Utilitarianism, Welfare, Children

Utilitarianism is the view according to which the only basic requirement of morality is to maximize net aggregate welfare. This position has implications for the ethics of creating and rearing children. Most discussions of these implications focus either on the ethics of procreation and in particular on how many and whom it is right to create[1], or on whether utilitarianism permits the kind of partiality that child rearing requires.[2] Despite its importance to creating and raising children, there are, by contrast, few sustained discussions of the implications of utilitarian views of welfare for the matter of what makes a child's life go well. This paper attempts to remedy this deficiency. It has four sections. Section one briefly outlines the purpose of a theory of welfare and its adequacy conditions. Section two evaluates what prominent utilitarian theories of welfare imply about what makes a child's life go well. Section three provides a sketch of a view about what is prudentially valuable for children. Section four sums things up.

1. Preliminaries

Utilitarians are welfarists.[3] They believe that welfare is the only thing that one ought morally to promote for its own sake, and that therefore it is the exclusive concern of moral and political thinking. But in what does welfare consist? What makes a life go well for the individual living it? The purpose of a theory of welfare is to answer these questions. A theory of welfare provides us with an account of the nature of welfare. It tells us what characteristic(s) something must possess in order to make someone

---

[1] See, for example, Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, third edition (Cambridge: University Press, 2011) and Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: University Press, 1984).
[2] See, for example, Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, seventh edition (London: Macmillan, 1907), Book IV, chapter iii, C. D. Broad, "Self and Others," Broad's Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy, ed., David Cheney (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), pp. 262-282, and David Brink, "Impartiality and Associative Duties," Utilitas 13 (2001), pp. 152-172.
[3] David Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), p. 217, and Wayne Sumner, Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics (Oxford: University Press, 1996), p. 186.

fundamentally better or worse off. It details what is non-instrumentally good or bad for an individual. More specifically, it measures prudential value: how well or poorly a life or part of a life is going from the point of view of the entity living it.[4]

The plausibility of a theory of welfare depends on its normative adequacy, or how appropriate it is for the purposes of moral and political reasoning, and on its descriptive adequacy, or how well it captures and explains our considered attitudes about welfare and related concepts.[5] The focus here will be on descriptive adequacy.

According to Wayne Sumner, there are four criteria of descriptive adequacy. First, there is fidelity. A theory of welfare must be true to our core beliefs about the concept of welfare and our use of these in practical reasoning and in common-sense psychological explanations. Second, a theory must be general in two senses: it must explicate the range of welfare judgements that we routinely make, positive, negative, and so on, and it must cover the core subjects to whom these judgements are regularly applied, including non-human animals, children, and adults. Third, it must be formal: it must not provide merely a list of welfare's ingredients, it must tell us why certain things make us better off. It must give an account of what relation health, for example, must bear to us to be non-instrumentally good for us. Finally, a theory of welfare must be neutral: it "must not have built into it any bias in favour of some particular goods or some preferred way of life."[6]

Sumner is right about fidelity. If a theory of welfare, whether for children or for adults or whatever, fails to plausibly capture and explain our most cherished pre-analytic convictions about welfare, this is a sign that something is awry. A theory of welfare must

---

[4] Sumner, p. 20; also James Griffin, Well-being (Oxford: University Press, 1986), p. 31.
[5] Sumner, pp. 10-18; also Dan Haybron, The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-being (Oxford: University Press, 2008), pp. 43-58.
[6] Sumner, pp. 17-18.

aim at fidelity. In addition, a theory of welfare must be general in the first sense: it must capture all of the "categories of judgement [about welfare] – positive and negative, of fixed levels and of changes in level."[7]

Pace Sumner an account of welfare need not be general in the second sense, and therefore it need not apply to all core subjects of welfare assessments. It might, for example, be perfectly adequate for children, but be inadequate for animals and for adults or vice versa. This does not entail that it is false or deficient. It means only that the domain to which it applies is circumscribed. But it may still be true for those to whom it applies: it will depend on how well it coheres with our considered convictions. This sense of generality is no constraint on a theory of welfare – *au contraire*. It has, it seems, led us to overlook the possibility that we fare well differently at different stages in life.

A theory of welfare need not, again *pace* Sumner, aim at being formal. First, it is by no means obvious that our search for a theory of welfare should, as Sumner puts it, be guided by the "regulatory hypothesis" that "however plural welfare may be at the level of its sources…it is unitary at the level of its nature."[8] The nature of welfare is not obviously the same for all core welfare subjects. Sumner himself denies that it is: in passing he states that he thinks that infants, small children and adults do not fare well in the same way.[9] It might be that a theory must be formal within distinct categories of welfare subjects. However, even this requirement seems too strong. It begs the question against positions making no attempt to deliver formal theories of welfare distinguishing between welfare's nature and its ingredients. That such views lack formality does not alone detract from their plausibility.

---

[7] Sumner, p. 13.
[8] Sumner, p. 17.
[9] Sumner, pp. 145, 146, and 178-179.

Finally, the neutrality requirement is implausible when applied to thinking about young children's welfare. Holding a theory that makes welfare dependent in part on the possession of particular goods in the case of non-human animals and young children is *prima facie* desirable. *A fortiori*, a theory of welfare needs to explain the fact that it is appropriate for parents to prefer for their children some forms of life over others on the grounds that this is what is prudentially good for them. A view of welfare must make room for the idea that paternalism is apposite in the case of some welfare subjects. Perhaps all Sumner's neutrality requirement amounts to is the claim that a theory of welfare should not presuppose a "concrete form of life", e.g., a life devoted to play rather than to developing one's talents, to rigorous planning rather than spontaneity. If Sumner means only to leave room for variability, there is no quarrel with him. Most reasonable views respect this weak form of neutrality.

