues, see Sarch, 2011.

Cross-References

- ▶ Ethics 334
- ▶ Eudaimonia 335
- ▶ Good Life, Theories of 336
- ▶ Happiness 337
- ▶ Preference Satisfaction Theories 338
- ▶ Wellbeing, Philosophical Theories of 339



References

- Au2** 340 Adams, R. M. (1999). *Finite and infinite goods*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 341 Adams, R. M. (1999). *Finite and infinite goods*. New York: Oxford University Press. 369
- 342 Appiah, K. A. (2005). *The ethics of identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 370
- 343 Appiah, K. A. (2005). *The ethics of identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 371
- 344 Arneson, R. (1999). Human flourishing versus desire satisfaction. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16(1), 113–142. 372
- Au3** 345 Arneson, R. (1999). Human flourishing versus desire satisfaction. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16(1), 113–142. 373
- 346 Arneson, R. (1999). Human flourishing versus desire satisfaction. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16(1), 113–142. 374
- 347 Brink, D. (1989). *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 375
- Au4** 348 Brink, D. (1989). *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 376
- 349 Brink, D. (1989). *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 377
- 350 Carson, T. L. (2000). *Value and the good life*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press. 378
- 351 Carson, T. L. (2000). *Value and the good life*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press. 379
- 352 Crisp, R. (2006). *Reasons and the good*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 380
- 353 Crisp, R. (2006). *Reasons and the good*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 381
- 354 Dorsey, D. (2011). The Hedonist's Dilemma. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 8(2), 173–196. 382
- 355 Dorsey, D. (2011). The Hedonist's Dilemma. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 8(2), 173–196. 383
- Au5** 356 Dorsey, D. (2012). Subjectivism without desire. *Philosophical Review*, 121(3), 407–442. 384
- 357 Dorsey, D. (2012). Subjectivism without desire. *Philosophical Review*, 121(3), 407–442. 385
- 358 Feinberg, J. (1984). *Harm to others*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 386
- 359 Feinberg, J. (1984). *Harm to others*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 387
- 360 Feldman, F. (2004). *Pleasure and the good life*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 388
- 361 Feldman, F. (2004). *Pleasure and the good life*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 389
- Au6** 362 Fletcher, G. A fresh start for the objective-list theory of well-being. *Utilitas*. 390
- 363 Fletcher, G. A fresh start for the objective-list theory of well-being. *Utilitas*. 391
- 364 Griffin, J. (1986). *Well-being*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 392
- 365 Griffin, J. (1986). *Well-being*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 393
- 366 Haybron, D. (2008). *The pursuit of unhappiness*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 394
- 367 Haybron, D. (2008). *The pursuit of unhappiness*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 395
- 368 Heathwood, C. (2006). Desire satisfactionism and hedonism. *Philosophical Studies*, 128, 539–563. 396
- Hurka, T. (1993). *Perfectionism*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 397
- Hurka, T. (2011). *The best things in life: A guide to what really matters*. New York: Oxford University Press. 398
- Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 399
- Murphy, M. C. (2001). *Natural law and practical rationality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 400
- Nussbaum, M., & Sen, A. (Eds.). (1993). *The quality of life*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. 401
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon. **Au7** 402
- Raibley, J. (2012). Health and well-being. *Philosophical Studies*, 161, 4. 403
- Railton, P. (2002). Facts and values. In *Facts, values, and norms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 404
- Rosati, C. (1996). Internalism and the good for a person. *Ethics*, 106, 297–326. 405
- Sarch, A. (2011). Internalism about a person's good: Don't believe it. *Philosophical Studies*, 154, 161–184. 406
- Scanlon, T. M. (1998). *What do we owe to each other?* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 407
- Sobel, D. (1997). On the subjectivity of welfare. *Ethics*, 107, 501–508. 408
- Sobel, D. (2009). Subjectivism and idealization. *Ethics*, 119, 336–352. 409
- Sumner, L. W. (1996). *Welfare, happiness, and ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press. 410
- Tiberius, V. (2008). *The reflective life*. New York: Oxford University Press. 411