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L.W. SUMNER'S ACCOUNT OF WELFARE*

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L. W. Sumner's contribution to philosophy of value, as it is presented in his excellent book *Welfare, Happiness & Ethics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996) constitutes an interesting defense of *welfarism*, i.e., the theory according to which "[welfare is] the only value which an ethical theory need take seriously, ultimately and for its own sake" (p. 3). Here I will, however, sidestep the evaluative issues and instead draw attention to Sumner's characterization of welfare, and in particular his argument that since welfare is perspectival to its nature, only subjectivism can account for this kind of value. His argument is not easy to grasp, however. The reason for this is, I shall argue, that his definition of subjectivism and objectivism leaves room for more than one interpretation.

Sumner on prudential value.

The argument sets out from the plausible idea that welfare is a *prudential* value. Sumner then argues that prudential value is a special "mode of value"; it is always *perspectival*. Welfare assessments, according to Sumner, concern "how well it is going for the individual whose life it is" (p. 20). But welfare, is not merely a value *period*, it is always a *value for* a subject. To be faithful to our ordinary concept of welfare, any theory has therefore to preserve "its subjective-relative or perspectival character" (p. 42).

Sumner argues that this perspectival character of prudential value is not shared by other kinds of values (aesthetical, ethical, perfectionist values) that apply to lives (the bearers of welfare). Thus, ascribing, say, beauty to a person need not keep this subjective-relative character, at least not analytically. Aesthetic value is not a *value for* the person carrying the value. In this respect prudential value seems to be quite different from other kinds of value.

There is something intuitively appealing with Sumner's idea that prudential value is distinguished from other kinds of value by this value for nature. But even if we grant Sumner that this is what is characteristic about prudential value, there is still room for competing replies to how we should best account for this special mode of value. Sumner discusses two such replies, viz., what he

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calls subjectivism and objectivism, which he regards as mutually exhaustive kinds of theories. Central to the book is his objective to show that objective theories fail to do justice to this "value for" character of prudential value. The precise reason for why they cannot account for this perspectival character of value is that they "treat welfare as *entirely mind-independent*" (p. 44, *My italics*). Subjective theories do not commit that mistake. Since subjectivism by definition makes welfare logically dependent on the attitudes of the welfare subject, the perspectival nature of welfare is accounted for by the presence of these very attitudes.

The deep problem for any objective theory is that personal concerns play no role in determining why something (anything) counts as a good for an individual in the first place... Only a subjective theory, which incorporates the individual's authentic point of view into its account of the good, is capable of acknowledging the status of human agents as determiners of their own priorities for their lives. (p. 215)

Thus, by making the substantive claim that our well being is dependent on the attitudes of the subject, welfare becomes mind-dependent to the subjectivist, and by making welfare mind-dependent they succeed in establishing a link between the value and the bearer of value that qualifies the value as being perspectival to its nature. Welfare being mind-dependent is in other words the subjectivist's reply to the 'value for requirement'. According to Sumner this option is not available to objectivism. By definition, objective theories deny that the attitudes of the person, whose life is being assessed as good or bad for him, play any role in such assessments.

This picture of objectivism appears to me somewhat unkind. Be that as it may, his own distinction between the "constitutive conditions" of welfare and the "sources of welfare" should have alerted him, as I shall argue below, to the fact that attitudes can relate to welfare in at least two interesting ways, both of which make welfare in a reasonable sense mind-dependent. A theory that claims that welfare is mind-dependent in only one of these ways, appear much more 'objectivist' than 'subjectivist'. Surprisingly Sumner does not consider this alternative.

Value sources and constitutive grounds.

According to Sumner

A theory about the nature of welfare must be [...] formal. It must tell us what it is for someone's life to go well or badly, or for someone to be benefited or harmed. In order to do so it must provide the appropriate relation to complete such formulas as 'x benefits y if and only if x stands in relation R to y'. It would be [a] plain mistake for a theory to confuse the conditions which constitute someone's being benefited by something (the value for R) with any of the particular things capable of being beneficial (the values for x). A theory therefore must not confuse the nature of well-being with its (direct or intrinsic) sources; it must offer us, not (merely) a list of sources, but an account of what qualifies something (anything) to appear on that list. (p. 16. See also p. 17).

What does Sumner mean by "direct or intrinsic sources"? One interpretation that suggests itself is that he is concerned with those (natural) properties on which well-being depends or supervenes? On this interpretation Sumner apparently distinguishes between the following questions: What constitutes the welfare of *a*? What makes *a* well off, i.e., on what properties does *a*'s welfare depend?