A theory of welfare for children should, then, aim at fidelity to our intuitions about faring well as a child and at capturing and explaining the central categories of welfare judgement regarding children. It need not aim at being formal or at being neutral except in some weak sense. In what follows, the aim is to ascertain how well particular theories of welfare satisfy the criterion of fidelity.

It is important to note here a difficulty associated with working out a theory of welfare for children. There is a great degree of variability amongst the individuals called children. The average 16-year-old shares very little in common with the average 2-year-old, despite the fact that both are routinely called children. It is not possible therefore to work out a theory of welfare that fits all children. Doing so would ignore the fact that children develop quite significantly over time. A better way to proceed is to make a rough

division between young children (e.g., toddlers) and older children (e.g., adolescents), and to work out different views for each. This paper focuses on young children.

2. Utilitarian Theories of Welfare

Utilitarians have defended a range of views about welfare, including hedonism, life satisfactionism, objective-list views, and desire satisfactionism.[10]

Hedonism is the view that welfare consists in happiness, which consists in surplus pleasure. On this view, pleasure is non-instrumentally good for an individual, and pain is non-instrumentally bad for an individual. Pain is bad because of its painfulness, and pleasure is good because of its pleasurableness. The more surplus pleasure one has the better one's life is going. The more surplus pain one has the worse one's life is going.[11]

Martha Nussbaum notes that hedonism makes good sense of the "receptive and childlike parts of the personality."[12] The hedonists and especially Bentham understood "how powerful pain and pleasure are for children, and for the child in us."[13] Hedonism has a lot going for it as regards young children. It predicts many of our common-sense judgements about their welfare, e.g., that taking them for ice cream, alleviating their pain, letting them gain excitement from the prospect of a visit from the Easter Bunny, and the pursuit of their typical forms of disporting, is non-instrumentally good for them. It does seem that a child's life goes well to the extent that she finds her life pleasurable on balance.

---

[10] These are at any rate among the most prominent.

[11] On one interpretation, this is the classical utilitarian view; see Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, eds., J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Oxford: University Press, 1996), chs. 1 & 4, John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: University Press, 1998), chs. ii & iv, and Sidgwick, Methods, Book III, ch. xiv.

[12] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Mill Between Aristotle and Bentham," Daedalus 133 (2004), pp. 60-68, p. 68.

[13] Nussbaum, p. 68.

One worry about the hedonist view is that it fails to capture the range of experiences that matter to a young child's happiness, and therefore to her welfare. Sumner argues, for instance, that states of mind other than pleasure and enjoyment matter to how happy we are, including everything from "bare contentment to deep fulfilment."[14] This is a persuasive criticism. A child is surely happy when she is merely contented with how things are going but not experiencing pleasure or enjoyment. A child is surely unhappy even though he is neither in pain nor suffering but is instead merely feeling glum or experiencing ennui.

To capture these judgements, Sumner advocates a more expansive notion of happiness that he thinks fits young children, namely, affective happiness: "what we commonly call a sense of well-being: finding your life enriching or rewarding, or feeling satisfied or fulfilled by it."[15] This involves judging that your life feels satisfying or rewarding or enriching to you. Together with the view that welfare consists in happiness, we get the position that welfare for young children consists in affective happiness. What is non-instrumentally good for a young child is finding her life satisfying. What is non-instrumentally bad for a young child is finding her life dissatisfying. A child is faring well when her life is on balance satisfying to her.

Like hedonism, this view predicts many of our common-sense judgements about young children's welfare. However, it is more attractive than hedonism, for two reasons. The first, as noted, is that it is broader and can therefore capture the full range of mental states relevant to happiness and welfare. The second is that it leaves room for the child's perspective to play a role in her welfare. We do ask children how various states of affairs

---

[14] Sumner, p. 149.
[15] Sumner, p.146; also p. 147.

would make them feel; and we take their judgement to be relevant to their welfare. Retaining the notion of satisfaction leaves some role in a child's welfare for a child's perspective and her judgement about how things are going affectively for her.

Sumner's view faces two challenges. One is that affective happiness as he characterises it contains several sophisticated concepts, including those of reward, enrichment, and fulfilment. It is not clear that young children have the capacity to judge that parts of their lives are fulfilling or rewarding. Such judgements may well be beyond the capacity of young children.

In reply, Sumner can argue that he needs only a minimal notion of satisfaction, requiring no more than that a child have the capacity for some kind of judgement about the affective conditions of the parts of her life. Such responses might be gleaned and confirmed using, among other things, verbal and behavioural evidence. It is not unrealistic to think that even a very young child can make some reasonably authoritative assessment of her affective condition.

A second worry is more powerful. On Sumner's view, how well a young child's life goes depends exclusively on her experience of her life. This follows from equating welfare with surplus affective happiness or with feeling happy on balance.[16] The more surplus satisfaction a child has the more welfare she has. But this leaves the view of welfare for young children vulnerable to a version of the experience machine objection, which is wielded at hedonism. Robert Nozick asks us to imagine that scientists have invented a machine designed to replicate experiences associated with living a vast range of lives that one might desire to lead.[17] By plugging in, a child would experience the most

[16] Sumner, pp. 147, 149, 156.
[17] Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45.

robust and sophisticated satisfaction associated with rich friendships, a supportive, safe, and stimulating living environment, and loving parents. This life would of course not be real. But the child would not know this. Suppose the machine could provide more happiness on balance than life in reality. Would it be best for a child to plug in? If Sumner is right, then it seems the answer to this question is affirmative.

One reason for not plugging a child in is that it would involve parents or guardians in violating a duty they have to care for their children. At least initially it seems wrong for guardians to give the care of their children over to a machine and the scientists that run it.[18] Each parent has a responsibility to raise his or her child.

This does not refute Sumner's view, for parents might have this reason while it is still true that life inside the machine is better for the child.

