Subjective Theories of Well-Being

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Subjective theories attempt to explain what makes something a constituent of a subject's well-being (*see* WELL-BEING) in terms of that subject's psychological states. They contrast with theories of well-being which claim that what makes something a constituent either has nothing at all to do with the subject's psychological states, or depends only in part on them (*see* OBJECTIVE THEORIES OF WELL-BEING). Subjective theories differ from each other chiefly in terms of which psychological states they specify as explanatory.

There are two main ways of distinguishing subjective theories from others. According to the first, broad, way, what distinguishes subjective theories is their claim that something is not a constituent of a subject's well-being unless she has, or would have in the right circumstances, some positive psychological attitude toward it. That is, the subject's positive psychological attitude is said to be a necessary condition of something's being a constituent of her well-being (Sumner 1996: 38–9; cf. Rosati 1996: 311). According to the second, narrower, way of characterizing them, what distinguishes subjective theories is their claim that the subject's positive psychological attitude fully explains which things are constituents of her well-being. On this characterization, the subject's attitude is said to be both a necessary and a sufficient condition of something's being a constituent of her well-being (Dorsey 2012: 407; Sobel 1997: 504).

The broader characterization focuses attention on one feature that a theory of well-being may have, and which may be attractive: the implication that something cannot be a constituent of a subject's well-being if it leaves her entirely cold, or would do so under specified circumstances. Call this the "non-alienating" feature of theories of well-being (Railton 2003: 47). Defined in the broad way, subjective theories will be non-alienating in this way.

Note, however, that a "subjective" theory in this broad sense may claim that there are other necessary conditions on something's being a constituent of well-being. In particular, it may claim that it is necessary, in addition, that the thing in question is objectively valuable. Thus, the broad characterization of subjective theories encompasses "hybrid" theories of a kind which claim that, to be a constituent of well-being, something must be both objectively valuable and subjectively valued (*see* HYBRID THEORIES OF WELL-BEING).

The narrower characterization excludes such theories, since it claims that the specified psychological attitude is sufficient, and not just necessary, for something's being a constituent of well-being. For this reason, subjective theories of this narrower kind also have a second feature, which may be attractive: they are psychologistic.

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That is, they seek to explain a kind of value (well-being) entirely in terms of psychological states (valuing states) (Lewis 1989: 113).

The broad and narrow classifications serve different interests. The broad one is most salient if our only interest in "subjective" theories is their non-alienating character. The narrow one is more salient if our interest in "subjective" theories includes an interest in psychologistic explanations of value. For the purpose of this entry, I will define subjective theories as having both features – thus adopting the narrower characterization rather than the broader one.

Which Kind(s) of Attitude?

One dimension of variation among subjective theories is in the kind or kinds of psychological state they appeal to in order to explain the nature of well-being. The most prominent subjective theory among philosophers is the desire theory (*see* DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD). According to the desire theory, what makes something a constituent of a subject's well-being is that it satisfies some specified set of her desires (*see* DESIRE; PREFERENCE); different versions of the theory specify different sets of desires. The simplest version says that the relevant desires are all of her actual desires. An alternative version says that they are those of her actual desires that are non-instrumental (that is, for things for their own sakes, rather than for the sake of their consequences; see Murphy 1999: 251; Heathwood 2005: 489). As we will see below, a further issue is whether the relevant desires are not those the subject actually has, but those she would have in some idealized circumstances – say, those she would have if she had no false beliefs.

An immediate attraction of these theories is that they seem to explain the judgment that different things are constituents of the well-being of different subjects. At least when we specify constituents concretely, it is hard to doubt that different things are good for different subjects. Thus, compare what would be the best life for Martha, who values adventure and excitement, with what would be the best life for Sadiq, who prizes security and serenity. Their different psychologies seem intuitively to make a difference to what would be best for them. Desire theories of well-being offer plausible explanations of this intuition.

Other kinds of subjective theory could offer similar explanations. All subjective theories (of the narrower kind) share in common the ambition to explain what is good for someone in terms of what she values; they differ mainly over which parts of her psychology constitute her values. Along with desires or preferences, other candidate psychological states include the agent's *evaluative beliefs* (Smith 1992; Dorsey 2012), her *cares* (Frankfurt 1982), her *likes* (Berridge 2009), or her *affective states* (Hawkins 2010). Since subjects appear to differ from each other with respect to all of these psychological states, each of these kinds of subjectivism seems able to explain why different things are good for different subjects.

The differences between these ways of specifying the subject's values matter greatly, and they connect with wider debates about moral responsibility and the philosophy of action. When we talk about a person's "values," which of his psychological

states do or should we have in mind? This is not just a matter of getting the theoretical analysis right: in practice, people seem capable of believing something good without desiring it, or of desiring something without liking it, for example. That is, the candidate psychological states are not guaranteed to harmonize, and so which one(s) we identify as a subject's values will make a difference to our account of his well-being. Furthermore, if we specify more than one kind of state, we may have to specify what determines well-being in cases where the states conflict with each other – as when, say, someone desires something but has negative emotions towards it (for one approach, see Hawkins 2010).

