CHOICE: An Objective, Voluntaristic Theory of Prudential Value [Redraft of Accepted Paper][[1]](#endnote-1)

Abstract

It is customary to think that Objective List (“OL), Desire-Satisfaction (“D-S”) and Hedonistic (“HED”) theories of prudential value pretty much cover the waterfront, and that those of the three that are “subjective” are naturalistic (in the sense attacked by Moore, Ross and Ewing), while those that are “objective” must be Platonic, Aristotelian or commit the naturalist fallacy. I here argue for a theory that is both naturalistic (because voluntaristic) and objective but neither Platonic, Aristotelian, nor (I hope) fallacious. In addition, this proposal, called “CHOICE,” is an example of neither an OL, D-S, nor HED theory. It is a theory according to which uncoerced choosings create objective values that we (even everyone) may be wrong about, because valuations are conative rather than epistemic activities. On this view, intrinsic prudential goods necessarily involve likely (pursuant to lawlike regularities) net increases in successful free choosings.

Whether some particular claim, one that is apparently made about the state of the world, can be determined to be subjective or objective is among the signature questions of philosophy. Presumably, the most appropriate places for discussion of the general matter of what constitutes subjectivity and objectivity are epistemological inquiries, since the resolution of that issue is intimately tied up with what people do, or can, know. But, the study of philosophy being what it is, this dispute regularly pops up in all the sub-fields, and, wherever it arises, it seems to dig in and stay. Although the nature of objectivity is a “heavyweight” matter and so not likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future (if ever), many—indeed, likely the majority of—philosophers have held that, when it comes to ordinary empirical assertions like “London is in England,” not only can we know them, but they are in some important sense not entirely about the asserter. Neither of these claims can be proved, of course, but they do seem indispensable if one wants to avoid making joint inquiry entirely senseless.[[2]](#endnote-2) In any case, leaving aside the question of whether we may know them, there is something like a consensus with respect to common-sense empirical propositions that they are objective in the sense that they say something not just about us, but about the world outside us. Furthermore, we may often be wrong about them, and others may be in a better position than we are to know when we are wrong about one of them.

While there has been no consensus anywhere in axiology or democratic theory, favorable attitudes toward a story that includes objectivity have been more prevalent in the area of certain moral values than they have been with respect to values that are prudential (what makes lives or societies better or worse off) or aesthetic (what makes things beautiful or ugly). Views involving the complete subjectivity of all assertions regarding what is beautiful or what makes for improvements in a person’s life have seemed easier to defend than have claims that, e.g., what is right is no more than a matter of how someone (or some society) feels or believes at a particular time. Indeed, claims to the effect that when human beings make moral judgments, they can never do more than either assert descriptions or express feelings that are exhausted by their narrow, individual perspectives have been very harshly treated. So, it seems quite sensible for those with naturalist, empiricist, or subjectivist bents to try restrict their claims to the often calmer waters of aesthetics and personal prudence, where appeal to non-naturalist scruples are generally made with considerably less indignation than when expressed inside the angry, oceanic eddies of ethical theory. No doubt, subjectivism in the area of personal well-being may still be met with a response bearing the faint odor of righteousness—say when the matter involves the consumption of an ice cream soda by a diabetic with a sweet tooth. But it is nothing compared to the accusatory glares likely to result from the assertion that it is purely a matter of personal taste whether or not it is appropriate to preemptively raze a populous city containing a nuclear facility. So, the move by naturalists away from moral issues and toward safer spaces is unsurprising. Nevertheless, most of the old disputes have re-emerged both in aesthetics[[3]](#endnote-3) and in the study of well-being, if with somewhat less *sturm* attached.

Interestingly, it seems possible to identify a divide among value-objectivists that is not common among epistemological realists. This split involves the manner in which allegedly objective truths come to be in the first place. While perhaps some phenomenalists have held that a complete description of the states of perceivers is all that makes “London is in England” true or false, realists of both common-sense and scientific varieties can be expected to deny that. That is, in the area of empirical indicatives about the world, objectivists will generally deny that declarers *create* the truth makers; but in the area of axiology, we can separate out the *voluntaristic* objectivisms, those that take *objective* values to be somehow created by valuations, from Platonic or non-naturalist forms of realism. The idea of voluntaristic objectivism may seem paradoxical: surely it is strange to suggest both that (i) we create prudential and aesthetic values by somehow “conferring” them upon items that are desired, enjoyed or otherwise honored, and also that (ii) we may be mistaken when making value judgments about what is beautiful or is good for our own lives, because these values are actually out there to be discovered. That is a quandary on which I hope to shed some light in this paper, as I try to make a case for a new type of voluntaristic objectivism with respect to prudential values—one based on free choice. I concede at the outset, however, that, while I believe my construal of prudential value judgments should be no more frightening to naturalist types than the existence of physical laws (in fact, I take the existence of such laws to be an essential constituent of the truth of any prudential value claim), I can offer no *complete* escape from the non-empirical. The best I can hope to do is limit the intrusion of non-natural propositions to one or two highly plausible axioms. This seems to me unobjectionable: it is my view that even the most “scientific” of philosophical and political theories—whether involving values or not—must include axioms of a non-natural (i.e., philosophical) type. Even the hardest-headed empiricism cannot be “self-authenticating.” It must begin *somewhere*.

**I. “Voluntarism” and “Subjectivism” Defined**

I have said above that I hope to illuminate—in a philosophically compelling way—what I take to be a somewhat paradoxical position: one that unites voluntarism with value-objectivity. But, of course, there are ways to make such a marriage a very simple task. We might just say, “Well, values are like artifacts. Acts of valuation—like wanting, enjoying or hating something—create values in the same way that acts of painting create pictures. Once created, both types of artifact endure.” We could thus take valuations to “emit” values in much the same way that cartoon characters send out thoughts via thought bubbles: we might even take these value emissions to be objects that, once created, continue to exist forever, along with their internal characteristics. Surely this sort of voluntarism would be compatible with an objectivism according to which anybody may be wrong even about what is good for his or her own life, for there is no doubt that we can be mistaken about the characteristics of many items that we have created. Alternatively, we might define “objectivity” in such a way that “I like grapes” is objective; after all, that statement is true if and only if I exemplify the property of enjoying grapes, and that is something that can be taken to be a completely objective matter. Such a move would again leave no difficulty in combining objectivity with voluntarism. However, there is no philosophical illumination to be found down either of those hallways: we must try to retain the paradoxicality mentioned above by defining our terms so that they comport with our pre-theoretic notions of both value creation and objectivity. Only then can an attempt to coherently unite the two—in spite of their apparent incompatibility—be philosophically fruitful.

Another thing we shall want to do is have the definitions of our key terms comport as far as possible with the ways in which prominent value theorists have classified their own positions. We must therefore begin with a quick survey of contemporary prudential value theories. The most popular are The Objective-List Theory (“OL”), Desire-Satisfactionism (“D-S”), and, though it is hard to see how it can manage not to be an example of OL, Hedonism (“HED”).[[4]](#endnote-4) OL is a paradigm of what we shall certainly want to call an *objective* theory, one according to which values may generally said to be out there in the world, whatever attitudes anyone has toward anything.[[5]](#endnote-5) Objective lists of prudential values generally contain such items as loving relationships, significant knowledge, good health, happiness, and personal achievement, where each of which is thought to be a well-being enhancer for anybody who gets it—whether they wanted it or not.[[6]](#endnote-6) D-S is an example of a popular value theory thought to be subjective, one according to which it is the favorable attitudes of individuals or groups toward items that are claimed to make those individuals better off. Thus, the fulfillment of a desire (or perhaps the enjoyment of this fulfillment, if those are thought to be different things) is claimed by D-S supporters to be a necessary condition of—if not actually identical to—a positive prudential value. Some have found HED more difficult to place on this map. Although often considered a “monistic” OL theory, since it treats as an objective matter the claimed facts that (i) every pleasure is intrinsically welfare-enhancing and (ii) no other items have intrinsic prudential value, HED is also a position that makes each individual’s pleasure quotient—a clear example of a “perspectival” and so allegedly subjective item—the sole determinant of what makes life go well for her. While what is pleasing may be so whether or not anyone wants to be pleased, pleasures must always be pleasurable—and hence valuable—*to someone*.[[7]](#endnote-7)

A quick look at the value literature regarding subjectivity makes it easy to see how slight variations in the definitions of our key terms can affect whether this or that version of HED or D-S turns out to be objective. Frank Chapman Sharp, an early twentieth century American value theorist who took his own stance to be one of voluntaristic objectivism, held that a value judgment should be considered objective just in case it “may properly be denominated true or false [in the sense that] there is something more than the bare assertion of the presence of an emotion or desire in the…person judging.”[[8]](#endnote-8) R.M. Hare put it that according to a subjective theory, a value statement is true “if and only if some state of mind or disposition of some person obtains.”[[9]](#endnote-9) L.W. Sumner, a subjectivist, also focused on the “perspectival” or “relativity-to-a-particular-person” aspect when defining as “subjectivist” any theory that “make[s] our well-being logically dependent on our attitudes of favor and disfavor.” [[10]](#endnote-10)