There is another reason for not entering a child into an experience machine. It is not just that giving one's child over to a machine involves violating a duty to look after her. There is, of course, strong reason to want one's child to fare well. Were there nothing more to welfare than surplus happiness or satisfaction, one would feel that there was strong reason for a parent to want a child to plug in. One would feel significant tension between one's duty to look after one's children and the duty to advance their welfare when confronted with Nozick's thought experiment. That there is no such tension except in the rarest of cases suggests that one reason we think it a bad idea for a child to live inside the machine is that there is more to faring well for a child than experiencing surplus happiness. The machine is unable to provide in addition to happiness, actual valuable relationships, actual play (physical and other kinds), actual intellectual activity, and so on, all of which any loving parent would want for his or her child for her child's

[18] Except perhaps in extreme situations.

own sake. Parents want their children not only to be happy, but also to be happy in real relationships, in real play, and in real intellectual activities.

This argument has not convinced everyone.[19] Those who are unconvinced are keen to defend hedonism. The replies can be modified to defend Sumner's view.[20] There are two lines of defence. The first is to argue that the view can, despite appearances, capture and explain our intuitions.[21] The second is to cast sceptical doubt on our intuitive response to Nozick's thought experiment.[22]

The first line of defence involves noting that though we appear to think that things other than happiness matter to young children's welfare, in fact these things are valuable only because their pursuit is instrumental to producing happiness. It turns out that there is a strong connection between happiness and the pursuit of friendships, intellectual activities and play. Young children would be much less happy were they to eschew these things. In addition, pursuing these goods under the idea that they are themselves non-instrumentally good is a way to solve the paradox of happiness. The paradox is that we do better in terms of happiness if we pursue it indirectly rather than directly, by means of pursuing others things, e.g. valuable relationships.[23]

In reply, one might argue that the happiness theory has trouble predicting our intuitions in some cases. Suppose your child has two options for what to do this

---

[19] It should be noted that the experience machine objection does not show that Sumner's view fails as a theory of illfare. Illusory unhappiness seems to contribute just as much to faring poorly as real unhappiness.

[20] Sumner cannot avail himself of these arguments but this need not concern us here.

[21] For this line of defense, see Sidgwick, Methods, pp. 401-406, and Roger Crisp, "Hedonism Reconsidered," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 73 (2006), pp. 619-645 and Reasons and the Good (Oxford: University Press, 2006), pp. 117-125. For a slightly different reply, see Richard Brandt, "Fairness to Happiness," Social Theory and Practice 15 (1989), pp. 33-58.

[22] For this line of defense, see Sharon Hewitt, "What do our Intuitions About the Experience Machine Really Tell us about Hedonism?," Philosophical Studies 151 (2010), pp. 331-349. For a similar view, see Matthew Silverstein, "In Defense of Happiness: A Response to the Experience Machine," Social Theory and Practice 26 (2000), pp. 279-300.

[23] For these thoughts, see, for example, Sidgwick, Methods, pp. 401-406, Crisp, Reasons, pp. 119-120, and "Hedonism," pp. 637-638.

afternoon. Both options involve equal amounts of happiness. In option one, the surplus happiness is taken in active engagement with other children, your child's friends, say. In option two, the happiness is taken in something entirely passive, e.g., watching TV. The happiness theory says we should be indifferent between these two options. We are not indifferent, however: the former is clearly better for child. Suppose further that there is no reason to think that one option is more likely than the other to make a greater contribution to your child's happiness over the long run. We still think that the former is better for the child. This suggests that there is more to faring well than surplus happiness.

The second strategy is to argue that we should not trust the intuitions claiming that things in addition to happiness matter to welfare. The idea is that in rejecting hedonism we rely on what we want for young children and on our intuitions about what seems to be prudentially valuable for them in addition to happiness.[24] For the argument to succeed we must to be able to trust that such appeals reveal what is in fact prudentially valuable for young children. This, the argument continues, we cannot do, for our desires and our intuitions are shaped by factors (e.g., personal and cultural habits) that undermine their claim to reveal the truth about prudential value.

One reply is to argue that appeals to what seem intuitively prudentially valuable and to what we desire are operative in arguments for the happiness theory. The traditional arguments for hedonism refer to either desire (Mill) or intuition (Sidgwick).[25] It is not clear what else one could appeal to in order to justify the happiness theory. If such appeals are *verboten*, then we end up with scepticism about prudential value in general.

---

[24] For Nozick's appeal to desire, see Anarchy, pp. 43, 45; for his appeal to intuition, see Robert Nozick, The Examined Life (New York: Touchstone, 1989), pp. 106-107.
[25] Mill, Utilitarianism, chap. iv and Sidgwick, Methods, pp. 400-401.

It might be possible to respond here by arguing that we are more directly aware of the prudential value of happiness than we are of the prudential value of other things. Sharon Hewitt, for example, argues that in experiencing happiness "we seem to be, in a very direct way, experiencing *goodness*." This is because goodness is a "phenomenal property of pleasure."[26]

The worry with this reply is that it does not tell us why we should trust what seems to be the case in this experience. Why not think that the appeal here to what seems to be the case is impugned by the same considerations that impugn our intuition that there are goods other than happiness that matter to welfare? It may appear to us that happiness is good when we experience it, though this appearance or seeming is the result, as in other cases, of "pre-existing personal and cultural habits" and of a "preference for the familiar, as well as for what those around us are doing and/or approving."[27] Indeed, we might be fashioned to think this way about happiness because of the evolutionary advantages of doing so. Happiness and unhappiness are strong motivators. One might think that happiness is non-instrumentally good for us because of its importance to the preservation of life and to one's reproductive fitness. We are in other words fashioned to think that happiness is prudentially good for us because of its instrumental importance. It is simply not clear how this seeming is any more reliable than what seems true in cases where we have judgments that run contrary to the happiness theory. It seems that if the happiness theorist is going to fend off this worry, they are going to rely on tools that are no less effective in defending the claim that things other than happiness matter to welfare.

