

On the Subjectivity of Welfare

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In “The Subjectivity of Welfare” L. W. Sumner hopes to, among other things, accomplish two important goals.¹ First, he wants to “develop the appropriate interpretation of subjectivity (and objectivity)” (p. 765) in theories of well-being. Second, he wants to argue that subjective theories of well-being have decisive advantages over objective theories. Despite the many significant virtues of the article, I will, perhaps somewhat perversely, focus on arguing that each of these two goals has not been fully achieved.

Sumner suggests that the subjective/objective distinction is an important one for theories of well-being because objective theories cannot capture the subject-relativity of well-being which is essential to the concept. Objective accounts of well-being, according to Sumner, are embarrassed by their inability to explain adequately what makes an agent’s well-being especially hers. Thus he hopes to show that all objective theories of well-being are inadequate.

THE SUBJECTIVE/OBJECTIVE DISTINCTION

However, Sumner offers two importantly different accounts of the subjective/objective distinction as though they were identical. Sumner’s official characterization of the subjective/objective distinction goes like this: “A subjective theory will map the polarity of welfare onto the polarity of attitudes, so that being well-off will depend (in some way or other) on having a favorable attitude toward one’s life (or some of its ingredients), while being badly off will require being unfavorably disposed toward it” (p. 767). He soon adds that “a theory is subjective if it treats my having a favorable attitude toward something as a necessary condition of the thing being beneficial to me. It need not also treat it as a sufficient condition” (p. 768). Let us call this the “necessary

1. L. W. Sumner, “The Subjectivity of Welfare,” *Ethics* 105 (1995): 764–90. Sumner’s article is incorporated into his *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). All in-text references are to the article as it appears in *Ethics*.

condition" interpretation of subjectivity. Sumner goes on to explain the implication of the necessary condition interpretation for how we should understand objective theories. "On an objective theory, therefore, something can be (directly and immediately) good for me though I do not regard it favorably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it" (p. 768).

Here Sumner makes plain that we can read his understanding of objective accounts from his understanding of subjective accounts (and vice versa) since he intends the dichotomy to be "mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories" (p. 764). Thus a theory of welfare that is not subjective would, on Sumner's view, be objective.

Sumner later invokes another understanding of the subjective/objective distinction. Here the idea is that a subjective account treats a person's pro-attitudes toward an option as intrinsically relevant, at least sometimes, to the goodness of that option for an agent, while an objective account never does so. He writes: "A theory treats welfare as subjective if it makes it depend, at least in part, on some attitude or concern on the part of the welfare subject" (p. 767). This latter understanding of the distinction makes several appearances in the article. For example, he writes that "objective theories exclude all reference to the subject's attitudes or concerns" (p. 775) and that "the duality [of subjective/objective] isolates objective theories as a group, since they alone treat welfare as entirely mind-independent" (p. 775). Let us call this later understanding of the subjective/objective distinction the "mind-dependent" interpretation of subjectivity and "mind-independent" interpretation of objectivity. On page 769 the mind-independent interpretation of objectivity is taken to simply be the rejection of the necessary condition interpretation of subjectivity.

The problem is that the necessary condition interpretation of the subjective/objective distinction is at odds with the mind-dependent interpretation of the distinction. To see this, one merely has to see that a person's pro-attitudes can be allowed sometimes to be relevant in determining a person's well-being without being a necessary condition for an option to be good for her. If an account of well-being had it that in some contexts my pro-attitudes are an important factor in determining my good, but held that in other contexts my pro-attitudes were irrelevant, this would be an objective account according to the necessary condition interpretation but a subjective account according to the mind-dependent interpretation.

Sumner's two accounts of the subjective/objective distinction would be equivalent if we required a theory of well-being to be monistic—that is, to have a single account of what makes something good for an agent across all contexts.² But it seems that the most plausible

2. Sumner pointed this out to me.

objective accounts ought to resist monism. It would be hard sensibly to maintain that a person's attitudes are never relevant to the location of her well-being. Surely when it comes to flavors of ice cream the sensible objectivist will admit that the flavor that makes our life go better has something to do with the flavor that we prefer. Thus, it seems, the most sensible path for the objectivist about well-being is to embrace a pluralist account of what makes a person's life go better or worse in which the agent's attitudes are sometimes relevant to her good but sometimes are not. Such an objectivist might claim that the agent's preferences are (perhaps even) sufficient for determining her good in some contexts deemed matters of "mere taste" but argue that, nonetheless, some options are good or bad for a person independently of her attitudes (e.g., living in seriously inegalitarian relationships might be thought to be bad for a person independently of her attitudes toward such a situation).