Christopher Heathwood is an example of a subjectivist who agrees with Sumner in denying the independence of positive attitudes and individual well-being, but who makes positive feelings toward things (“pro-attitudes”) sufficient as well as necessary for the creation of prudential values:

A theory is subjective just in case it implies the following: that something is intrinsically good for someone just in case either (i) she has a certain pro-attitude towards it, or (ii) it itself involves a certain pro-attitude of hers towards something.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The key divergence here is with regard to the nature of the dependence of truth or falsity of value statements upon valuations. Sharp, who believed that value judgements were almost never “bare assertions” of judgers’ attitudes, makes the field of subjective judgments quite narrow, while Sumner broadens it immensely by requiring only that subjective assessments *include* or “depend on” the attitudes of judges. Thus, for Sharp, the self-styled objectivist, subjectivity requires that subjective claims include *nothing but* the description of valuers’ attitudes, while for the subjectivist Sumner, *any* attitudinal involvement makes a self-directed prudential judgment subjective. Hare, like Sumner, takes every attitudinal involvement in a prudential value judgment to be a mark of subjectivity, but, like Heathwood, insists that all such value judgments necessarily *do* include this involvement. For Hare, truth or falsity of value claims must be guaranteed by the existence or absence of a particular attitude: that is what makes a valuation true or false. Heathwood goes even farther: he takes the existence of relevant valuations (pro-attitudes) not just to be necessary and sufficient to produce the truth of every prudential value judgment, but also claims that these attitudes are, at least sometimes, *identical* to the judgments in question.

Going the Heathwood route makes for a problematic definition of “subjectivism” in my opinion. If we want to leave the logical space to distinguish subjectivist from voluntaristic theories, we must be careful not to define these concepts in such a way that the creation of values by acts of consciousness[[12]](#endnote-12) necessarily makes particular value claims true. Voluntarists have been keen to understand the “conferring of value” as a matter of creating, rather than either finding or seeming to find values that are somehow already present in the world, but making a truth-condition or truth-maker, isn’t the same thing as making a truth: for that there must also be something to *be* true—an assertion, belief, proposition or the like. Of course, it could be that “conferring” value is essentially a matter *both* of creation of and belief in (or assertion of) the existence of a value, a position which would certainly allow for varieties of subjectivist voluntarism. But I believe it is important not to define either “subjectivism” or “voluntarism” in such a way that voluntaristic theories are *ipso facto* subjective in the sense of requiring any belief or assertion on the part of the value-conferrer. While, as we shall see, the sempiternal “value bubble” picture need not be retained, creating value should not be seen as a necessarily epistemic activity. In sum, while it is indisputable that voluntarists *may* be subjectivists: what is important for our purposes is that we allow at least the logical possibility of objective voluntarism.

Sumner’s definition of “subjectivism” simply makes too many theories subjectivist.[[13]](#endnote-13) It is not enough for someone’s perspective to be involved in the claim in some manner or other. To be legitimately subjective, value claims must be tied to epistemic attitudes in much the way that phenomenalists believe that the truth or falsity of physical object statements are a function of experiences of “sense-data.” While value subjectivists need not definitively endorse an epistemic position according to which no prudential value claim can ever be mistaken when made with respect to one’s own well-being, subjectivists must at least admit, along with Heathwood, Hare and Keller, that there is nothing to what makes a statement about S’s well-being true or false that is not in some manner exhausted by S’s attitudes. To be wrong about a self-directed prudential value claim must be taken to be tantamount to being wrong about “I enjoy pasta,” “That looks red to me,” or “I am sad.” No doubt, strong cases have been made that assertions of all those kinds still *may* be mistaken, due, perhaps to language malfunctions, conceptual confusions or the like (see, e.g., Bertrand Russell, Charles Sanders Peirce, Wilfrid Sellars and other fallibilists on this matter), but such assertions can be wrong only in such peculiar ways that we may call those occasions “passing strange.” They are not, in any event, the sorts of claims that can be shown to be false by scientific investigation. I will take this difficulty of controversion to be one mark of legitimately subjective propositions—including those involving self-directed prudential value claims.

I believe the following conception of subjectivity/objectivity meets the criteria set forth above in addition to imposing the common-sense requirement that objective judgements be unbiased:

T is an objective theory of (ethical, prudential or aesthetic) value=def. (i) T is a theory of value according to which at least one value proposition P is true (or legitimate); and according to T it is possible that there is some person S such that (i) S objectively judges P to be true (or legitimate).

J is an objective judgment of some person S that P =df J is a judgment by S that some proposition P is true (or legitimate) and J is not a subjective judgement.

J is a subjective judgment of some person S that P =df. (i)J is a judgment by Sthat some contingent proposition P is true (or legitimate); (ii) neither the truth nor the falsity of P is derivable from the existence of J; and either (iii) S judges that P because (or largely because) she wants P to be true or S judges that P is false because S wants P to be false; or (iv) it would be passing strange if J were incorrect.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The idea is that, if S makes a value judgment like “Sewing machines are evil,” rather than try to directly determine its objectivity by investigating whether it is tacitly perspectival, (i.e., really about S without showing it), we let our tests of subjectivity be (a) Does it reflect bias? Or (b) Would it be extremely odd if S were wrong about this matter? If it is clear both that S is unbiased and that she could be wrong about her sewing machine contention without strangeness, it must be an objective judgment—though, of course, one that could be false. And, of course, S might have no evidence for whatsoever for her claim. The contingency requirement rules out the subjectivity of any judgment that must be correct solely because of the meanings of the terms involved or is otherwise axiomatic.

It could be objected that we may, because of doubts or internal conflicts, be unsure whether we do or do not like something. There may even be instances in which someone both loves and hates something at the same time. But it should be remembered that these definitions contain no requirement either that any of S’s judgements—objective or subjective—be doubt-free or that the entire batch of them be internally consistent. And there may be cases in which both P’s truth/legitimacy and its falsity/illegitimacy would be passing strange for S. As already indicated, the “strangeness” is intended to be the (itself undefined) sign of the peculiarly intimate relationship S has with certain propositions, a relationship that need not entail either certainty or self-consistency. The strangeness of being wrong about such “subjective” claims as “This looks green to me” (or “Scallops taste good to me”) is a function of a “psycho-epistemic” principle that makes some types of knowledge even “easier” to come by than such G.E. Moorean achievements as “This is a chair.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Let us now turn to voluntarism. To recap, on this view values can be created only with the help of acts of valuation; that is, something can be valuable or “disvaluable” only if it is, (or perhaps has been or will be) valued (desired, eschewed, liked, disliked, enjoyed, hated, appreciated, disdained, honored, despised, etc.) by somebody. Note that while voluntarism takes the valuative acts to be necessary for the existence of prudential values, it does not suggest that they are sufficient. Thus, nutriment, beauty, knowledge, friendship, courage, etc. can be goods only if somebody values (or, perhaps has valued or will value) them.[[16]](#endnote-16) For voluntarists, in a world eternally without sentient individuals—or a world consisting only of individuals who are completely indifferent to everything—there would be no value.[[17]](#endnote-17) I take non-voluntaristic (“realist” or “non-naturalist”) positions to include every theory according to which at least one thing, event, property or state of affairs—actual or merely imaginable—has positive or negative value, whether or not anybody has ever valued it.[[18]](#endnote-18) While non-voluntaristic values would all seem to be objective, it does not follow that voluntaristic values must be subjective. OL theories (and HED) must be realist so long as they deny any requirement that people must have some attitude toward, say, friendship or pleasure in order for friendship or pleasure to be good for anyone. On the other hand, D-S would seem to be necessarily voluntaristic since it makes desires (or approval or enjoyment of their fulfillments) necessary for values to exist, and all such attitudes should be considered valuative acts.

Let me therefore propose the following definition of “voluntarism”:

Voluntarism =def. Any theory of value according to which an item or state of affairs X is valuable (or perhaps partakes of some particular type of value) only if and during only such times as someone approves of (is averse to), would choose (decline), or enjoys (suffers from) X.*[[19]](#endnote-19)*

I have noted above that the “value-bubble” picture I outlined above is quintessentially voluntarist, and that it is easy to see how, on a primitively causal conception of value-creation, anyone, including the “conferrer,” can still be wrong (without strangeness) when making a judgment about her own well-being—so long as conferring is not construed as also being a necessarily epistemic activity. But the attractions of voluntarism, about which I will have more to say below, seem to me to be largely contrary to this primitive conception, and the definition above does not require it. The question, then, is whether, if we move beyond value-bubbles, we can still leave open the possibility of a plausible objective voluntarism. For it seems that any “scientific” version of voluntarism will not only limit the existence of values to the durations during which some state of affairs is valued, but will also be inclined to make the conferring essentially epistemic. After all, what else do we really have the power to do when we value something besides thinking that it is good or bad? If we make the truth conditions for valuations a (near) function of the nature of the epistemic properties of the valuer, won’t we be conceding that voluntarism entails subjectivity?