---

[26] Hewitt, p. 333n7; italics in original. She defends hedonism but her account of pleasure makes it essentially equivalent to Sumner's view of happiness. See p. 333n8.
[27] Hewitt, p. 345.

One final point: What explains the desire to defend the happiness view? One explanation is that it allows us to weigh and balance various other goods by reference to one common denominator. It allows us to systematise our disparate judgements. This is one reason that Sidgwick gives for accepting hedonism. This might be a reason to accept the happiness theory.[28] But it is not a very strong reason by itself. The theory must in addition answer to some of our most cherished intuitions.

On the face of it, then, there is no way around the experience machine objection. We should reject the claim that welfare for young children consists in happiness alone. We should not, however, abandon this view completely. We should concede that happiness is a necessary condition of welfare. This captures many of the plausible features of the happiness view. Sumner is right to think that nothing can make an individual better or worse off unless it affects the quality of his or her experience.[29] It seems that there are very good reasons to retain happiness as a necessary condition of young children's welfare. First, doing so captures the intuition that a child's perspective is at least partly relevant to her welfare at a time. Second, it provides us with a plausible criterion for determining when something does or does not make a difference to a child's welfare. Third, it explains why the hedonistic and the happiness theories have seemed so plausible when thinking about young children's welfare. Fourth, it explains why books written for consumption by young children focus so consistently on their happiness together with other goods, e.g., friendships and play.[30]

---

[28] Sidgwick, Methods, p. 406; see also Silverstein, p. 293.
[29] Sumner, pp. 112, 128.
[30] See, for example, Anita Jeram, Bunny My Honey (London: Walker Books, 1999), and Gus Clarke, Max and the Rainbow Rain Hat (London: Andersen Press, 2002).

Happiness is not the only thing that matters to welfare for young children. What more is required for happiness? In his discussion of the experience machine objection, Sumner notes that a view according to which only mental states matter to well-being is "too interior and solipsistic to provide a descriptively adequate account of the nature of welfare."[31] He thinks that this is true of hedonism. He does not notice that is true of his own view of welfare for young children. He provides an account of welfare for adults that he thinks avoids this worry.[32] This account will not do for young children.

How, then, might one avoid this solipsism in the case of young children? One could do so by imposing a value requirement on welfare. A child's life goes well when her satisfaction or happiness is taken in something that is worthy of satisfaction, such as valuable relationships, intellectual activity, and play.[33]

Sumner is sceptical of such views.[34] His first worry is that it is difficult to determine which values matter to faring well. Whose views do we rely on? This worry is not insurmountable. He has encouraged us to take account of our most cherished pre-analytical convictions about welfare; that is, the most cherished of our common-sense attitudes about faring well. This puts us in danger of endorsing erroneous or biased views of welfare. The view we arrive at on the basis of this method may well turn out to be parochial. To avoid this, presumably Sumner would insist on relying on a broad set of views and sober reflection and on exposing one's views to analysis by relevant experts. There is no reason why an exponent of a value requirement on welfare for children could not avail themselves of the same tools in articulating their position.

[31] Sumner, p. 98; also p. 110.
[32] Sumner, pp. 171-183.
[33] These things are described as "worthy of satisfaction" to avoid claiming that they are by themselves good for a child.
[34] Sumner, pp. 163-164.

A second worry that Sumner raises is that "a value requirement…seems objectionably dogmatic in imposing a standard discount rate on people's self-assessed" welfare.[35] He thinks that it is up to the individual to determine how well he or she was faring in the past, something an individual does when her values change radically over time. His view is that there is no right answer as to how an individual was faring previously: it is up to her to decide now. Things are different with happiness. Sumner thinks that there is a right answer to how happy one was. When thinking about some prior point in your life, he says: "You do not, and should not, reassess your level of happiness during that earlier stage of your life."[36]

There are three problems with Sumner's claim. First, his view equates children's welfare with their happiness, thereby imposing a "standard discount rate" on it. Second, his discussion is conducted in terms of changes in values and in terms of judgements and capacities that are well beyond young children. Third, it is certainly not obvious that one's adult self is in a position, normatively speaking, to determine one's welfare as a child on the basis of one's adult values. It might be that how well a child fares is fixed by the facts in the same way that everyone's happiness is.

Sumner is wrong to think that happiness is all that matters to children's welfare. One generates a more plausible view, in my estimation, by endorsing a value requirement on children's welfare. On this view, a young child's welfare consists in taking satisfaction or happiness in things that are worthy of satisfaction. Sumner has given us no reason to reject such a view. Providing it with a defence in part involves saying

---

[35] Sumner, p. 165.

[36] Sumner, p. 165; also p. 157.

something about the sort of things that are worthy of satisfaction for young children. A good place to begin such a defence is a discussion of the objective-list theory of welfare.

The general idea behind the objective-list view is that what is good for an individual does not depend on what satisfies her or her desires. What is non-instrumentally good for an individual is the possession of objectively valuable goods; what is non-instrumentally bad for an individual is the possession of objectively disvaluable evils and/or the lack of possession of objective goods. One's life is going well when one has on balance more objective goods than objective evils.

