

Hybrid Theories of Well-Being

Christopher Woodard

In general, a hybrid theory is a theory that combines elements of two or more other theories. In the case of theories of well-being, hybrid theories are usually understood to combine elements of “subjective” and “objective” theories of well-being (*see SUBJECTIVE THEORIES OF WELL-BEING; OBJECTIVE THEORIES OF WELL-BEING*).

For example, Shelly Kagan has discussed a theory according to which well-being consists in *enjoying the good* (Kagan 2009; *see WELL-BEING*). Kagan’s phrase neatly encapsulates one way of combining a subjective requirement (that the subject have some positive psychological attitude toward *X*) with an objective requirement (that *X* is good). By combining both kinds of requirement, this theory seems to straddle the divide between subjective and objective theories, to inherit some of the attractions and problems of each, and to merit the name “hybrid theory.”

Some other views share the same basic structure of positing a subjective and an objective requirement, but vary the details. Thus, for example, Robert Adams proposes that well-being is *enjoyment of the excellent* (Adams 1999: ch. 3), while Richard Kraut (1994: 44) proposes that it is *loving things worth loving*. Theories broadly of these sorts are attractive because they seem to solve some of the problems associated with straightforwardly subjective and straightforwardly objective theories. Subjective theories are open to the objection that a subject may value things that are worthless (*see DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD*), while objective theories are open to the objection that what is valuable may leave a subject cold, and for that reason cannot be good for her (Railton 2003: 47). Theories of the kind discussed by Kagan, Adams, and Kraut seem able to solve both kinds of problem at once.

It makes sense to begin by considering these views – according to which well-being consists in subjectively valuing (in some specified way) objectively good things. These form the most prominent and obvious kind of hybrid theory of well-being. They are similar in structure to hybrid theories in some related areas of ethics, for instance to theories about the nature of virtue (Hurka 2001) or about the nature of meaning in life (Wolf 2010; Metz 2013). As we shall see later, though, it is possible to broaden the category of hybrid theories of well-being so that it includes theories quite different from these.

Well-Being as Valuing the Good

Kagan begins his discussion by noting that it is possible to travel in a dialectical circle when considering theories of well-being. If, for example, we begin with hedonism – the theory according to which well-being consists in pleasure and the avoidance of pain

(*see HEDONISM*) – we might come to worry about its exclusive focus on mental states. Shouldn’t something other than my mental states determine how well my life is going for me? Motivated by this worry, we might then consider a desire theory of well-being – according to which well-being consists in getting what one desires. Since whether one’s desire is satisfied is an objective matter, this successfully implies that well-being does not depend only on one’s mental states. But what, then, if my desires are for worthless things? Well, then perhaps we should consider an objective theory of well-being, according to which well-being consists in having the items that feature on some list of objective goods. But what if I do not care about them at all? As Kagan puts it,

friends of an objective account of well-being seem forced to accept the unappealing claim that I could be extremely well off, provided that I have the right objective goods in my life, even though these things hold no appeal for me, and I am, in fact, utterly miserable. Understandably enough, the desire to avoid this implausible implication is enough to leave many running back to hedonism, at which point, of course, we have come full circle. (Kagan 2009: 254)

However, Kagan then points out that another sort of view is possible. We might want to combine elements of a subjective theory with elements of an objective theory and to claim that a good life requires both having objectively good things in one’s life (say, friendship, knowledge, or achievement) *and* enjoying them. He writes: “In short, well-being requires getting both the ‘insides’ *and* the ‘outsides’ right: one must both possess objective goods and take pleasure in them” (2009: 255). In this way, one might try to combine the attractive features of subjective and objective theories and to avoid their problems.

As mentioned above, other authors have advocated structurally similar views. In Adams’s formulation, well-being consists in enjoying the excellent (Adams 1999: ch. 3). In Kraut’s, it consists in loving things worth loving (Kraut 1994: 44). In Raz’s, it consists (in large part) in the successful pursuit of worthwhile goals (Raz 1986: ch. 12). Though these views differ in important ways – in particular, over the nature of the subjective condition for well-being – they share a common structure. In particular, they all claim that well-being requires (a) fulfillment of a subjective condition (enjoyment, loving, having as a goal), *and* (b) fulfillment of an objective condition (having in one’s life excellence, goodness, things worth loving, or worthwhile things) (see also Darwall 2002 and Feldman 2004 for similar views). That is, they each identify a subjective condition and an objective condition, and they each claim that fulfilling both conditions is necessary for well-being. They are, as we might put it, “joint necessity” views, where one necessary condition is subjective and another is objective (see Woodard 2016: 164).

Many of these authors emphasize that fulfillment of these conditions is not sufficient for well-being. For example, in Raz’s formulation it is not sufficient that one’s worthwhile goals be fulfilled: they have to be fulfilled *as a result of* one’s successful pursuit of them (Raz 1986: 297). Somewhat similarly, Kagan (2009: 255–60) discusses what sort of connection there must be between the pleasure and the objective goods in one’s life,

while Kraut (1994: 44) claims that “one must be related in the right way to what one loves.” Since many different ways of spelling out additional conditions are possible, there is room here for considerable variation among superficially similar views.