To answer this question, let us consider a simple valuation story. Say Oona, a woman with no death wish, has a desire for an entire wheel of Camembert at t. A simple D-S theory[[20]](#endnote-20) might take Oona’s receipt of a wheel of Camembert at t to be prudentially valuable for her, just because she wants it at t. Suppose, however, that in spite of her actual desire, Oona also *believes* at t that what she wants is only a small wedge of cheese, knowing, perhaps, that eating an entire wheel is never good for anybody’s health. Oona judges, *Cheese in the amount I am going to have would be a good thing for me.* A voluntarist could then claim that we have an instance of value-creation as well as a value judgment exemplifying (non-strange) error, and hence, that which requires an objective value theory according to our definitions. But surely Oona’s overly optimistic belief could not have somehow made her otherwise subjective valuation objective: it must be objective (whether or not true) with or without the false belief. Furthermore, mistakes are even easier to come by if we move to a more complex D-S view, according to which, for example, there are only certain types of desires that create values, or only certain types of desired items that are ever valuable.[[21]](#endnote-21) On these refined versions of D-S, Oona can be wrong in her prudential judgment (without “passing strangeness”) even when she simultaneously desires the wheel of Camembert and thinks that getting it is a bad thing for her life.

So, it seems that one may coherently subscribe to voluntaristic objectivism. This compatibility should not trouble Platonists in my opinion. In fact, the case for a non-entailment relationship between naturalism and subjectivism was nicely made by A.C. Ewing,—a foe of both—when he pointed out that strictly naturalistic theories might consistently push such assertions as “‘X is good’ entails that most people like X” or “X is good just in case the existence of X tends to the satisfaction of most people’s desires.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Clearly, there need be nothing at all subjective about either of those theories; in fact, proponents of either could attempt to make ethics a branch of empirical science.

While our definition allows voluntarist theories to be either subjective or objective, it should be obvious that all voluntaristic theories will be naturalist—at least if all acts of valuation take place in nature, (i.e., that there are no supernatural valuative acts, as I suppose occur according to divine command theories). It should also be noted that in spite of the “voluntarist” moniker, valuations need not be *voluntary*. What matters is that, according to all voluntaristic theories of value, the desiring or aversion, the disposition to choose or let alone, or the enjoyment or displeasure is required to something valuable or disvaluable.[[23]](#endnote-23) These attitudes need not be rational, well-informed or even entirely free of contradiction either. The point is that they must be “affective” or “conative” (involve liking/disliking or moving toward/away from) in spite of also containing an element of cognition/judgment.

**II. Some Attractions of Voluntarism**

As suggested above, value-theorists have not always been careful to distinguish (or to put it more charitably, *have not always been particularly interested in distinguishing*) objectivist from subjectivist versions of voluntarism. As a result, it is not always clear from whence any perceived merits of some particular theory arise. Henry Sidgwick, e.g., took it to be virtue of D-S that it makes values “entirely interpretable in terms of fact…and [does not] introduce any judgment of value fundamentally distinct from judgments relating to existence; still less any ‘dictate of Reason.’”[[24]](#endnote-24) David Lewis (1989: 113) concurred. He noted that a theory of well-being according to which values are what we are disposed to value…. invokes only such entities and distinctions as we need to believe in anyway, and needs nothing extra before it can deliver the values. It reduces facts about value to facts about our psychology.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Thomas Scanlon also acknowledged the fact that D-S theories give “theoretical primacy” to empirical valuations, and added that they recognize “the sovereignty of individual choice.” [[26]](#endnote-26) Dale Dorsey has made this last alleged virtue explicitly a function of subjectivity, rather than of value creation:

Subjectivism is able to explain the seemingly plausible connection between what a person values for her own sake and what is valuable for her for its own sake. As noted by Richard Arneson, subjectivism is characterized, and in part motivated, by the plausible thought that a person should be sovereign over her good—her evaluative perspective (at least under the right conditions) should determine her well-being.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Whether stemming from voluntarism or subjectivism, I will call these two alleged philosophical virtues often claimed for D-S, “value-naturalism” and “anti-paternalism.”

Another benefit that has been identified with D-S is a sort of explanatory depth that it seems nearly impossible for OL to provide. While OL theorists might tell us that, say, meaningful knowledge, loving relationships, and personal autonomy are on their lists of what makes someone’s life go well for her, they are almost proscribed from saying why this is so, since it cannot be, for example, that any of their list items is considered eligible because it is something desired by many people (or everyone) or that it makes people happy or gives them pleasure. It seems the non-naturalist must be content with contemplating each of her proposed items (or everyday talk about it) in order to simply *see* whether it is indeed a prudential good.[[28]](#endnote-28) Sumner has put concerns commonly brought forth with respect to enumerative “theories” of alleged objective goods this way:

It would be a…plain mistake for a theory to confuse the conditions which constitute someone's being benefited by something…with any of the particular things capable of being beneficial…. A theory therefore must offer us not (or not merely) a list of the ingredients of the good life but an account of what qualifies something (anything) to appear on that list.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Another benefit that may seem to inure only to D-S, but that I will argue can also apply to another sort of voluntarist theory as well, is what might be called “availability of a plausible axiom of value.” As Mill famously (if confusingly) pointed out, there seems to be at least *some* sort of necessary connection between being desirable and being desired—even if it is not an analytic one.[[30]](#endnote-30) Of course, nothing prevents an OL theorist from claiming that her list also follows from her axioms, but it is hard to see how the claim that, e.g., loving relationships are intrinsically valuable can be taken as a reasonable first premise of any theory of prudential value. It is simply insufficiently intuitive. I will have more to say more about this matter below.

The last batch of virtues that might be suggested for certain types of voluntaristic theories is that they may be claimed to provide benefits for democratic theory. Empirical theories of value, even those that have not relied on Benthamic hedonism, have seemed by some to provide welfare economists as well as political and legal theorists with a promise of what might be called “calculationism”—the hope of one day being able to calculate both individual and societal welfare by such means as noting revealed preferences, estimating probabilities of various consequences, aggregation, and so on.[[31]](#endnote-31) Such a hope may be based on the belief that the desire-fulfillments or chosen items might be aggregable—or at least have more hope of one day being so—than either “degrees of instantiation” of non-natural goods or “amounts” of pleasure and displeasure can ever be. Considering for a moment a standard that will be discussed in detail below and that I will term “CHOICE” if one gives every choice equal weight, since each vote is at least *supposed* to be treated equally under most democratic voting schemes, we have the suggestion of a possible basis for common democratic procedures.[[32]](#endnote-32) Such dreams as these may seem far-fetched, but I believe they have been motivating factors for some voluntarists and may continue to motivate others.[[33]](#endnote-33) Whatever one may think of the welfarist prospects for a non-hedonic, objective voluntarism, it cannot be doubted that there are many reasons that various forms of voluntarism have remained popular among value-theorists for centuries.

**III. Some Objections to Voluntarism**

For all of the virtues claimed for voluntarism, there have long been plentiful and powerful criticisms of voluntarist positions too. There seem to be biological facts, for example, that make certain things good for us, whatever anybody may think, enjoy or desire. Surely, if Oona should eat that entire wheel of Camembert in a half-hour, it will not be good for her life—whatever she may have desired at any time. Again, can the obtaining of a mutual, loving relationship really be bad for one’s life, even it seems to someone that it would make things more troublesome? Can a malevolent person—or an entirely deluded one—have a life loaded with well-being if she is swamped with sadistic or delusive pleasure? Must pain be intrinsically bad if some seem to enjoy it? These are all familiar criticisms of naturalistic positions, and if some of them are successful only if directed at subjective theories, this may not be true of all of them. Let us therefore look at a few more closely.

Roger Crisp has identified the two most common and long-standing criticisms of HED as concerns about “swinish” behavior and the pseudo-satisfactions provided by delusions or something like Nozick’s experience machines.[[34]](#endnote-34) Naturally, subjective theories that are not explicitly pleasure-based, like many D-S theories, have also been subjected to these critiques. Taking “swinishness” first, the objections run along the following lines: “How can an addict’s or suicide’s acquisition of a dangerous drug be good for her, even if and when it is desired? And is the satisfaction of a malicious desire to gratuitously punch a stranger on a train ever prudentially valuable?” The intuitive answers, “It can’t” and “No” have long been among the main supports of OL theories of prudential value. Another basic intuition that seems to conflict with subjectivism is reflected in what might be called “Parfitian pointlessness.”[[35]](#endnote-35) For example, one may ask the D-S theorist: “How can the fulfillment of your desire for it to be discovered, exactly ten years subsequent to the date of your death, that there are precisely 343 hickory trees in the state of Louisiana having the same number of leaves that the tree on your front lawn had on November 11, 2011, make your life go better for you?”