The most prominent utilitarian exponents of this view are David Brink and Richard Arneson.[37] Brink has the most developed version. He describes it as "objectivism about welfare."[38] According to Brink, what is non-instrumentally good for an individual "neither consists in nor depends importantly on…psychological states," e.g., pleasure or desire.[39] There are in particular three primary components of welfare: development, pursuit and realization of an agent's admissible projects, certain personal and social relationships.[40] These are good for an individual in part because they involve the exercise of certain desirable traits and capacities. Pursing and realizing worthwhile projects involves practical reason: "the capacity to evaluate courses of action and decide what to do."[41] Forming, pursuing, and maintaining personal and social relationships involves our capacity for sociability and in particular our capacities "for sympathy, benevolence, love

[37] See also Brad Hooker, Ideal Code, Real World (Oxford: University Press, 2000), p. 43.
[38] Brink, Foundations, p. 231.
[39] Brink, Foundations, pp. 221, 231.
[40] Brink, Foundations, p. 221.
[41] Brink, Foundations, p. 232.

and friendship."[42] These relationships express such capacities because they involve "mutual concern and respect" and "treating others as people whose welfare matters."[43]

Brink's view does not help us determine the nature of children's welfare. The problem with the view is that it relies on and emphasizes capacities and traits that children typically do not possess in any reasonable and stable degree. This is especially true of Brink's understanding of practical reasoning. Children even at an advanced age seem incapable of engaging in the sort of practical reasoning that Brink describes, which involves, among other things, deep reflection, life plans and long-term projects.[44] The same is true of the other goods, for children do not realise and pursue the kind of personal and social relations that assume pride of place in his view. Young children do not for example engage in relationships that involve developing shared intentions, long-term planning, agreement, and bargaining (especially over how to solve conflicts between the principles governing mutual interaction), among other things. This seems to be the sort of relationships on which Brink focuses, which involve "agents" and "persons".[45]

Brink's objective-list view does not fit children. In addition, it is missing something that all seem to agree is primary to children's welfare, i.e., happiness. Arneson's list is more plausible in this regard. He notes that love, accomplishment, friendship, pleasure and desire satisfaction would be on any plausible objective list.[46] Some goods obviously fit children (pleasure and friendship); whether others do depends

---

[42] Brink, Foundations, p. 233.
[43] Brink, Foundations, p. 233; also p. 234.
[44] "The formation and pursuit of projects should be reflective; an agent's decisions should reflect a concern for her entire self. This requires that she attempt to integrate projects into a coherent life plan, one that realizes the capacities of the kind of being that normative reflection on human nature tells her she is." Brink, Foundations, p. 232.
[45] Brink, Foundations, pp. 231, 234.
[46] Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing and Desire Satisfaction," Social Philosophy and Policy 16 (1999), pp. 113-143, at pp. 119, 136, 140, 141.

on how they are interpreted. In his discussion of love, for example, Arneson focuses exclusively on romantic love.[47] This is not the sort of love that appears to be worthy of satisfaction for young children. His discussion is at any rate conducted entirely with adults in mind.[48]

However, that advocates of the objective-list view of welfare fail to draw up lists of objective goods explicitly for children does not entail that the view is a false. Arneson notes that some versions of the objective-list view accept that "there are different types of persons and a distinct list for each type."[49] He might be open to the idea that there is a distinct list for children, in which case all proponents of the view need do is draw up a list of goods that is specifically geared toward children. This may require no more than that one modify the nature of the goods that one thinks form the nature of welfare.

What would such a view look like? An answer to this question will be put off until the next section. The view of young children's welfare that appears plausible to me includes a list of things worthy of happiness. As some of the foregoing suggests, the possession of such things is part of the nature of children's welfare. It will suffice to maintain that the things most worthy of happiness for children are intellectual activities, loving and valuable relationships, and play, involving enjoyable mental and physical activity engaged in for its own sake.

The main difficulty with the objective list view is that it holds that one can fare well at a time without experiencing any happiness. This element of the view is implausible in the case of children. There are good reasons to think that happiness is a necessary condition of a young child's welfare. Hedonism and the satisfaction view

---

[47] Arneson, p. 140.
[48] This is true of Hooker's view, which has a "central" role for "autonomy". Hooker, p. 43.
[49] Arneson, p. 118. We can assume that "persons" here refers to "individuals".

appear to be too solipsistic and interior to be adequate views of children's welfare; they leave no room for things other than experiences to play a role in a child's welfare. The objective-list view has the opposite problem. It leaves too little room whatsoever for the individual child. In particular, it leaves too little room for the seemingly important role that a child's own affective responses play in a child's welfare at a time. Of course, proponents of the objective-list view can and do include happiness and pleasure on their lists, but this seems insufficient to support the plausible idea that it is only when a child is happy that a child is faring well.

There is, however, a formidable challenge to the idea that happiness is a necessary condition of welfare. Arneson claims that an experience requirement on welfare is refuted by the following case. Suppose that an individual desires strongly to write and publish a good novel and that this state of affairs obtains, but that it involves no "experience of any sort on the part of the desiring agent."[50]Arneson says that it is plausible to say that one is better off as a result of having this desire satisfied.

This strikes me as implausible. Suppose the state of affairs obtains while the person is an irreversible comma, or permanently removed and out of contact with planet Earth. Does the satisfaction of this desire really make the individual better off? It seems very hard to believe that it does.

This might be a strange example. Here is another, better one. Let's suppose that your child works hard to gain proficiency in ice hockey and that she takes great satisfaction in doing so. She acquires the skills of skating, puck control, stick handling, efficient passing, and so on. She gains these skills to such a degree that she is able to play hockey at a very high level. Suppose, however, that once she achieves her goal of earning

[50] Arneson, p. 123.

a spot on the top team and is able to play with the best players, she experiences no happiness. The happiness she felt before is gone: she is left, as Arneson puts it, with no affective "experience of any sort."[51] It is highly plausible to think that up until she played with the top team she was faring well. It is, it seems, less plausible to claim that she is now faring well. There is some reason to regard her current situation as less desirable. A plausible explanation is that she is no longer faring well.