Subjective–Subjective and Objective–Objective Hybrids

Once we have seen the possibility of joint necessity views, we might consider other possible kinds of hybrid theory. Jennifer Hawkins (2010: 66–8) has proposed one such theory, which combines two subjective conditions. She defines an “affective state” as a set of “long-lasting dispositions that underlie and shape both our moods and emotions” (2010: 65): depression is one example of a negative affective state in this sense. Importantly, it is possible for a life to satisfy a subject’s preferences but to result in a negative affective state, in which the subject is disposed to low mood and negative emotions and prone to distorted judgments about the worth of her own projects. According to Hawkins’s view, a good life is one in which the subject has a positive affective state *and* her preferences are satisfied.

We might imagine other kinds of subjective–subjective hybrid view. For example, we might distinguish desiring and liking (Berridge 2009), and propose that something is a constituent of well-being only if the subject *both* desires it *and* likes it. Since there are several kinds of psychological state with a claim to being the subject’s “values,” we could consider other possible combinations. Another possible view, for example, would claim that something is a constituent of well-being only if the subject desires it, likes it, and believes it to be good.

Just as it is possible to have subjective–subjective hybrids, it is also possible to have objective–objective hybrids. An objective theory might claim that friendship and virtue are among the objective goods, for example (see FRIENDSHIP; VIRTUE). Standardly, these goods would be treated as making independent contributions to the subject’s well-being – so that, for example, more friendship always adds constitutively to her well-being, no matter what the subject’s degree of virtue is. But we could combine these goods in a hybrid theory and claim instead that well-being consists in a life of *virtuous friendship*. This would be structurally similar to claiming that well-being consists in enjoying the good, except that both necessary conditions are objective. According to this view, friendship by itself would add nothing to well-being, and virtue by itself would add nothing to well-being.

Objections to Joint Necessity Theories

Consider, once more, the proposal that well-being consists in enjoying the good. One objection to this proposal is that it is unduly restrictive. We might think that other things are constituents of well-being: for example, pleasures taken in worthless things (Delaney 2018). If I get some pleasure from listening to cheesy pop music, should we really deny that this pleasure adds to my well-being? In parallel fashion, we might wonder whether good things in our lives add nothing to our well-being just because we do not enjoy them. Compare two equally miserable artists, only one

of whom has succeeded in making great art. Does her great achievement add nothing to her well-being – how well her life goes for her – just because she does not enjoy it (Sarch 2012: 444–5)?

As Kagan discusses, there are some possible responses on behalf of the view that well-being consists in enjoying the good. One option would be to insist that unenjoyed achievements do not increase well-being but to concede that they may increase other kinds of value of a life (Kagan 2009: 256–7). Alternatively, in the case of apparently worthless pleasures, we might claim that sensory pleasure is *always* enjoyment of something good, since it is enjoyment of one's body (Kagan 2009: 269–70; see also Adams 1999: 100).

Whatever the merits of these specific replies, it is obvious that joint necessity theories will in general be open to structurally similar objections. For example, the proposal that well-being consists in desiring the good (and getting it) is open to the objection that well-being is enhanced by merely having good things, without desiring them (see Lauinger 2013 for discussion). To Raz's view that well-being consists in the successful pursuit of worthwhile goals, Brad Hooker (2015: 29–31) objects that merely “passive” pleasures – pleasures that fall into one's lap without being pursued – contribute to well-being. And we might similarly wonder, in relation to the objective-objective hybrid we canvassed earlier, whether friendship without virtue, or virtue without friendship, would really contribute nothing to well-being.

In each case, the objection is that one of the conditions said to be necessary is not really necessary. Of course, an objection of that form can be made to every attempt to identify a necessary condition. But it is given extra bite in the current context by the fact that hybrid theories of well-being attempt to combine the appeal of different existing theories of well-being – that is, the appeal of their parent theories. If hybrid theories take the joint necessity form, they will necessarily disagree with their parent theories about the sufficient conditions of well-being. Thus the claim that well-being consists in enjoying the good disagrees with the claim of one of this specific hybrid's parent theories, hedonism, about whether being pleasurable is sufficient. And it disagrees with its other parent, objective theories, about whether having objectively good things in one's life is sufficient.

It may be that in each such case of disagreement the joint necessity hybrid adopts the right stance. We have already noted some specific replies that could be made in that spirit. But it is also worth considering whether hybrid theories must take the joint necessity form that gives rise to these objections in the first place.

Holism

What distinguishes a hybrid theory of well-being from a pluralist theory? Compare the claim that well-being consists in enjoying the good with the pluralist claim that well-being consists in enjoyment and having good things in one's life.