Idealization

A further question is whether some way of correcting for errors is needed to specify the relevant psychological states. The simplest forms of subjective theory specify the subject's values as the desires (or evaluative beliefs, or cares, or likes, or affective states, etc.) she actually has. In contrast, idealizing versions pick out the relevant states using some idealizing assumption (*see* IDEALIZATION IN ETHICS). For example, they may say that the constituents of Sophie's well-being are those things she would value if she had no relevant false beliefs, or those things she would value if she had no relevant false beliefs and she were reasoning correctly (Sidgwick 1907: 110–11; Brandt 1979: 268; Dorsey 2017). Idealizing theories thus specify what are to count as "the right circumstances" in the following general subjective formula: what the subject would value in the right circumstances. (Non-idealizing theories specify "the right circumstances" as "the subject's actual circumstances.")

An intuitive case in favor of some kind of idealization can be made by considering some cases of false beliefs. Suppose that a subject has a desire for some object *O*, but that this desire would not persist except for her mistaken belief that it has property *P*. For example, suppose that she wants to eat a particular apple because she believes that it would be delicious. In fact, the apple is rotten (Sidgwick 1907: 109–10; Lauinger 2011). Presumably, we do not believe that eating this apple – which would satisfy one of this subject's desires – would increase her well-being at all. One way of developing a desire theory so that it accords with that judgment is to set aside those of a subject's desires that exist only because of factual mistakes. Similarly, we might imagine a case in which the subject desires *O* only because she mistakenly infers that it has property *P* from her correct belief that it has property *Q*. A subjective theory might then seek to block the implication that getting *O* would be good for this subject by ignoring desires based on faulty reasoning.

However, there are several worries about these kinds of idealization. One such worry is that it is hard or impossible to provide a rationale for idealization that is compatible with the assumptions of subjective theories (Murphy 1999; Enoch 2005). For example, the subjective theorist cannot say, simply, that the rationale for idealization is that the ideal standpoint is more apt to generate correct evaluative attitudes – at least, not if the correctness of these attitudes is supposed to be

independent of the attitudes themselves. For subjective theorists (of the narrow sort) deny that there are attitude-independent facts about which things have value.

David Sobel has replied to this first worry. He notes that an informed desire can be said to be "more genuinely for" its object – since it responds to what the object is really like, rather than to some misrepresentation of it (2009: 347). To use our earlier example, Sobel's point is that a desire for an object *O* which depends on the belief that it has property *P* is "more genuinely for" *O* if *O* has *P* than if it does not. My desire for fame, which is based on the belief that a life of fame would be satisfying, is more genuinely for fame if fame really is satisfying than if it is not. (An alternative response to this sort of example would be to claim that the relevant constituent is "objects with *P*," not "*O*": satisfaction, rather than fame.)

A second worry about idealizing theories is that they may be alienating after all (Griffin 1986: 11). The stronger the idealizing assumption, the further the idealized psychological states are likely to be from the subject's actual states. Since alienation seems to be a matter of fit with actual states, idealizing theories risk being alienating. "Sure," I might say, "a fully informed version of myself might want to spend his time reading poetry, but it just leaves *me* cold."

In light of these and other worries about idealization, there is renewed interest in non-idealizing forms of subjective theory. Mark Murphy (1999) has pointed out that some of the motivation for idealization depends on questionable assumptions about the individuation of desires. Chris Heathwood (2005) has discussed several ways in which non-idealizing forms of desire theory can handle apparently "defective" desires. For example, desires based on false beliefs might be excluded not via idealization but by excluding all instrumental desires (since, arguably, non-instrumental desires are not based on beliefs at all). Eden Lin (2018) has argued that problem cases can be solved without idealization once we distinguish between the attitudes that a subject actually has to some object, and the attitudes toward it she would have were she to have the object.

As should be fairly obvious, these issues about idealization apply no matter which psychological state(s) we identify as the subject's values. That is, it is possible to construct idealizing or non-idealizing forms of subjective theory according to which the subject's values are her evaluative beliefs, likes, cares, and so on – not just her desires.

Some Attractions of Subjective Theories

Subjective theories (characterized in the narrow way) have two main features: they are non-alienating (modulo the worries about idealization noted above), and they are psychologistic. These two features, unsurprisingly, give rise to the main attractions of subjective theories.

If we assume that the correct theory of well-being is non-alienating, that gives us one reason for being interested in subjective theories. For subjective theories are guaranteed to have this feature, insofar as they claim that what is good for someone depends on what she values, or would value in the right circumstances. Admittedly,

if "the right circumstances" become very distant from her actual circumstances, the sense in which a subjective theory may be non-alienating may seem to diminish in importance. Nevertheless, the connection between the subject's attitudes and what is said to be good for her is surely one of the attractions of subjective theories, for those who are attracted to them.