One might insist that what we really think is that the child is faring less well than she was. But there seems little basis for this claim: she is left absolutely affectively flat by the experience. The victory, we might say, is hollow. Suppose she wants to abandon playing, and I encourage her not to do so. When I do so I cannot really credibly claim to be doing so in order to promote her welfare if I know that she will gain no happiness. If I really thought she'd gain welfare in doing so I would try to find ways to get her to see that she'll enjoy it. I might point to the fact that the other kids are enjoying it (if they are) or I'd tell her to take a break and reconsider. If I really think that no happiness will be had, I might still, using a different tone, encourage her to continue. But the reason I might give for encouraging her is that this there is an important moral reason to continue – you ought to finish what you started, your teammates are counting on you – or I might reason that this is a case in which I am trying to encourage her to pursue non-welfarist values.

At any rate, it is just not clear to me what is lost in saying a young child cannot fare well in the absence of happiness. Nothing much seems lost in saying this. I can merely argue that some other value is being promoting other than welfare when happiness is absent. However, saying that one can fare well in the absence of happiness seems to entail a serious loss. It involves ignoring a child's perspective about what

[51] Arneson, p. 123.

matters to her. It ignores what resonates with her. It involves ignoring what all agree is salient to a young child's welfare.

I have maintained thus far that the most plausible view of welfare is a kind of hybrid view, combining elements of both the happiness view and the objective-list view. Before outlining this view, it is important to note that the view stands in stark contrast to what is by far the most popular view of welfare amongst the utilitarians. This is the desire theory of welfare. On the desire view, the satisfaction of a desire makes one non-instrumentally better off; the frustration of a desire makes one non-instrumentally worse off. One's life is going well when one has on balance more of one's desires (adjusted for strength) satisfied than frustrated.

There is some dispute over which desires matter to one's welfare. Some believe that welfare consists in the satisfaction of one's actual desires.[52] In Intelligent Virtue, Julia Annas argues that this views fits young children.[53] The problem with the actual preference view is that there may be too few actual desires to capture the range of things that matter to children's welfare. Nozick suggests that one reason we might not think that one fares well inside the pleasure machine is that it fails to fulfil the range of our desires. He is thinking in particular of the desire to be a certain person, the desire to do certain things and the desire to have contact with reality.[54] The problem is that children may not have these wants. They may not have in particular any clear desire for contact with reality or the desire to do certain things. If they failed to have these desires, we would not think that they would be better off plugging in. The problem is not that the set of desires that a

---

[52] For a compelling defense of this view, see Christopher Heathwood, "The Problem of Defective Desires," Australasian Journal of Philosophy 83 (2005), pp. 487-504.
[53] Julia Annas, Intelligent Virtue (Oxford: University Press, 2011), p. 134.
[54] Nozick, pp. 43, 45.

child has is in some way corrupted or inauthentic. The problem is that the set of desires might not be robust enough to capture all of what matters to a young child's welfare. This might be due to the fact that the set of desires is not mature or developed enough. That we think this is presumably why we think it appropriate to encourage children to develop desires for certain things.

Some of the worries about the actual desire satisfaction view might be deflected by adopting the view that welfare for children consists in the satisfaction of the desires one would have were one fully rational, i.e., informed and free of logical errors. R. B. Brandt's version of the view is that a desire is rational when it survives cognitive psychotherapy; otherwise, it is irrational. A desire survives cognitive psychotherapy when one possesses it after one has at the right time repeatedly and vividly exposed one's desire to all of the available empirical facts that are relevant to its formation.[55]

The purpose of relying on cognitive psychotherapy is to discover what one truly wants or what is truly good for one. It has its greatest attraction in cases where one is making a decision about what to do with one's life.[56] The idea seems to be that one has values, one has an evaluative profile, and that all one needs to do is find out what that dictates by undergoing cognitive psychotherapy. The problem is that in the case of a child we have no reason to think that the outcome of this process – in the event that it is (a) possible and (b) consistent with treating a child properly – is one we have reason to think will reveal a robust evaluative profile. The problem with this position is that it assumes that the individual in question has a reasonably developed value-system. The aim is to find out what of the things you value is really good for you from your perspective. The

---

[55] R. B. Brandt, A Theory of the Good and the Right (Oxford: University Press, 1979), pp. 110-129.
[56] See, for example, Brandt's discussion of the professor choosing between where to work. Brandt, Good, pp. 125-126.

function of cognitive psychotherapy, according to Brandt, is to help the agent in question "find his [her] ideal value-system."[57] But do young children have a reasonably developed or "ideal" value-system? The answer seems to be negative. This is because a child's value system is still under development. Even were some value system to emerge it would lack the characteristic that such a system of values possesses in the case of adults, namely, a presumption of authority.[58]

Peter Railton's version of the desire theory might be thought to be more plausible. He maintains that what is good for one is what one's fully informed self would want one to want in one's actual situation. This is referred to as the ideal advisor view, for the advisor is an ideal version of you. She is more informed and therefore more authoritative. It tells you what is good for you, rather than what is good *sans phrase*. The idea is that one's good is determined not by what one's fully informed self wants. The satisfaction of such wants might not be good for one in one's actual situation. Instead, as Railton puts it, "an individual's good consists in what he would want himself to want, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses of instrumental rationality."[59]

---

[57] Brandt, Good, p. 114.

[58] Brandt may be willing to grant that this view does not fit young children. In an article, he suggests that some individuals might not be "sufficiently mature to engage in the reflective evaluation characteristic of 'cognitive psychotherapy'." (Brandt, "Fairness," p. 40). In Good, he argues that happiness consists in net or surplus enjoyment, and that "obviously in the case of children, animals, and mental defectives we want to make them happy and avoid distress." He is clear that he thinks that this is all we want for them. His position seems to be that this is a closed question in the case of children, though not in the case of adults. (Brandt, Good, pp. 146, 147, 252). It's not clear how he squares these claims with his account of the concept of welfare.