There is a genuine distinction, and it turns on whether the contribution made by each component (enjoyment, having good things) is independent of the other component. A straightforward pluralist view claims that the contribution made by enjoyment

is entirely independent of the extent to which the subject has good things in her life, and vice versa. In contrast, the view that Kagan discusses claims that the contribution made by enjoyment depends on the extent to which the subject has good things in her life (and the way in which enjoyment is related to this), and vice versa. Because the contribution of each component depends on the degree to which the other component is present, we can describe this view as holist (see *HOLISM*). Unlike straightforward pluralist views, hybrid views are holist in this way (see Parfit 1987: 501–2).

But note that joint necessity is just one possible kind of holism. According to joint necessity views, the contribution made by each component depends in a stark way on the degree to which the other is present; enjoyment without goodness counts for *nothing*, and goodness without enjoyment counts for *nothing*. It is this feature that gave rise to the objections we considered in the last section. And it is important to note that it is not entailed by holism.

Holism entails that the contribution made by each component depends in some way on the degree to which the other is present. It does not require that each component is a necessary condition of the other's making any contribution at all to well-being – which is what joint necessity views claim. For example, we could imagine holist views according to which enjoyment, by itself, makes a positive contribution to well-being, but this contribution is amplified as it is taken in more and more valuable things. Equally, we could imagine a view according to which friendship makes a positive contribution to well-being, but this contribution is amplified as it becomes more virtuous.

These “amplification” views are holist, and so they are distinct from straightforward pluralist views. They deserve the label “hybrid.” But they do not adopt the joint necessity structure of the best-known hybrid views. They are much more flexible, and they are not open to the same objections (for a related discussion, see Sarch 2012). Those who are attracted to hybrid theories of well-being should not be put off merely by the objections that have been raised to joint necessity views.

Issues

We started with what looks like a fairly simple hybrid view, according to which well-being consists in enjoyment of the good. Obviously, this is only the outline of a theory of well-being. To turn it into a proper theory, we would need to say much more about which things are good and what kind of enjoyment is relevant. But in fact even this would not be enough. As Kagan, Adams, and Kraut pointed out, there is also more to be said about how the enjoyment is related to the good: about how it is caused, about whether there can be a delay (and if so, how large) between having something good and enjoying it, and so on. Even this relatively simple view calls for a great deal more specification.

However, we then generalized the idea of a hybrid theory of well-being in two ways. The first generalization was to consider combinations other than subjective–objective. The space of interesting hybrid theories includes subjective–subjective theories and objective–objective theories – and, no doubt, theories with more than two components. Few of these possible combinations have yet been discussed by philosophers.

The second generalization was to consider hybrids that do not have a joint necessity structure. We noted that what distinguishes hybrid views from straightforward pluralist views is holism, not joint necessity. Once the possibility of hybrid theories that are not joint necessity views is clearly in sight, the range of interesting possible theories increases enormously. Very many functions – from the degree to which one component is present to the contribution of another – are possible and worth investigating. Again, few of these have yet been discussed (see Kagan 2009: 264–70 and Sarch 2012 for discussion of some of these functions).

Another important issue complicates things further. A theory of well-being would tell us, ideally, about the constituents of *bad* lives as well as about the constituents of *good* lives. Most philosophical discussions of well-being focus on the nature of good lives. But “ill-being” is just as important, and we should not simply assume that it is the mirror image of (positive) well-being (Kagan 2014).

In the present context this is extremely important. If we think that the positive value of enjoyment is amplified when enjoyment is taken in good things, do we want also to claim that the disvalue of a negative evaluative attitude is amplified when that negative attitude is directed to bad things? Or is it worse (in terms of well-being) for a subject to negatively evaluate *good* things than it is for her to negatively evaluate bad things? Or is the disvalue of a negative attitude constant whatever its cause or object (Kagan 2009: 271; 2014)? We have just noted that very many hybrid theories are possible and worth investigating. If, as seems plausible, we allow that the character of ill-being need not be a mirror image of the character of well-being, then the number of interesting theories worth investigating increases further.

This diversity of possible hybrid views makes it difficult to generalize about their merits and demerits. Issues about how to *specify* a component that arise for a parent view (such as the issue of how to handle future-related desires) will also arise for a hybrid descendant of that view. But objections to each parent view will not automatically carry over to the hybrid descendant, since some other feature of it may undermine the objection. Hybrids may also be open to objections that do not arise for any of their parent views.

Thus each specific hybrid view will face its own problems and have its own attractions, and it is probably a mistake to expect that similar things will be true of all or most of them. It might be that we should spend less time discussing them as a class and more time discussing specific hybrid theories. In any case, philosophers of well-being should take heart from the existence of hybrid theories. A large number of interesting possible views of the nature of well-being (and ill-being) have so far not been explored. This should give us hope that consideration of them might enable us to make progress in the philosophy of well-being.

See also: DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; FRIENDSHIP; HEDONISM; HOLISM; OBJECTIVE THEORIES OF WELL-BEING; SUBJECTIVE THEORIES OF WELL-BEING; VIRTUE; WELL-BEING

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