There have been two main strategies taken by voluntarists—hedonistic or otherwise—to allegations of swinishness, non-veridicality, or pointlessness. They have been to either (i) bite the bullet or (ii) idealize our valuations or their consequences in some important manner.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Biting the bullet on swinishness or Parfitian pointlessness[[37]](#endnote-37) involves responding with something like “I’m sorry, but those allegedly welfare-reducing fulfillments just *are* good for the addict (suicide, sadist, hickory leaf obsessive), regardless of how it might seem to them later, or anybody else ever. After all, nothing but my attitudes can determine what is good for me: it is *my* enjoyment/the fulfillment of my desires/etc. that are the sole determinants of that.” Such a response suggests a basic clash of intuitions, indeed an end to any useful discussion. Rather than make this move, let us simply agree that intuitions supporting perfectionism and other OL theories are too deeply ingrained to simply be scoffed at or ignored by voluntarists.

The idealization response to accusations of both swinishness and pointlessness involves some sort of “making sure” process. For example, a number of D-S theorists[[38]](#endnote-38) have made the value-conferring capacity of desires more limited (or eliminated it entirely), unless the desire is for something an individual wants herself to want; or for something still sought after psycho-analysis sufficient to have eliminated any relevant unconscious confusions; or is such that it would be retained by individuals who are in possession of “full information” regarding the consequences of that desire’s fulfillment. Dorsey has done an admirable job refuting claims of success for these methods of handling the traditional objections, and I will not repeat his arguments here.[[39]](#endnote-39) I will only add the remark that to the extent that “idealization” is required, it seems difficult to maintain the position that one’s position is strictly voluntarist. That is, if an increase in value resulting from additional information makes some desire more prudentially valuable, then, according to voluntarist principles, this increment must itself have been created by one or more valuations, and it is hard to see what arguments might be used to defend that highly counter-intuitive claim.[[40]](#endnote-40)

When we move on to the second item in Crisp’s catalog of longstanding objections to hedonistic theories, concern over simulations of satisfactions of desired states of affairs, we will see the same strategies utilized by respondents. Some HED theorists again simply bite the bullet.[[41]](#endnote-41) “How,” they ask, “can anyone insist that a machine-simulated ‘pet pony’ is in any respect worse for any pony-desirer’s life than a real pet pony, or that a faithful marriage is any better for a cuckold’s life than one that only *seems* to him permanently and in every way faithful? For purposes of our personal well-being, it is enough that we *believe* we have gotten what we want when there is no way to verify ‘the real truth’ in any case.” This again seems insufficient to me. At least since Bishop Butler pointed out that it is not really the case that what we generally desire is our own pleasure, value theory has managed to find its way out of the confusions of psychological egoism.[[42]](#endnote-42) Most welfare theorists in philosophy (and many in economics), have come to understand that confusing evidence with truth is as deleterious in the area of value theory as it is in other corners of philosophy. I understand full well that there are no proofs to be had here.[[43]](#endnote-43) But whoever may be right about this matter, the intuitions of a categorial difference between truth and mere facsimiles thereof are again too widespread and deeply ingrained to be either disregarded or gainsaid; the voluntarist will have to do more than insist or ignore.

Responses to the experience machine challenge that go beyond shrugging have also been made. One approach that is somewhat akin to the “idealization” strategy with respect to swinishness, is to specifically allow for “truth-adjustments” to valuations.[[44]](#endnote-44) On this view, a satisfaction is simply “worth more” (perhaps even by a specific, quantitative amount) if the enjoyment is veridical. Of course, such a move would again seem to commit one to a value enhancement that somehow manages *not* to be a strict function of the value-creating activity.[[45]](#endnote-45) Such enhancements are evidently consistent with a voluntaristic theory only if they are at least partly a function of exogenous factors, like, e.g., association with an increase in the production of *other* value-creating activities (by oneself or others). Although that is not an approach that Feldman considers, I think there may be something to it and will say more about it in the next section.

Generally, the strategies taken to find passage between the Scylla of biting the bullet on swinish delights or delusive fulfillments and the Charybdis of appeals to apparently non-voluntaristically-created values have involved attempts either to find special *objects* of valuative acts—those that precisely fall inside our intuitions of the limits of prudential values—or attempts to distinguish special valuative *acts* that produce all and only the changes in prudential value that appeal to the theorist. Mark Overvold (1982) takes the first tack; Dorsey takes the second.[[46]](#endnote-46) The “special objects” strategy has been a game of more and more complicated definitions of what makes a value prudential, and more and more subtle counter-examples.[[47]](#endnote-47) This entire contest can be side-stepped by the “special acts” strategy, but, it seems to me, not very effectively. On Dorsey’s proposal, which he calls “Judgment Subjectivism,” what a person prudentially values is precisely what she believes is good for her. While Dorsey allows someone might be wrong in these self-assessments, he says this can no longer happen once the beliefs are “rendered coherent,” a process that he endorses. With that elaboration, his position again becomes one that allows for no mistakes in our beliefs about what is good for us, because, as Dorsey puts it, “I cannot coherently believe that it is good for me to be worse-off.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Thus, if true (rather than simulated) friendship increases someone’s well-being, it is not because anybody *desires* true friendship or even desires to desire it, it is because the person in question *judges* of true friendship (only) that it is welfare-enhancing for her.

It is hard to believe that a large number of value-theorists—voluntarists or not—will be moved by this strategy for handling objections to subjectivism. First, while it attempts an analysis of “what we prudentially value” via error correction, it gives no help regarding what is good for the lives of those with no beliefs at all about the matter, such as babies. Second, as long ago as 1932, Ralph Barton Perry responded to a suggestion by Orlie Pell that since, for voluntarists like Perry, something must be valued in *some* manner to be valuable, they ought to insist that items must be *judged valuable* to be valuable, since such judgements seem to be valuations. Perry’s response to this seems to me dispositive:

The answer is, of course, that epistemologically this is a crucial step, since it involves the fatal admission that the act of judgment itself creates the fact by which its truth or falsity is determined. In my view the fact of value consists in an interest-in-something. The judgment which refers to this fact, that is, the judgment of value, can be disputed only on the ground that there is no such interest. Such a judgment is not infallible in the sense that what is judged valuable is ipso facto valuable, for the interest (like anything else) may be judged falsely; nor [has the judgment been shown not to exist] by the discovery that the object of the interest is not what it is judged to be.[[49]](#endnote-49)

The crucial point being made by Perry here is that it is an error to try to convert a largely conative process into a primarily epistemic one. That valuations are objective does not mean either that they are true or that they are justified.

**IV. A Non-D-S Objective Voluntarism**

Before attending to any of the specific criticisms of naturalist theories brought above, it may be wise to question the sense of the entire project attempted herein. I have argued above that there may be benefits to pursuing voluntarism while eschewing subjectivism. But is it a feasible approach in the first place? If values are created by valuations and last only so long as do these acts or the dispositions to them, how can it be that values are objective in the way that empirical statements like “London is in England” are? Surely in the latter case, no one’s judgment is involved in the “creation” of the truth, which would survive the death of all sentient creatures. Even if we have cleared logical space for an objective voluntarism, doesn’t every good theory of prudential value at least have to reach some minimum level of initial plausibility?

One thing I hope can be accepted by value theorists of all stripes is that in order for a theory of value T (prudential or otherwise) to be found congenial by someone S,

(a) T commits to (or provides a clear path to the commitment to) all and only the values that S, on reflection, believes to be in the world (if any); and

(b) T has what S takes to be a sufficient batch of the characteristics required of any good philosophical theory and none (or not too many) of what S takes to be the characteristics of inadequate or otherwise defective philosophical theories.

Perhaps a few readers will join me in taking the position that any granting of congeniality to a theory of value will require the fleshing out of (b). In my own view, this must be done in such a way that the following proposition will have to be appended to (a) and (b) above:

(c) T provides what S takes to be a plausible “standard of value.”

Since, however, the inclusion of (c) may be thought to unfairly rule out the congeniality of some styles of philosophical theorizing by insisting that any good theory of prudential value must be of a type that is evidently inconsistent with the simple enumeration of an objective list of prudential goods, I suggest we bracket it for the moment and take (a) and (b) alone to be our congeniality desiderata.

Both (a) and (b) seem entirely uncontroversial. For example, for any rational S subscribing to OL, every OL theory will completely satisfy criterion (a) for her: that is because S can simply add to her list all and only those items she finds intuitively welfare-enhancing. And, indeed, if S believes that the list should be variable, she can add the conditions under which each list-eligible entity becomes an actual prudential value. If S is an OL theorist who is drawn to hedonism, the list of values will be quite short, but there may be a benefit to a pleasure theory with respect to criterion (b), for the hedonist can claim to be attempting to provide an explanation as well as a list, and many philosophers believe that good theories ought to be illuminating. For the hedonist, but not the OL theorist claiming a variety of list items, the explanation can be expected to be, roughly, that *there is something we all understand to be unique about pleasure and those things that tend to increase it*. Non-hedonist OL theorists are unlikely to want to have to endorse a dozen similar propositions involving uniqueness.