It is hard to make a conclusive argument for subjective theories on this basis, however. One reason for this, as Guy Fletcher has pointed out, is that even "objective" theories may specify goods that essentially involve positive psychological attitudes. For example, an objective theory may list *friendship* and *pleasure* as the constituents of well-being. It may claim that these things are constituents of well-being because they are objectively valuable, in an attitude-independent sense. That is to claim that these things are good for each subject whether or not she happens to value them. But such a theory would arguably be non-alienating, since it would be impossible to experience friendship or pleasure without experiencing some positive psychological attitudes; so these things could not leave one cold (Fletcher 2013: 215–17). Moreover, those hybrid theories which claim that the constituents of well-being are those things that are both objectively valuable and subjectively valued seem to have the non-alienating property in just the same way, and for the same reason, as do subjective theories.

The second attraction of subjective theories is their metaphysical modesty. In seeking to explain well-being in terms of psychological states, they appear to be modest in their metaphysical claims (Lewis 1989: 113). Yet, it is again not straightforward to make an argument for subjective views on this ground. The reason for this is that objective theories of well-being appear to be immodest only when combined with certain views in metaethics (*see* METAETHICS). For example, quasi-realists (*see* QUASI-REALISM) claim that propositions such as "achievement is objectively valuable" are best understood in a way that is just as metaphysically modest as the claims made by subjective theories (see also Hooker 1991a).

Another attraction of subjectivism has to do with its epistemic implications. It suggests that the way to learn about what is or would be good for someone is to learn what she values. To the extent that we can learn what someone values, subjective theories imply that we can gain some insight into this important kind of value. (Since it is not straightforward to learn what someone values, they also imply, plausibly, that knowledge of what is or would be good for her is not very easy to acquire.) Though objective theories may be just as metaphysically modest when combined with some metaethical views, they may not have such attractive epistemic implications.

Issues for Subjective Theories

We can end by noting some issues confronting subjective theories of well-being.

First, there is what is known as the "scope problem" (Sumner 1996: 135). The issue is that we seem to evaluate things other than the constituents of our own well-being. As James Griffin put it: "The trouble is that one's desires spread themselves so widely

over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one's well-being" (1986: 17). Thus, for example, one person can desire that another fares well, and it seems wrong to insist that the person who desires this is made better off when the desire is satisfied (Parfit 1987: 494). Moreover, this problem seems to generalize to other evaluative attitudes. Subjectivists must either accept the allegedly problematic implications of their views, or find some way to restrict the attitudes that are said to be relevant. One example of the second strategy is the suggestion that only desires for states of affairs in which the subject is an essential constituent are relevant (Overvold 1982; see also Hooker 1991b; Heathwood 2011).

A second set of issues concerns time. In the simplest case, a subject gains well-being in virtue of having the relevant psychological attitude toward some object *O* at the same time as possessing *O*. But it is also possible to have evaluative attitudes toward past or future events, of course. Should my desire, on Monday, to meet friends on Saturday be entirely discounted so far as my well-being goes? Similarly, should my backward-looking evaluative attitudes be discounted? According to *concurrentists*, satisfaction of evaluative attitudes contributes to well-being only if the attitudes are concurrent with their satisfaction (Heathwood 2006: 542–7). This generates the intuitive answer in some cases, but not perhaps in all. For example, there may be some evaluative attitudes – such as the desire for a deep sleep – that are impossible to satisfy concurrently.

A third set of issues concerns the application of subjective theories to subjects who are not cognitively standard adult humans. Some of the evaluative attitudes that play an explanatory role in subjective theories – such as desires, or cares, or evaluative beliefs – seem to require cognitive sophistication. Can subjective theories be extended to say plausible things about the well-being of nonhuman animals, or human children, or human adults with severe cognitive deficits (Rice 2016; Skelton 2016; Lin 2017; *see also* ANIMAL COGNITION)?

Finally, there are of course broader issues about whether subjective theories can match up with our intuitions in other ways. To some, the fact that subjective theories take the subject's values to be decisive in determining what is good for her appears to be their greatest strength. However, it also implies that subjects with eccentric values – such as the desire to count blades of grass (Rawls 1999: 379–80) – have eccentric interests: it is good for them to satisfy these eccentric desires. The issue here is partly a matter of implications about specific cases. Equally, though, it is a matter of the intuitive plausibility of subjective theories' claim that the nature of a kind of value is to be explained in terms of subjects valuing certain things. According to some critics, what makes something good is not that it is valued, but that it is appropriate to value it (Kraut 1994: 43–4).

See also: ANIMAL COGNITION; DESIRE; DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; HYBRID THEORIES OF WELL-BEING; IDEALIZATION IN ETHICS; METAETHICS; OBJECTIVE THEORIES OF WELL-BEING; PREFERENCE; QUASI-REALISM; WELL-BEING

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