The "reasonable objectivist" outlined above would only be classified as an objectivist by the necessary condition interpretation. Because that interpretation has the best prospects for separating actual disputants and because it is what I would have thought the common interpretation of subjectivism amounted to, I will note some consequences of accepting it and rejecting the "mind-(in)dependent" method of marking the distinction.

Recall that on Sumner's necessary condition interpretation of subjectivism the subjectivist need not hold that a person's having a pro-attitude toward an option is a sufficient condition for the option being good for her. Indeed Sumner adds that "most subjective theories will not do so" (p. 768). Although such issues get too little discussion, I suspect that this position is orthodox.³ However, somewhat surprisingly, this turns out to be an unstable position.

A picture Sumner's necessary condition interpretation might suggest is that one divides up all options into three categories—those the agent has an intrinsic pro-attitude toward, those she has an intrinsic con-attitude toward, and those she has an intrinsic indifference toward. Subjective accounts would then, apparently, be accounts which claimed that only elements in the former category could be part of the agent's well-being.

But the notion of "an account of well-being" is slippery. At least two different interpretations are possible: (1) an account of what makes it the case that certain options are better for an agent than

3. See, e.g., Connie S. Rosati's recent "Internalism and the Good for a Person," *Ethics* 106 (1996): 297–326. In her defense of a very interesting version of the thesis that welfare is subjective, she claims that, "of course, those who support [existence] internalism claim only that it is a necessary condition on a plausible account of a person's good, not that it is a sufficient condition" (p. 311).

some neutral zero point (e.g., better than nonexistence) or (2) an account of what makes it the case that one option is better for an agent than another. A theory which addressed either of the two might deserve to be called a theory of well-being.

In many cases we are forced to choose between unsavory options, options that would not initially have been classed among those we have a pro-attitude toward. If we are to have an adequate account of what makes an option better or worse for an agent, we will have to capture the thought that one of two unsavory options can be better for an agent than the other. Thus the initial picture I offered above where an agent's options are divided up into the three categories and subjectivists about well-being limit themselves to the "pro" category looks, at best, incomplete. Such a crude classificatory scheme will not account for all the differences in prudential value that options hold for us. Thus a comprehensive subjective account of well-being should not strive merely to divide up options into the three categories but must offer a more fine grained contextualized analysis.

This more complete account, it would seem, could best be given a subjectivist spin by heeding the agent's preferences. This move to the second, more complete account, avoids the thankless task of marking out a unique zero point on our utility scale. I will assume here that we, like the overwhelming majority of contemporary value theorists, are seeking an account of what makes one option better for an agent than another.

This move to preferences is perhaps overly familiar, but it does make trouble for Sumner's attempt to treat the agent's attitudes as necessary but not sufficient for the determination of her well-being. While it was clear how to treat a pro-attitude as a necessary but not sufficient condition for an option "being beneficial for me," it is less clear how to treat a preference for X over Y as necessary but not sufficient for its being more beneficial to me. If X's being preferred to Y is a necessary condition for X's being better for me than Y, then Y's being dispreferred to X is a sufficient condition for Y's being no better for me than X. Thus if preferring X to Y is necessary for X's being better for you than Y, it must also be sufficient for X's being no worse for you than Y.

The subjectivist is forced to move from pro-attitudes to preferences to account for all that makes one option better for a person than another. But the subjectivist cannot sensibly claim that the agent's attitudes are a necessary condition for determining her welfare without also claiming that they are, in an important way, also a sufficient condition.

Presumably part of what made Sumner shy away from a picture in which the agent's attitudes are necessary and sufficient for determining her well-being is that he is working with an undifferentiated,

flavorless pro-attitude, one that might well reflect moral attitudes as well as well-being-determining attitudes. The fact that I have a pro-attitude toward X or prefer X to some other option had better not entail that the option is good (or better) for me unless we want to hopelessly mix moral attitudes with well-being-determining attitudes.