Unfortunately for the hedonist, claims about the alleged “specialness” of pleasure—or any other natural property—have been credibly attacked for committing the naturalistic fallacy—trying to derive the existence of a *value* from items having purely natural (physical or even psychological) characteristics. Even many who are sympathetic to naturalism have been forced to admit that none of the following can be true of *being pleasing*, *being the fulfillment of a desire*, or any other natural or empirical property *N*:

N is identical to being valuable.

“N” and “good” are synonymous terms.

*N* (or items that exemplify *N*) is (are) the only thing(s) we ever seek.

*N* is the only thing we seek “for its own sake.”

*N* is itself the only intrinsically valuable item.

Every exemplification of *N* (or occurrence of an *N* item) is intrinsically good.

I will not here rehearse the arguments showing that none of these passes philosophical muster, but simply refer doubtful readers to the works of Moore, Ross and Ewing.

It may seem that the forfeiture of these six propositions with respect to any natural property that one might name must result in a victory for a non-hedonistic OL over all other theories, precisely because it leaves precious little ground for explanatory vigor in *any* theory of value. I don’t believe the situation is as dire as it may seem, however. In a series of mid-20th century works, the American value-theorist Everett Hall explained how, given a proper understanding of the need for axioms in any philosophical theory, one might render unto the Mooreans the falsity of all the naturalistic proposals listed above, without yielding one’s empiricist scruples.[[50]](#endnote-50) For example, Hall suggested that those voluntarists with a hedonistic bent can endorse something like the following as a first premise of their value theories:

HED-1. Things experienced as pleasant, and they alone, are good. Indeed, only things experienced as pleasant are desired for their own sakes.[[51]](#endnote-51)

It should be noted that this standard, which those wanting to add criterion (c) to (a) and (b) above will welcome, continues to tie values to valuative acts. But it is not violative of any of the above six prohibitions. There is no claim of synonymy, for example, or that the property of *being pleasing* is itself good, let alone the only thing people ever seek. As we have seen, however, there are other objections to naturalist theories besides accusations of committing the naturalist fallacy. And when we look to see how HED-1 handles the classic objections involving experience machines and swinishness, it seems quite unpromising. True, it offers only necessary (not sufficient) conditions for welfare-enhancers; but if only what is experienced as pleasant is good and is desired for its own sake, how will we distinguish the pony lover’s simulations from receipt of real ponies?[[52]](#endnote-52) And HED-1 doesn’t seem to do any better with respect to swinishness. Since we have already conceded the intuitiveness of objections from OL backers on these issues, HED-1 seems an inadequate theory.

Without referring to these problems, and perhaps with other goals in mind, Hall went on to suggest an alternative manner of fashioning a hedonic standard of value, one that, by baking in an objective consequentialism and utilizing the concept of lawlike regularity, seems to fare better against the objections highlighted by Crisp. Hall’s proposals suggest a move to something like[[53]](#endnote-53) the following standard:

HED-2. For any property N and person S (or society Y or world W), an exemplification of N is intrinsically (prudentially) good for S (or Y or W), if and only if such exemplification would causally contribute, pursuant to one or more physical laws, to a subsequent increase in the ratio of total of pleasure over displeasure in S’s life (or in Y or W).

Thus, according to HED-2, that and only that which is generally conducive to overall pleasure (for someone or some group, depending on the scope of the prudential value we are attempting to explicate) is good. While traditional versions of utilitarianism, whether ideal or otherwise, have separated the chosen utils (the intrinsic goods) from their consequential aggregation, according to HED-2, intrinsic goodness requires *conduciveness to overall pleasure*. Note again here that the pleasure does not constitute the value, even if production of it is the *reason* why the exemplification of *N* is a good thing. HED-2 handles the experience machine objections roughly by saying that it is only in those cases in which a simulation produces more pleasure in the overall scheme of things that it can be intrinsically good for anyone: delusive fulfillments may or may not be valuable, depending on their predictable consequences. The same response can be made to charges of endorsing swinishness. According to HED-2 what matters is whether the swinish behavior is conducive to a greater overall ratio of pleasure to displeasure.[[54]](#endnote-54)

To what extent these rejoinders to the two traditional objections identified by Crisp are successful, and to what extent they simply rely on the existence of a (merely dreamed-of) Benthamic calculus are interesting and difficult questions. Presumably, the OL theorist will insist that the making of a machine that, pursuant to physical laws, would give *everyone* continuous pleasure is no more intrinsically valuable than a single, non-veridical pleasure induced by such a machine. And, surely, with respect to swinishness, it is hard to know what evil lurks in the hearts of *most* men and women as it is to know what lurks in *each*. Furthermore, even if the voluntarist responses to these objections were deemed entirely adequate, there would remain the complaint that neither HED-1 nor HED-2 seems a plausible candidate for a first premise of axiology, simply because of an insufficient conceptual connection between pleasure and (even prudential) goodness. That is, since HED-1 and HED-2 are clear examples of statements of propositions that assert non-natural values, an objectivist is likely to argue that they are implausible axioms of value theory because pleasure and goodness are, apparently, worlds apart. Thus, while the offers of HED-1 and HED-2 were proposed to provide a theory that would fare better on criterion (b) than OL theories do, the OL defender is likely to simply counter with “But why should what is pleasing be thought to be valuable in the first place?” It is not that the HED defender is required to claim an analytic connection between pleasure and goodness, it is simply that no satisfactory theory of value can rely on axioms that have so little initial conceptual attractiveness. If the response is, “It is just obvious that what is pleasing is good for us” it’s not clear that the proposal offers anything that OL does not in the area of explanatory value.

This impasse naturally leads to D-S, for it seems clear that the popularity of D-S is to a great extent a function of the close conceptual connection noted by Mill—whether or not he explained it satisfactorily—between what is desired and what is desirable. Along with anti-paternalism and value-naturalism, it has been this intuitive connection between satisfaction of desire and prudential value that has made D-S attractive to so many philosophers. So, even if HED-2 *did* successfully respond to the traditional objections to naturalistic value theories, it would still seem to make sense to convert it into a D-S standard.

**V. CHOICE**

Rather than consider the prospects for either HED or D-S further however, I propose to offer an alternative standard of value. I believe it reflects a voluntarist perspective that, like D-S, can provide a more plausible (if still unavoidably unempirical) first premise of axiology than can any hedonic standard. And this proposal also provides insight into the relationship of well-being to personal autonomy and individual liberty, something that neither HED nor D-S standards can offer. It is utterly unsurprising that its proponent should find CHOICE congenial, i.e., that, at a minimum, it meets (a) and (b) above when I put myself in for “S”: how could it not? But CHOICE also seems to me preferable to other theories because of the explanatory power it possesses as a result of the standard of value it proffers. In other words, criterion (c) at least does it no harm, and I don’t believe that the more popular theories discussed above (for all their undoubted congeniality to *their* proponents) will be able match it in that regard.

CHOICE. For all possible states of affairs S and persons P, S is intrinsically prudentially good for P at t if and only if (i) S is freely chosen by P at t; and (ii) pursuant to one or more physical laws, the obtaining of S will, under ordinary conditions, causally contribute to the subsequent increase either in P’s ability to make successful choices or by an increase in the alternatives[[55]](#endnote-55) available to be freely chosen by P.[[56]](#endnote-56)

On this standard, only that which is freely chosen can be intrinsically good for anyone, although it does not preclude the possibility that a needed rain shower, a baby’s reaching for a bottle, or the passage of a budget bill is instrumentally good to the extent that it predictably engenders subsequent successful free choices.[[57]](#endnote-57) Note again that CHOICE must not be taken to imply that either “goodness” or “intrinsic goodness” means the same thing as “being freely chosen” or even that every free choice or every freely chosen item must be good for the chooser.[[58]](#endnote-58) Furthermore, an act can be intrinsically good for someone under CHOICE even if it provides less in the way of prudential value than any number of other actions she might have taken.[[59]](#endnote-59) All that is necessary is a “success” and an increase in the capacity for more of them.