An answer to the latter question may well be that *a* experiences pleasure, feels content and secure. A reply to the former question will tell us what it is for something to be valuable. Why is experiencing pleasure and feeling content valuable? The distinction between these two questions about value is, I believe, central to formal value theory.¹ Unfortunately, it is not always clear when Sumner has the constitutive grounds in mind, and when he is thinking of the sources or value-making properties of welfare. This is unfortunate, especially, since it leaves the reader hanging in the wind with regard to the following issue: Which role does subjectivism, in Sumner's view, ascribe to the attitudes of the welfare subject regarding (a) the constitution of value; (b) and its

sources? By 'attitudes' I mean here what Sumner describes as a "favourable attitude toward one's life". That they have, according to subjectivists, a constitutive function is clear. But are they also figuring necessarily among the sources?

Consider, for instance, the following passages:

"A theory treats welfare as subjective if it makes it depend, at least in part, on some (actual or hypothetical) attitude on the part of the welfare subject [...] so that being well off will depend (in some way or other) on having a favourable attitude toward one's life (or some of its ingredients), while being badly off will require being unfavourably disposed toward it." (p. 38)

"Subjective theories make our well being logically dependent on our attitudes of favour and disfavour. Objective theories deny this dependency. On an objective theory, therefore, something can be (directly and immediately) good for me though I do not regard it favourably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it." (p. 39)

The former passage concerns what welfare, on a subjectivist reading, depends on, namely certain attitudes of the welfare subject. If these attitudes are absent in the subject, he will not be a bearer of welfare. But speaking about what welfare depends on suggests that he is not having the constitutive side of the matter in mind but is thinking of welfare-making properties. On the other hand, in the latter passage the attitudes appear to have more of a constitutive role: for a subjectivist someone will make my life go better only if I have a positive attitude towards it.

This opens for the following possibilities, regarding what subjectivist will say about the role of attitudes: (a') Attitudes play necessarily only a constitutive role; (b') Or they are also necessarily among the value sources. Notice too, arguing that welfare is mind-dependent does not clear this ambiguity away. Speaking of mind-dependence is in fact ambiguous; it may refer to the constitutive tasks of subjects or to the presence of attitudes among the sources of value. Since welfare, according to Sumner, is related to not just any subject's 'mind' or 'constitutive powers' but only to the mind of the subject whose welfare is evaluated, he does seem to identify the bearer of welfare (the source) with the constituting subject of welfare. And this, I venture, is not merely quite remarkable, it raises precisely the question of whether attitudes necessarily play a single or dual role. I will return to this 'mind-dependent' role of welfare in a moment. But meanwhile I will explain why I think both alternatives create problems for Sumner. I begin with (b), which is the interpretation that I am less sure about.

Subjectivism and objectivism.

Claims about value sources are as far as I can see bona fide examples of substantial evaluative claims. Saying that experiencing pleasure is beneficial (i.e. value-making) to *a*'s welfare, is to take an evaluative stand. Moreover, since the issue between subjectivists and objectivists is meta-ethical (or belonging to formal axiology), nothing in principle prevents subjectivists and objectivists from agreeing that a certain value has the same source. It is therefore paramount to define these positions in as neutral (evaluatively non-committal) a way as possible. Thus, the following substantial questions should be open to both a subjectivist and an objectivist:

- (i) Is object *p* valuable?
(ii) Is the fact that subject *a* has a positive attitude (for its own sake) towards object *p* valuable?

The oddity of this latter question may perhaps startle us. But this should not be allowed to obscure the following observation: If it follows from our definition of subjectivism that some attitude of the evaluating subject has to be included among the good-making properties of the evaluated object (whether it is a concrete object or a fact or something else), i.e., those properties which the value accrues to, we get not only the unhappy consequence that question (i) appear to collapse into (ii), but (ii) can only be answered affirmatively by the subject. Subjectivists and objectivists certainly disagree. But their disagreement should not be turned into an evaluative one.

What properties value accrues to must be left out of a definition of subjectivism. So whether or not the person who answers the question in (ii) and who actually desires *p*, is a subjectivist or not, he should not be forced to say that value accrues to the case in (ii). If the fact in (ii) is of value,

¹ A detailed elucidation of it is found in Rabinowicz, W. and Österberg, J. (1996), 'Value Based on Preferences', *Philosophy and Economics*, 12.

according to *a*, it is valuable because of the subvenient properties – which in the case of (ii) happens to include that *a* desires the painting.

If Sumner claims, in other words, that subjectivism but not objectivism regards welfare as necessarily supervening on certain properties (e.g., the attitudes of the welfare bearer) he is turning a meta-ethical issue into an evaluative one, which would be unfortunate.