Many influential advocates of preference-based accounts of well-being accept that not all of our preferences, even our informed preferences, are connected with our well-being. J. S. Mill argued that “of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, *irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it*, that is the more desirable pleasure.” Sidgwick suggested that we focus only on “what a man desires for himself—not as a means to an ulterior result—and for himself—not benevolently for others.” Richard Brandt claims that only “self-interested” preferences are connected with one’s well-being. Peter Railton thinks we should focus on “nonmoral” preferences. Derek Parfit rejects the “Unrestricted Desire-Fulfillment Theory” in favor of the “Success Theory,” which “appeals to all of our preferences about our own lives.” James Griffin allows that “the trouble is that one’s desires spread themselves so widely over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one’s well-being.”⁴ However, although these authors are attuned to the problem, they are not very helpful in trying to solve it. We still need a plausible way of separating out the preferences that are “for himself,” “nonmoral,” “self-interested,” or about “our own lives.” In the most systematic writings in this area Mark Overvold has argued that the desires which are connected with well-being are those such that the agent’s “existence at t is a logically necessary condition of the proposition asserting that the outcome or feature obtained at t.”⁵

Despite Overvold’s efforts, the job of finding a convincing method of separating out the well-being-determining subset of our preferences from the other motivational factors remains a crucial but neglected component of a satisfactory subjectivist account of well-being. Without

4. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), p. 259, emphasis added; Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 109; Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 329; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 494; Peter Railton, “Facts and Values,” *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–29, p. 20; James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 17 (see also pp. 21–26). Sumner has made it clear in conversation that he agrees with this tradition that not all of our (informed) preferences are connected with our well-being.

5. Mark Overvold, “Self-Interest and Getting What You Want,” in *The Limits of Utilitarianism*, ed. Harlan B. Miller and William H. Williams (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982). See also Mark Overvold, “Morality, Self-Interest, and Reasons for Being Moral,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44 (1984): 493–507.

such a method, the subjectivist lacks an account of what makes it the case that one option is better for a person than another. Yet to my mind no subjectivist has offered a compelling method.⁶

The method of making one's preferences a necessary condition for an option being better for an agent does not leave room to adequately take care of this problem. If I prefer that ten thousand acres of rain forest be preserved rather than that I get an important promotion and this is due to my moral motivations, this should not imply that getting the promotion cannot be better for me than the preservation. The "necessary condition" interpretation of subjectivity would have this implication. (Recall that we saw that the necessary condition interpretation of subjectivity had as a consequence that one's preferring X to Y implies that Y cannot be better for you than X.) Hence I think we subjectivists had better find another way of characterizing our view.

Here are three options for the subjectivist that come quickly to mind. One could sensibly attempt to extract elements (e.g., a person's moral preferences) from the agent's preferences, allegedly being left with just the well-being-determining subset of preferences. One could strive to define a feature of a subset of the agent's preferences that holds just for well-being-related preferences (as Overvold does). Or we could search for a distinctive kind of pro-attitude that we have toward all and only options that are better for us. But surely none of these tasks are easy rows to hoe.

SUBJECTIVISM VINDICATED?

Making the appropriate distinction between objective and subjective accounts of well-being is only a prelude to Sumner's primary goal in the article. Sumner's plausible conclusion is that objective accounts cannot capture the subject-relativity of well-being. But because Sumner equated the necessary condition interpretation of the subjective/objective distinction with the mind-(in)dependent interpretation, there is room to worry that he did not notice that on the necessary condition interpretation the objectivist can allow that the agent's attitudes play

6. I argue, in my manuscript "Well-Being as the Object of Moral Concern" (unpublished), that our inability to plausibly bifurcate our concerns into those that simply reflect our well-being and those that simply reflect moral concern not only creates trouble for constructing an account of well-being from our preferences but also undermines the thought that well-being should serve as the sole appropriate object of moral concern. Any plausible attempt to restrict preference accounts so as to capture only our well-being will leave out many of our most pressing concerns. I go on to offer an alternative account of what the consequentialist should give weight to in the moral calculus. I offer what I call the "autonomy principle," which allows people to throw the weight they get in moral reflection where they informedly choose, provided only that they understand the aggregative process into which they are choosing their own input.

a (perhaps crucial) role in shaping her good. The more the objectivist allows this, the more they can capture the subject-relativity of well-being in just the way that Sumner approves. Thus Sumner's objection to objective accounts, on this interpretation, should not be that they cannot capture any subject-relativity. Rather his objection must be that objective accounts necessarily fail to capture the completely subject-relative character of well-being.