[59] Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," Philosophical Topics 14 (1986), pp. 5-31, at p. 16; see also Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," Philosophical Review 95 (1986), pp. 163-207.

This is not a plausible view about what is good for young children. How do we inform a child so that she is in a better to position to judge what is good for her in her actual situation? The trouble is that informing a child to the right and proper degree seems to involve turning her into an adult, for, it seems, being vividly informed in this way is inconsistent with what it is to have the perspective of a child, which one presumes is the relevant standard for determining a child's welfare. This suggests that there is something incoherent about thinking of a child's good as consisting in what a more fully informed version of a child would recommend to a child in her actual circumstances. Even if this worry were capable of mitigation, it is still meaningful to ask whether the ideal advisor's desires would be a normatively adequate standard for a child. Why think that we should trust that this informed version of a child is the right standard for the child? After all, what the ideal advisor might want is for a child to do things that are good for the future adult the child will become rather than the child herself. Indeed, since there is no requirement that the advisor care about the individual in question there is the real possibility that the advisor may fully discount the child's good relative to the future adult's good.

To these worries we might add that the worry that arises for Brandt's view seems also to arise for Railton's view. The problem is that Railton's view seems to presuppose that there is some set of authentic desires or set of desires that truly reflect one's autonomous self that the process of informing and freeing from error terminates in. But there is no such set of concerns on the part of children and there is no presumption that this set of desires, even if they did exist, would be worthy of respect. To put the point another way, the desire view aims to preserve the individual's authority to determine

what is good for her. But there is no such authority to be preserved in the case of a child, suggesting that this view is applicable only to adults, where the presumption of authority makes sense. We should therefore reject the desire theory of welfare as an adequate account of children's welfare.

3. Welfare as Satisfaction in what is Worthy of Satisfaction

It was suggested above that in the case of children, satisfaction and the possession of things worthy of satisfaction are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for welfare. A child's welfare consists in being happy in what is worthy of happiness. A child is better off when she is both happy and her happiness is taken in something that is valuable in this way. This is a hybrid theory of welfare for children. Some utilitarians have been attracted to this type of view, though none has applied it to children.[60]

Something has already been said about the nature of the happiness that is integral to children's welfare. It is plausible to follow Sumner in holding that happiness is important to welfare and that happiness consists in something like satisfaction.[61]

Satisfaction is not the only thing that matters to a child's welfare. A child's welfare depends crucially on whether she possesses things that are worthy of satisfaction. In the previous section I noted that the standard objective-list views that utilitarians offer are adult-centric. The lists are not suitable for children as they stand. However, it is possible to draw up a list of things worthy of happiness for children. A plausible list

---

[60] See, for example, Parfit, Reasons and Persons, pp. 500-501, and Shelly Kagan, "Well-being as Enjoying the Good," Philosophical Perspectives 23 (2009), pp. 253-272. For a similar view that is explicitly applied to children, see Richard Kraut, What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-being (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) pp. 131-204. Kraut is not a utilitarian. For a critical evaluation of Kraut's view, see my "Two Conceptions of Children's Welfare," (unpublished manuscript).

[61] For a different view of happiness, see Haybron, The Pursuit of Unhappiness, pp. 105-151.

includes intellectual activity, loving and valuable relationships and play. It is important to say more about these items.

One can do so by dwelling on Thomas Scanlon's view of welfare. He argues that welfare consists in success in one's worthwhile projects, valuable personal relationships, and desirable consciousness.[62] The last of these obviously fits the case of children, and I have captured this in my claim about happiness. The same is true of the second of his goods. However, in light of the sort of relationships that Scanlon focuses on, it seems that the kinds of relationships or friendships that matter to how well a child's life is going will be importantly different.

Scanlon maintains that success in one's worthwhile aims or goals is good for one. He holds furthermore that the prudential value of one's valuable relationships depends in part on success in one's aims or goals, though they make a distinct contribution to one's welfare. In the case of children, it is not possible to make this dependency claim. This is due to the fact that success in one's worthwhile goals has to do with the desirability of one's "choices and reactions" and with "how well…[one's] ends are selected and how successfully they are pursued."[63] There are no such standards that govern young children for they cannot make the sort of sober choices and take the actions that seem to matter to the pursuit of worthwhile goals. They cannot be held responsible as adults can for making certain choices or for pursuing certain ends. In addition, it is important to note that the sorts of friendships and relationships that are worthy of satisfaction for children are not the same as those that Scanlon thinks are good for adults, since the latter seem to

---

[62] Thomas Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 120-123; also "Ideas of the Good in Moral and Political Philosophy," draft of 15 March 2011, http://www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/240489
[63] Scanlon, What We Owe, p. 125.

presuppose attitudes (reciprocity) and abilities (mutual and shared cooperation over time) that are beyond young children.[64]

It seems the relationships that are worthy of satisfaction for children are, first, loving, engaging relationships with adults with whom the child is closely bonded, social speaking (e.g., a parent or grandparent). These should take on a particular shape. They need not be based on reciprocity or robust attitudes of equal concern and respect, though they should involve the child recognizing the adult as an authority figure. They should involve the child being loved by a caregiver or parent where this involves a life-shaping desire on the part of the caregiver to nurture and guide the child by means of reasonable moral principles. It should involve a deep desire to engage and support and love the child for her own sake and to provide the child with the environment in which to express him or herself honestly and in which the child can develop the skills for success in adulthood. It should, however, not necessarily include complete candidness on the part of the adult. There are, second, another set of relationships that are worthy of satisfaction for children, that is, valuable friendships with other children, including siblings (if any). It is hard to characterize these in any detail. They can take on myriad forms. Generally, they are worthy of happiness when they involve the child gaining important tools and techniques for socialization, forms of cooperation, effective communication and the use of skills to create situations that are to the mutual benefit of the children in question. These seem to be worthy of satisfaction even if they last only for a short period of time and even if they are largely at the discretion of a child's parent(s).