There is another line of objection that I think it is important to anticipate. It is that I have provided no analyses, psychological or otherwise, of what constitutes either freedom or successful choosings. The nature of human autonomy is a heavyweight philosophical question to which I will attempt no contribution. I simply depend on the common-sense view that to the extent one is put in the position of being “forced to choose” something one doesn’t actually find attractive (or “really want”), one is to that same extent denied autonomy. That is because *success* is here seen as the acquisition of some item one approves of (*ex ante*).[[60]](#endnote-60)

As indicated above, the proposal shares with D-S standards the appealing feature of promoting a first premise of axiology that is highly intuitive. For it is quite hard to deny that there is a close conceptual connection between what is freely chosen by people and what is good for them (or is, in common parlance, “a choice item”), just as there is such a tie between what is generally desired by people and what is desirable for them. Of course, D-S theorists may also write a standard of value in such a way that the conceptual connection between what is desired and what is desirable will survive any particular poor (or deluded) impulse. But, as indicated above, CHOICE has several advantages over even such an improved D-S standard. Because of the insertion of “free” in CHOICE (however this term may be unpacked by compatibilists, libertarians or others), there need be no concerns about the insufficient autonomy of an otherwise value-creating act, as there might be pursuant to either a D-S or HED standard. Coercion and addiction issues are thus side-stepped. I do not deny that the nature of “free will” and the character, process and result of what is called “choosing” or “making a decision” are extremely complicated and likely to remain controversial philosophical topics for the foreseeable future. The point is that CHOICE makes autonomy (whatever it is) fundamental to the consideration of what makes a life go well for someone, while the other proposed axioms do not. In addition, CHOICE waives away issues involving Parfitian pointlessness, for although such weird desires do seem to be capable of success, no *choices* are actually made in those scenarios. Thus, regardless of how intensely such confections might be desired—they cannot be intrinsically welfare-enhancing for anyone. Finally, unlike both pleasant or unpleasant experiences and desires or aversions, choices are dichotomous in the sense that they do not vary by intensity or duration. They either happen or they don’t. While *pleasure*, *happiness*, *desire*, and *satisfaction* all are intensive qualities that may come in greater or lesser amounts, *choices* can only be counted This makes the CHOICE standard potentially more amenable to future calculationism.[[61]](#endnote-61)

It may seem to make sense to conclude from CHOICE that to be intrinsically good for the world at large—rather than for Oona alone, her cheese-binge must enhance opportunities for free choice generally. It should be noted, however, that, unlike HED-2, this version of CHOICE makes no explicit claims about what can be expected to improve the world as a whole; it includes no mention of aggregations of choices, a matter I have no space for here. But, obviously, when one considers how successful choices can be aggregated, one must face the unpleasant dilemma that either there is a feasible way to measure the importance of one choice/success against others or we will need to treat every want/success as equal to every other one. As is well known, both prongs seem objectionable.

Returning to Oona, in order for the satisfaction of her cheese craving to be intrinsically good for her, it must not result from addiction and must do her no physical harm or deplete her finances (or future earning capacity) to an extent that her opportunities for future successful choices will be constricted either in number or in scope. “Useless pleasures” are assessed similarly.[[62]](#endnote-62) If a dour, joyless life is shorter or leads to fewer free choices than one filled with video game adventures, then additional game-playing may be welfare-enhancing, but if the practice ends up significantly reducing earning capacity or healthy exercise, it cannot be.[[63]](#endnote-63) The value of bouts on experience machines must be assessed in a like fashion.

It may be objected that we are all familiar with instances in which individuals at least seem to be made better off when we restrict their ability to choose. After all, some people are irrational and all of us are always suffering from incomplete information. According to CHOICE, however, while the freedom of a child or an irrational or confused adult may be advantageously constrained or even prohibited, it cannot be the case that a net loss in autonomy over the long term is ever good for an individual. I cannot, of course, “prove” the soundness of any such intuition,[[64]](#endnote-64) but it should be noted that its attraction seems to be closely connected to our intuitive revulsion of pleasure machines and Brain-In-Vat scenarios. Furthermore, to base a determination of the merits of CHOICE solely on how it seems to do when we estimate the “sum” of happiness/misery we expect to result from this or that hypothetical decision scenario is simply to retreat to hedonism, a theory with well-known deficiencies.

In addition to objections related to the CHOICE theory’s avoidance of issues regarding morality and justice, I would expect it to generate complaints regarding the impossibility of the proposed calculation. Even if one drops any grievances involving the need for value theories used for politics to advise us on what tax policy is *right*, what labor laws are *fair* to businesses, or, generally, what sort of society everyone *ought* to strive for, the requirement that we count successful choices will be claimed by some to doom the theory at the outset. This point can be made by considering a famous passage from Austin’s ‘A Plea for Excuses’ (1956: 5) and noting how similar making a choice is to ‘doing an action’:

Is to sneeze to do an action? Or is to breathe, or to see, or to checkmate, or each one of countless others? In short, for what range of verbs, as used on what occasions, is ‘doing an action’ a stand-in? What have they in common, and what do those excluded severally lack? Again we need to ask how we decide what is the correct name for ‘the’ action that somebody did-and what, indeed, are the rules for the use of ‘the’ action, ‘an’ action, ‘one’ action, a ‘part’ or ‘phase’ of an action and the like. Further, we need to realise that even the ‘simplest’ named actions are not so simple....

Suppose that someone, say, Helen, wants a new car. Does this somehow include the following choices which might be needed to bring this primary choice to fruition: the buying of the new car, the going to the dealership, the getting on the bus to the dealership, the getting out of bed, the moving her left leg toward the side of the bed, etc.? Each choice seems to break down into littler and littler wants, decisions and actions, *ad infinitum*. So, if it is the case that the more successes we have, the better, we must know how to count these choices/successes. Do the ‘big ones’ (like wanting a new car) include the ‘smaller ones’ (like wanting to get out of bed) or is each to be separately counted?[[65]](#endnote-65) To generalize this line of complaint, it would seem we cannot count desires or satisfactions without criteria of identity for them.[[66]](#endnote-66)

These sorts of objections strike me as being less serious than one might at first think. I see no reason why we may not elect either to count the desire for a new car as one item or as many, so long as the same convention is used in the counting of satisfactions. And, presumably, the conventions we decide upon will depend on the particulars of the policies we are interested in. For example, if we are concerned with the utilities created by the addition of more bus routes, we may wish to count Helen’s desire to get on the bus to the dealership as well as the existence of its satisfaction (if it is indeed satisfied). If we are wondering about the good provided by prosthetic devices, counting walking to the bus stop might also be relevant. If we have questions about the value of one more day of life, successes as fine-grained as the successful moving of one’s leg may be important. Even if, as Austin suggests, ‘overall’ counts of utilities may involve a wide variety of sums depending on how we choose to bundle choices and successes, so long as all and only what matters to us is counted in the same manner everywhere, there seems to me no great harm in the fact that different counting conventions are available.

CHOICE is both objective[[67]](#endnote-67) and voluntaristic. Although there would be no values without the occurrence of choosings or the existence of dispositions to choose, whether or not a particular state of affairs is welfare-enhancing is as objective as any Moorean might demand. And, surely, CHOICE is explanatory in a way that no OL theory can ever be: if personal achievements or the attaining of significant knowledge are said to improve someone’s life, CHOICE tells us why. An OL does not. In sum, by providing a plausible standard with which to meet criterion (c), it offers the promise of many more theorists assenting to it in light of both (a) *and* (b).

As the preceding few pages have been somewhat abstract, let me conclude by stating the promise for welfare economics and political theory that might be associated with the acceptance of something like the above CHOICE standard of prudential value in a somewhat more wild-eyed fashion. (1) Since “how much” something may be wanted has been made irrelevant by CHOICE, which is a yes/no matter, any hunt for some method of making accurate intersubjective comparisons of experiential intensity may be abandoned by axiology and political theory without loss. (2) If each choice is taken to be equal in value to every other one[[68]](#endnote-68) (except as they predictably result in the future acquirement of more or fewer freely chosen goods by oneself or others), there is a basis for claiming the equality of each person’s vote with every other person’s vote and, thus, for defending majoritarianism. [[69]](#endnote-69) (3) Finally, CHOICE tells us that the best one can do for one’s society on any occasion is that which is likely to produce the largest number of—or widest scope for—future (successful) free choices by members of that society. As estimates of that kind require expertise in areas like the actuarial and environmental sciences, economics, and behavioral psychology, the availability and use of such expertise should be deemed to be essential to good public policymaking. This, in turn, should be seen to imply that the only sort of political libertarianism that is supported by a CHOICE standard of prudential value is of the “bleeding heart” variety.[[70]](#endnote-70)