It is here that one wishes to hear more about the subject-relativity of well-being than Sumner offers. He does tell us that what is central to the concept of prudential value is its "characteristically positional or perspectival character" (p. 775). This implies at least that "from the mere fact that some state of affairs is intrinsically good it plainly does not follow that it is good for me" since it remains to establish "the needed connection" between the good and me (p. 778). An explanation of what makes my good especially mine is needed. This seems exactly right. However, it is not obvious (though perhaps not fully opaque either) how this fact alone tells between the significantly agent-relativized account of well-being that the objectivist can offer and the fully agent-relativized accounts that only subjectivists can offer.

Sumner plausibly holds out perfectionist theories as offering the objectivist's best prospects of capturing well-being's subject-relativity without resorting to the agent's attitudes. The perfectionist that Sumner worries about is one who claims that a thing's welfare is tied to how well it "exemplifies the excellences characteristic of its nature" (p. 772). Such a theory, whatever other problems it might have, would seem capable of explaining what makes my well-being mine without resorting to my attitudes. The well-being is mine, on this view, because the perfection is mine. Sumner asks us to reject such accounts (and others) on the grounds that we could, at the end of our life, sensibly wonder if our lives might have gone better for us if we had attached less importance to the perfectionist (or aesthetic) value of our lives (pp. 770–73). Since such evaluation can sensibly take place, we are told, the perfectionist (or aesthetic) point of view and the prudential point of view are not one.

Sumner seems to have in mind a version of the open question argument. It is pointed out that there are two distinct concepts before us when we wonder if perfectionist value is the same as prudential value, and therefore the two are held to be nonidentical. He tells us that "as a conceptual matter the inference for any agent from perfectionist value to prudential value is never safe; there is always a logically open question" (pp. 789–90). Thus, apparently, it is a mistake to think that perfectionist value is prudential value.

But Sumner presumably thinks there is a logically open question as to the truth of subjectivism as well. He claims that it is conceptually true that well-being is agent-relative and subjectivism is offered as a

substantive thesis meant to supply (defeasibly) the best account of this aspect of well-being.⁷ Further, we could also sensibly wonder if our life would have gone better for us if we had spent less time pandering to our attitudes. Thus it is hard to see what force such arguments could have against perfectionism as an account of well-being that would not equally tell against subjectivism. Open question arguments have not kept us from equating water and H₂O, despite the coherence in wondering if one is identical with the other. We cannot rely on them to preserve us from perfectionist accounts of well-being either.

Consider the theory of welfare that has it that something is good for you to the extent that it is green. The problem here is not merely that the concept of greenness and the concept of welfare are different but that the former has no plausibility as a tolerable revision of the latter.⁸ It does not match our convictions where we are most confident and does not offer an attractive way of interpreting the concept when we need help. I suspect that Sumner's real complaint is that the perfectionist account of welfare seems to him too much like the above account, which wears its absurdity on its face. If so, I am not unsympathetic, but it seems implausible that such a consideration could have escaped those who for all the world accept perfectionist accounts as deeply plausible accounts of welfare. Hence such a consideration is exceedingly unlikely to alter the battle lines as they are currently drawn.

7. Sumner writes that "the thesis that welfare is subjective is therefore not merely a reaffirmation of the fact that it is subject-relative; instead, it is a (putative) interpretation or explanation of this fact. Although this explanation seems initially promising, it could turn out to be mistaken, in which case we would need to look elsewhere for an account of the subject-relativity of welfare" (p. 775).

8. Peter Railton's "Naturalism and Prescriptivity" (*Social Philosophy and Policy* 7 [1989]: 151–74) has influenced my thinking in this area.