In addition to desirable consciousness and valuable relationships, Scanlon argues that success on one's worthwhile aims makes one better off. This seems not to fit young

[64] For what appears to be Scanlon's view of friendship, see What We Owe, pp. 88-90.

children. However, it is possible for one to argue that there is something in the vicinity of this item that does fit children, e.g., the development of the sorts of capacities and the activities that are integral to and that enhance success in one's rational aims in the future. One such good is that of intellectual activity, the use and development of one's intellect or intellectual powers. This should not simply be equated with the acquisition of knowledge, which may be entirely passive, or simply with what is required for success in one's goals in adulthood. What matters is something like intellectual striving, growth and expansion. This encompasses a broad range of things, including curiosity, learning, artistic activity and creation, understanding, appreciation, reasoning, and so on. It is important that we do not think that intellectual activity is worthy of satisfaction only because it is relevant to/connected with success in one's rational aims in the future. It can be good for a child to happily develop his aesthetic appreciation and abilities even when this has little or no impact on his abilities in later life.

A final item is that of play. This is missing from Scanlon's list. It seems integral to faring well as a child. What is of particular importance is the sort of play that is unstructured and spontaneous and that does not necessarily involve any of the things that are worthy of happiness. It might be that of playing with friends, animals, or one's parents. It might be focused on a game that is directed by the child and not by the adults who are caring for the child. The basic idea is that what is worthy of satisfaction for a child is to be free from what Moritz Schlick describes as purposes. This is, in his view, the essence of play: "free, purposeless action, that is, action which in fact carries its purpose within in itself."[65] This is a pursuit that is distinct from those that concern

[65] Moritz Schlick, "On The Meaning of Life," in Moritz Schlick: Philosophical Papers Volume II (1925-1936), eds., Henk L. Mulder & Barbara F. B. Van De Velde-Schlick (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), p. 114.

intellectual activity and any other ability connected with future success in one's goals or aims. There is also another form of play that is worthy of happiness. This is the sort of thing that John Stuart Mill says he lacked in his childhood: "the accomplishments which schoolboys in all countries chiefly cultivate." Mill is referring primarily to physical activities involving "feats of skill or Physical strength" and "ordinary bodily exercises."[66] The free use of one's physical abilities for no purpose or goal by, for example, playing in a park, swimming on one's back, swinging on a swing, or riding a bike, is something that is worthy of satisfaction for a child.

My view is that when these are objects of satisfaction or when a child finds herself pursuing one of these things and the child finds happiness in them, this is prudentially good for her. When a child has a surplus of satisfaction or happiness in what is worthy of happiness her life is going well for her.

This account has virtues that are worth highlighting briefly. First, the account is plausible on its face and avoids some of the errors of the views discussed above. Second, the view seems to possess the kind of weight or importance that a normatively adequate view of welfare should possess. The account makes it clear why children's welfare is worth promoting. Third, it is a view of welfare that involves the engagement of the full range of a child's capacities, active and passive, intellectual and physical. Fourth, it is not obviously in tension with views of welfare that seem to be plausible in the case of adults.

This view does, however, face two objections. The first is that it fails to capture the fact that sometimes happiness appears by itself to enhance a young child's welfare. Surely, it is true that when a child enjoys a sweet drink or laughs at a silly joke, the

---

[66] John Stuart Mill, Autobiography in Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. I, ed., John Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 39.

happiness she receives from this makes her to some extent better off. One might want to concede that it is better for a child to plug into an experience machine in cases where all the other options lack happiness or produce only suffering. Surely one would want to concede that there are cases in which happiness in the absence of things worthy of happiness is sufficient for welfare. This seems right. But the sort of welfare that this happiness forms is going to be of a low form, compared to the welfare represented by the hybrid view defended above. It is low welfare or low fare. Thinking of it this way explains the intuition that being in a machine and eating sweets are not as good for a child as are situations in which the same quantity of happiness is taken in things worthy of happiness. The view of welfare defended in this paper is full welfare or full fare.

The second objection targets the account of full welfare. Roger Crisp argues that it is mysterious that the things that are worthy of happiness do not count towards welfare in the absence of happiness but that they do count when they are found with happiness.[67] This does not, however, appear any more mysterious than the claim that there are truths about what is non-instrumentally good for young children or adults. In addition, some of the mystery is dispelled by pointing to the fact that the hybrid view captures many of our intuitions about what it means to fare well (fully) as a young child.

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed a number of theories of welfare to which utilitarians have been attracted. Some of these imply a view about what it is to fare well as a child. This is true of hedonism, Sumner's happiness view, and the actual desire satisfaction view. I have argued that these views are not descriptively adequate. Some views do not appear to imply a view about children's welfare. I have argued that this is true of rational

---

[67] Crisp, Reasons, p. 123 and "Hedonism," p. 640.

or fully informed desire views. Some views fit children but only upon modification. I have argued that this is true of objective-list views. I have also argued that even after modification objective-list views are not descriptively adequate. I have suggested a hybrid view of welfare for children according to which welfare consists in happiness in what is worthy of happiness. I have conceded that in some cases happiness is sufficient for welfare though this welfare is inferior to the welfare that results when a young child takes happiness in things that are worthy of happiness.[68]

Anthony Skelton

University of Western Ontario

[68] Thanks to Anne Skelton, Roger Crisp, Wayne Sumner, Ariella Binik, Anca Gheaus, audiences at the Ethox Centre, Oxford University and at the Centre for Medical Law and Ethics, King's College London, and (especially) Carolyn McLeod for helpful comments on a previous draft of this chapter.