But suppose Sumner is in fact only distinguishing between these theories in terms of constitutive conditions. After all, interpretation (c) does appear to be the more plausible one (see for instance *a*, 2, p. 45).² But in that case, we can imagine a theory that maintains that *a*'s positive attitude towards his life necessarily is among the subvenient properties (sources, I would say) of *a*'s welfare. Such a theory certainly would appear more as an objectivist than subjectivist theory. Moreover, as far as I can see, it could account for the "mind-dependent" role of welfare, something that Sumner maintains that objectivism cannot do. Such a theory would not commit the above-mentioned mistake of mixing the evaluative with the metaethical – at least not necessarily. A striking feature of objectivism is precisely its assertion that the distinction between the constitutive grounds of value and value sources is a *subjectivist fabrication*. There is no need, on its account, to invoke any 'constituter': value is present whenever its source (i.e., its supervenience base) is present. Given this picture, objectivists and subjectivists may well agree on what is the supervenience base of a valuable object. However, they will never agree on whether value has to be coconstituted. Sumner, as far as I can see, does not provide us with any remedy against this 'objectivist' move.

Actually, I think there are good reasons why we should not require the presence of such attitudes among the properties that welfare depends on. However, I suspect that Sumner would not in fact welcome these objections to the above kind of 'objectivism', since they make welfare less mind-dependent (i.e., not mind-dependent on the level of sources). Thus, we all seem ready to speak of the welfare of non-sentient beings as well of sentient ones that nevertheless are unable to have attitudes towards themselves (say, pot plants and aquarium fishes). It might be suggested that we are merely speaking figuratively about the welfare of our flowers and that it is therefore incorrect to ascribe 'welfare' to such entities. But I am not sure this is the most plausible conclusion. Why not consider such uses as an indication that having (even in a hypothetical sense) a favorable attitude toward one's life is not a necessary condition for being the bearer of welfare? This invites, however, the following reply: The notion of welfare that comes into play here is insufficiently perspectiveal – it is not a value *for* the plant. But I am not so sure about that. Consider another case where we seemingly can speak of a value *for*, say, me but that nevertheless is not mind-dependent in just the way Sumner seems to have in mind. Suppose my life is going well for the moment because of *x*, *y* and *z* (subvenient properties). Furthermore, assume that I have a favorable attitude towards my life in virtue of *x*, *y* and *z*. I can, however, imagine a hypothetical situation in which I also had *x*, *y* and *z*, but where I had no constitutive attitude towards my life – I might even have the very opposite kind of attitude towards *x*, *y* and *z*.³ Shouldn't we say that in such a hypothetical situation welfare could at least still accrue to my life? I think so.⁴ The distinction between the supervenience base of value and the value constitutive grounds explain this intuition. As Rabinowicz and Österberg (1996) argue, what constitutes value does so not only in the actual world but reasonably also in those possible worlds towards which the constitutive attitude is directed. In contrast, the supervenience base has to be present in the world in which the valuable object is present.

Mind-dependent value.

Let me finally comment in brief on his idea that welfare is mind-dependent. To make up one's mind about this idea it seems inescapable to ask just what role does value in general, and welfare in particular play in the life of subjects. Some reflection on this matter ought to leave it clear that it is questionable whether values do play any interesting 'mind-dependent' role. A radi-

tion going back to at least A.C. Ewing,⁵ for instance, has argued that as agents we respond to an object's 'good-making' qualities and *not* to its goodness. Admiring a valuable object, for instance, does not necessarily involve any judgment that the object admired is good. This important insight is also more recently expressed by T. M. Scanlon:

[Contrary to Moore, I believe that] being good, or valuable is not a property that itself provides a reason to respond to a thing in certain ways. Rather, to be good or valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons. Since the claim that some property constitutes a reason is a normative claim, this account also (i.e., like Moore's) takes goodness and value to be non-natural properties, namely the purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind. ... it is not goodness or value itself that provides reasons-but rather other properties that do so. For this reason I call it a back-passing account.⁶

I am prone to think the back-passing account is correct, and I find it therefore hard to see what important sense can be made of Sumner's claim that "if welfare is subjective then it is by virtue of being mind-dependent" (p. 33) — a sense, that is, that only lets welfare be dependent on the mind of the proprietor of welfare and not on the mind of the person who makes the evaluation that the proprietor bears prudential value.

Making welfare dependent on the proprietor evaluating himself as having this very value seems for other reasons counter-intuitive. Surely my life can be going well without me endorsing the relevant evaluation that I am well off (recall the hypothetical case from above). A rejoinder might be that we can assume that the bearer of welfare would hypothetically accept this evaluation. But even if this were granted, this would at most show that the person carried a hypothetical value.

² In private communication L. W. Sumner has responded that he is uncertain whether 'source of welfare' should be understood in terms of supervenience.

³ There is nothing strange about this. We do, after all, sometimes say about persons that they do not know themselves what good lives they live.

⁴ The example was suggested to me by Włodok Rabinowicz.

⁵ *The Definition of Good*, 1947, New York, The Macmillan Company.

⁶ *What We Owe to Each Other*, 1998, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard UP, p. 97.