1. Thanks are due to Larry Tapper, John DeMouy, and several anonymous contributors to The Skeptical Zone. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I discuss this in Horn, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., Horn, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. These three basic positions are set forth very cogently in the opening pages of Simon Keller, ‘Welfare as Success’ Noûs 43:4 (2009): 656-683, although HED is there called “the mental state theory.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is stated a bit too categorically, since nothing prevents an OL from containing elements, like happiness, that seem to require positive attitudes. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. As will be discussed below, OLs may also be classified as Enumerative or Explanatory, and as Variable or Invariable. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A good discussion of the proper placement of various styles of hedonic theories may be found in Dale Dorsey, ‘The Hedonist’s Dilemma, Journal of Moral Philosophy 8 (2011): 173-196. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Frank Chapman Sharp, ‘Voluntarism and Objectivity in Ethics,’ Philosophical Review 50:3 (1941): 253-267, see pp. 253-254. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. R.M. Hare, ‘Some Confusions About Subjectivity,’ in John Bricke, Freedom and Morality (University of Kansas Humanistic Studies, 1963), pp. 191-208; see p. 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. L.W. Sumner, ‘The Subjectivity of Welfare, Ethics 105:4 (1995): 764-790, see p. 768. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Christopher Heathwood, ‘Subjective Theories of Well-Being,’ in Ben Eggleston and Dale Miller, The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 199-219; see p. 205). Similarly, Keller, ‘Welfare as Success,’ makes the objectivity/subjectivity characterization a function of whether the item being considered is deemed valuable because of, or independently of the valuation. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Or, I suppose, unconsciousness—so long as they must be the acts of a person. See, e.g., Ralph Barton Perry, General Theory of Value (Harvard University Press, 1926), particularly chh. 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. David Sobel ‘On the Subjectivity of Welfare’ Ethics 107:3 (1997): 501-508, makes the same point when he notes that Sumner leaves “room to worry that he did not notice that on the necessary condition interpretation the objectivist can allow that the agent's attitudes play 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.” (pp. 506-507). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The first conjunct of (ii) is there to handle such judgements as that *there are people*. That counter-example is evidently objective, in spite of being passing strange if false, but (at least supposing that we mean “sentient beings” by “people”) the judgement cannot actually occur if it is false. It is an interesting and perplexing question whether, if it is the case that for some judgement J by S, it would be passing strange if J were false, that this must be *necessarily* so—i.e., be the case in every possible world in which S exists and makes that judgement. It does not seem to me to be relevant to the argument being made here, however, so I will not pursue it. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I discuss this sort of epistemic “power” in Horn, 2018. See also Thomasson XXXX. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Voluntarism is thus unsympathetic to G.E. Moore’s (XXXX) disgust with uninhabited, never-seen ugly worlds and his paeon to the intrinsic value of never-to-be-experienced beautiful ones. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See, however, note 57 below. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Thus, divine command theories are voluntaristic, as are some versions of theories according to which there is nothing to value judgements but autobiographical commentary or expressions of emotion. But neither divine command theories nor anything like emotivism is necessary to voluntarism; all that is required is, roughly, that for all states of affairs P, without some act of valuation regarding P, P could be neither valuable nor “disvaluable.” A more precise definition is offered below. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. I note that David Sobel, in his ‘Subjectivism and Idealization,’ *Ethics* 119:2 (2009): 336-352 and ‘On the Subjectivity of Welfare,’ *Ethics* 107:3 (1997): 501-508, takes a somewhat different view of the nature of subjectivity. It may be found objectionable by some that my definition stops at necessary conditions. I hope to remedy this matter below when I propose a standard of value. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For descriptions of simple desire-satisfactionism, see Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford University Press, 1984) pp. 493-502 and Mark C. Murphy, ‘The Simple Desire-Fulfillment Theory,’ Noûs 33:2 (1999): 247-272. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. These elaborations of D-S will be discussed below. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. A.C. Ewing, The Definition of Good (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948) pp. 36-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Additional argument would be required to show that all naturalist positions are voluntarist. Perfectionists may claim that human flourishing is both naturally value-enhancing and non-voluntaristic. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Henry Sidgwick, Methods of Ethics (MacMillan, 1901) p. 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. David Lewis, ‘Dispositional Theories of Value,’ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 63: 113-137. Dale Dorsey, ‘Subjectivism Without Desire,’ Philosophical Review 121:3 (2012): 407-442 also suggests that “The argument from the metaphysics of ‘good’ has an important place in arguments for D-S. D-S is often defended on grounds of naturalism, i.e., that it is most consonant with our naturalist, scientistic worldview.” I think it is important to recognize here that not all “facts about our psychology” are reducible to individual acts of valuation. What I mean by that will become clearer as we continue. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Thomas M. Scanlon, ‘Preference and Urgency,’ Journal of Philosophy 72:19 (1975): 655-669’ see p. pp. 17-44; see p 657. .Another philosopher who singled out these two characteristics of D-S is Robert Merrihew Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods (Oxford University Press, 1999); see p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Dorsey, ‘Subjectivism Without Desire,’ p. 410. His citation is to Richard Arneson, ‘Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction,’ Social Philosophy and Policy 16: (1999): 113-142. Both Sumner, Welfare Happiness and Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1996) and Keller, (‘Welfare as Success’) also give subjectivism the credit for making essential the ties between what is good for one’s life and one’s own perspectives on the matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. This criticism is made also by Ben Bradley, ‘A Paradox for Some Theories of Welfare,’ Philosophical Studies 133:1 (2007): 45-53. OL defenders have seemed largely untroubled by charges of non-illumination, however. Christopher M. Rice ‘Defending the Objective List Theory of Well-Being,’ Ratio 26:2 (2013): 196-211 seems to attempt to handle the objection that OL theories are merely enumerative mostly by saying the word “because” loudly in such sentences as “Friendships are constituents of a person’s well being because they involve friendship, an intrinsic prudential good.” One may doubt, however, whether throwing in even an italicized “because” can make such a claim explanatory. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Sumner, ‘The Subjectivity of Welfare’; see p. 769. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See Everett W. Hall, ‘The “Proof” of Utility in Bentham and Mill’ Ethics 60:1 (1949): 1-18; and Elijah Millgram, ‘Mill’s Proof of the Principle of Utility’ Ethics 110:2 (2000): 282-310. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For extensive bibliographies of political and welfare economists working in this area in the 20th Century, see E.J. Mishan, ‘A Survey of Welfare Economics, 1939-1959’ The Economic Journal 70:278 (1960): 197-265; and Dan Brock, ‘Recent Work in Utilitarianism, American Philosophical Quarterly 10:4 (1973): 241-276.;; See also Fred Feldman, Pleasure and the Good Life (Oxford University Press, 2004); Russell Korobkin, ‘Libertarian Welfarism’ California Law Review 97:6 (2009): 1651-1686; and David Ellerman, “Does Classical Liberalism Imply Democracy?” Ethics & Global Politics 8 (2015): http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/egp.v8.29310. Of course, much of the work of such well-known observers as Arrow, Barry, Baumol, Beitz, Bergson, Braybrooke, Buchanan, Dahl, Downs, Dworkin, Fishburn, Hansson, Harsanyi, Hayek, Hausman, Hicks, Little, May, Nozick, Posner, Rawls, Riker, Samuelson, Sen, and Waldron is devoted to—and in some cases quite critical of—claimed connections between choice (individual or social) and individual or general welfare. I will briefly discuss a couple of the principal criticisms in Section IV. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For defense of a contrary claim, one according to which objective interpersonal weightings of preferences are indeed impossible, but nevertheless remain essential to any just electoral process, see Greg M. Hayden, ‘The False Promise of One Person One Vote’ Michigan Law Review 102:2 (2003): 213-267. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. A few fascinating works not mentioned in note X above that give a sense of the extremely wide variety of material in this vein are Hall, ‘An Ethics for Today’ American Journal of Ethics and Sociology 2:4 (1943): 433-452; Paul Streeten, ‘Economics and Value Judgments’ Quarterly Journal of Economics 64:4 (1950): 583-595; W.D. Lamont, The Value Judgement (University of Edinborough Press, 1955); Herbert Hovenkamp, “Legislation, Well-Being, and Public Choice” University of Chicago Law Review 57:1 (1990): 63-116; Elizabeth Anderson, Value in Ethics and Economics (Harvard University Press, 1993); and Werner B. F. Brouwer, Anthony J. Culyer, et al., ‘Welfarism vs. Extra-Welfarism’ Journal of Health Economics 27:2 (2008): 325-338. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Roger Crisp, ‘Hedonism Reconsidered’ Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 73:3 (2006): 619-645. For experience machines, see Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State and Utopia (Blackwell, 1974) pp. 28-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See Parfit, Reasons and Persons, p. 511. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. To handle pointlessness, the idealization might also involve the requirement that the desired state of affairs is essentially connected to a particular person’s life. See Dorsey, ‘Subjectivism Without Desire,’ pp. 420-421. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For two examples, see Heathwood, ‘Desire Satisfaction and Hedonism’ Philosophical Studies 128: 539-563; and John Bronsteen, Christopher Buccafusco et al., ‘Welfare as Happiness,’ Georgetown Law Journal 98 (2010): 1583-1641. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. These include Sidgwick, Brandt, Lewis, Railton, Griffin, Kagan, Sobel and many others. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Dorsey, ‘Subjectivism Without Desire.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Keller, ‘Welfare as Success’ makes a similar point. David Enoch, ‘Why Idealize?’ Ethics 115:4 (2005): 759-787 provides a thorough-going critique of claims of the consistency of idealization techniques and value-subjectivity. Sobel’s response, ‘Subjectivism and Idealization’ includes the statement that to say “it is one’s desires that determine one’s well-being is to hold that it is whether one wants X that determines whether one benefits in getting X”; see p. 346. However, Sobel does not tell us enough about what he means by “determine” to enable us to distinguish between what may be taken as a rationale for voluntarism and what must be taken as a defense of full-blown subjectivism. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. For good examples, see, again, Heathwood, ‘Desire Satisfaction and Hedonism’; and Bronsteen, Buccafusco et al., ‘Welfare as Happiness,’ [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. See Joseph Butler, Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel (Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1827). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See Horn, “Metaphysical Realism and the Various Cognitive Predicaments of Everett W. Hall” in *The Roots of Representationism* XXXX. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. This tack is taken by Feldman, Pleasure and the Good Life, who also allows for adjustments based on desert. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Sumner, ‘Review of Utilitarianism, Hedonism, and Desert: Essays in Moral Philosophy by Fred Feldman’ 109:1 (1998): 176-179 also takes Feldman to task on this matter. He questions the consistency of consequentialism with a position that takes value enhancements to be based on desert or veridicality, because such enhancements appear to “violate the traditional assumption that the good is prior to the right”; see p. 178. On Sumner’s view, Feldman’s approach “abandons the traditional utilitarian project by rejecting the idea that principles about desert (and fairness, justice, etc.) are to be derived from the maximization of the good, [since] they are somehow or other (how?) determined independently and then used to partially define the good to be maximized.” Keller, ‘Welfare as Success’ makes a similar criticism; see p. 679. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. See Mark Overvold, ‘Self-Interest and Getting What You Want" in Harlan B. Miller and William H. Williams, The Limits of Utilitarianism (University of Minnesota Press, 1982) pp. 186-194; and Dorsey, ‘Subjectivism Without Desire.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See Dorsey ‘Subjectivism Without Desire,’ pp. 420-421 for coverage of a couple of innings. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. ‘Subjectivism Without Desire’ p. 423. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Perry, ‘Real and Apparent Value,’ Philosophy 7:35 (1932): 62-67; see p. 66. See also, Robbie Kubala, ‘Valuing and Believing Valuable,’ Analysis 17:1 (2017): 59-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Hall, ‘A Categorial Analysis of Value,’ Philosophy of Science 14:4 (1947): 333-344; ‘The “Proof” of Utility in Bentham and Mill’; and What is Value? (Humanities Press. 1952). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. ‘The “Proof” of Utility in Bentham and Mill,’ p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. It may seem that this problem can be handled by putting a *prima facie* or *pro tanto* qualifier before the “good” in the first sentence, but this would require us to have some more fundamental axiom to rely on for determining what is really (i.e., not just *prima facie*)intrinsically good. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. For the original versions, see Hall, ‘A Categorial Analysis of Value,’ pp. 342-343 and What is Value, pp. 185-187. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. In addition to the standard’s dependence on a law-governed consequentialism, it cannot be subjective pursuant to our definitions if (as intended by its proponents) it is considered a necessary truth rather than a contingent proposition. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. “Alternatives” must be understood to be limited to those that are *attractive* to the person(s) in question. For example, it is obvious that the beef items at a restaurant will be irrelevant to a vegan diner and that the availability of jobs in philosophy departments will be of no interest to those who are interested exclusively in careers in plumbing. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Here we give sufficient as well as necessary conditions for intrinsic value creation. It may be noted that the standard is easy to apply only in a few delimited cases, e.g., where either there is an expected increase in successful choices and no expected decrease in attractive options or there is an expected increase in attractive options and no expected decrease in future successes. It provides no clear answer in numerous other scenarios: I believe however that that is consistent with the limitations of common intuitions on the matter. It is also important to recognize—and will be stressed below—that since the tastes of the chooser may change over time, estimating future successes requires predicting what will be taken as attractive options and successful apprehendings at later dates. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. The voluntarism endorsed here refers exclusively to what is valuable for persons. Of course, Aristotelians often make much of the fact that it is reasonable to claim that things can be made better or worse for non-sentient entities: see Kraut, *What is Good and Why* (Harvard University Press, 2007). I don’t deny that sunlight is in some sense “good for” clover (as is oxygen for cancer cells and erosion for canyons) and that this would be so even if there had never been sentient entities. But while it seems absurd to claim that what is good for clover, cancer or canyons is, all else equal, intrinsically good simpliciter (i.e. good for the world as a whole), it seems to me at least plausible that a net increase in what is good for sentient entities over the long term makes the universe a better place whatever may happen elsewhere. In any case, I consider it basic that for something to be intrinsically good its occurrence or instantiation must, if all else is unchanged, make the world a better place. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. For an excellent discussion of the error in claiming that the existence of a successful choice or satisfied want is sufficient to produce a social or political good, see Brian Barry, ‘Liberalism and Want Satisfaction: A Critique of John Rawls,’ Political Theory 1:2 (1973): 134-153. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. And, again, an intrinsically (prudentially) good act may also be immoral: I make no attempt here to explicate moral values. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. These considerations show the close relationship between D-S and CHOICE. The differences between the two positions remain important, however. CHOICE (i) ignores intensity of desires and/or satisfactions; and (ii) makes both freedom/autonomy in choosings and increased opportunity for future successes essential to intrinsic value. Traditional D-S theories do neither. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. It will be well to consider a confusion that can arise here. While the theory being advocated insists that each choice is equal, it also seems to make some more valuable than others when it takes future likely successes into account. If some are thought to be more “fecund” than another in this sense and importance is assigned to that factor, how can it be that they are of equal value. It is important to understand that the variance in fecundity does not imply any sort of intrinsic inequality in choices. In fact, if choices weren’t all equal, we could not deduce that there was anything significant about fecundity. For if some choice were thought to be very productive, but only of “extremely unimportant” successes, we could not infer anything of interest the information. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. See Arneson on “cheap thrills” in ‘Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction,’ p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. It is generally agreed that it is worse to have unsatisfied wants than to have no wants at all (assuming one remains alive, sentient and autonomous). There may thus be (perhaps Vedantist- or Buddhist-tinged) concerns that truly good societies will not only contain the fewest individuals with unsatisfied desires, but the fewest individuals with desires at all, and, consequently, the fewest possible satisfactions. Given such a perspective, CHOICE, with its focus on *more* may seem to bestow its blessings on the most horrendous ‘wheels’ of *craving—getting—craving* that one can imagine. I think, however, that genuine autonomy is inconsistent with the absence of conation. we can therefore handle this concern by construing desires and satisfactions broadly enough to consider ‘going beyond wanting’ itself a successful choice. While it may seem that we are perversely attempting to call the absence of desire something that may be sought, it cannot be denied that a sort of bliss is often promised to those who succeed in attempts at asceticism. If the value of *sadhana* is considered somehow exempt from rebukes stemming from the praiseworthiness of giving up desires, it seems acceptable to count the seeking for the promised state of bliss a value and the finding of it a success. An autonomous person can’t “just *be*.” One may also compare here the (somewhat whiny) observations of Barry Schwartz in his *The Paradox of Choice:* *Why More is Less* (EccoPress, 2016)*.* He complains therein that we may be “paralyzed” by having too many sizes and styles of jeans to choose from. As explained above, “options” that are not attractive may be considered irrelevant to our analysis. Furthermore, Schwartz accepts without argument a standard of well-being (involving “happiness,” presumably) that he seems to take to be indisputably connected to survey results. That the happiest people are the best-off does not seem to me to be an analytic truth. In any case, I do not take it to be so here. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. And I understand that not everyone agrees with this stance. For a defense of paternalism, see Jason Hanna, *Our Best Interest: A Defense of Paternalism.* (Oxford University Press, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. A similar worry could be brought regarding whether to count desire tokens or desire types. That is, if I desire something each day for a week, is that a bigger deal than ‘still’ (maybe subconsciously) wanting it (once) over the entire period? Again, do we count occurrent desires or dispositions to answer questions of the type ‘Do you want so-and-so?’ with, at the very least, ‘Yeah, I guess so.’? [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. There’s an interesting discussion of this subject in Murphy (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. The objectivity afforded by the second conjunct in the CHOICE standard allows me two responses to Plato’s objection that the good I’m pronouncing is nothing but “that in which the beast delights,” the evil is precisely “that which he dislikes,” and that I “can give no other account of the just and the noble.” First, I am interested in prudential values only and do not pretend to explicate what is good or just. Second, no amount of delight is alone sufficient to produce an increase in intrinsic prudential value according to CHOICE. It must actually be the case that future successful choices will be multiplied. That is a patently objective matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. This, too, would require an axiom; it is no more strictly derivable from CHOICE than “with each counting as one and none counting as more than one” is derivable from Benthamic HED. But it seems to me a highly intuitive addendum. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Or, perhaps more precisely, “pluritarianism.” The point is that the hunt for cardinal utility values can be abandoned in favor of counting final choices, whether or not one endorses simple majoritarianism. See Author 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. See Barbara Wootton, *Freedom Under Planning* (University of North Carolina Press, 1945). [↑](#endnote-ref-70)