

Normative theory and psychological research: Hedonism, eudaimonism and why it matters¹

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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the debate about eudaimonism started by Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, King, and Waterman in a previous issue of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. We point out that one thing that is missing from this debate is an understanding of the problems with subjective theories of well-being that motivate a turn to objective theories. A better understanding of the rationale for objective theories helps us to see what is needed from a theory of well-being. We then argue that a suitably modified subjective theory can provide what is needed and that this is the theory that ought to be favored by psychologists.

Keywords: well-being; happiness; hedonism; eudaimonia; subjective well-being; theory; values

Introduction

In a recent issue of *The Journal of Positive Psychology* Kashdan, Biswas-Diener and King argue that the current taxonomy of well-being research that highlights the distinction between hedonistic and eudaimonic theories is at best unhelpful and possibly also pernicious. Some of the important problems they discuss have to do with measurement in one way or another and are really the bailiwick of psychologists. But one of the problems they press is a philosophical problem, namely that the very notion of objective happiness or eudaimonia is incoherent or, insofar as it can be defined precisely, not something worth pursuing. According to Kashdan et al. (2008) “We’re not convinced that

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an objective notion of *happiness* is possible or, more importantly, meaningful or even useful” (p. 223). As philosophers, our attention was drawn by this forceful critique of a cherished philosophical concept and our focus in this paper will be on the philosophical objections to eudaimonic theories rather than on problems of measurement.

Kashdan et al.’s (2008) article and Waterman’s (2008) response generated a number of reactions in a later issue of *JPP*, in which Keyes and Annas (2009) and Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, and King (2009) affirm the importance of a dialog on these central conceptual issues of well-being research. We present this paper in the spirit of continuing this welcome discussion. In this later issue of *JPP*, critics question Kashdan et al.’s interpretation of Aristotle, emphasize the distinction between happiness and well-being, and defend the role eudaimonia plays in psychological research. While these authors make a number of good points, we believe there is still something important missing from the discussion. What has not been considered in any detail is the *rationale* for objective theories. Without an understanding of this rationale, we suggest, one cannot see the problems that there are for subjectivist theories as theories of the human good.

We argue that subjective theories of well-being have trouble making sense of the *value* of well-being, or, the sense in which the fact that some action contributes to well-being gives us *good reasons* for doing it. To put the point in the terms familiar to philosophers, subjective theories have difficulty in accounting for the *normativity* of well-being. (Or, in terms that may be more familiar to psychologists, subjective theories seem ill-suited as *prescriptive* theories).² This is the rationale for objective theories. It is also an answer to Biswas-Diener et al.’s query about how different interpretations of eudaimonia are to be evaluated (p. 209). We decide on the best theory of well-being, in part, by asking what makes the most sense as an answer to questions about the goal of life for us,

² When philosophers use the word “normative” they mean, roughly, “having to do with what ought to be rather than what is”; “normative” is opposed to “descriptive” and does not refer to what is statistically normal. We follow the philosophical usage throughout the paper.

the end worth pursuing.³ Despite what we've just said, it is not our view that objective theories are ultimately to be preferred. Indeed, we believe that objective theories have serious problems of their own. The preferred philosophical theory of well-being, we propose, is a subjective theory that employs idealization: a theory that begins with subjective psychological states and adds constraints that such states must meet in order to count as constitutive of a person's well-being. We will argue that such theories (which we will refer to as "idealized subjective theories") do best at solving the different problems that face objective and subjective theories.

Finally, we explain why a good theory of well-being that captures its normativity is something that psychologists should want to have. In their response to their critics, Biswas-Diener et al. (2009, p. 210) reaffirm their original argument that categorizing certain processes and functions as being part of eudaimonia unnecessarily complicates psychological research. They ask, "What is gained by reducing this complexity into a category that is distinct from useful elements that help flesh out the theoretical model such as emotions and cognitive appraisals about the self, other people, and the world?" Our answer to this question, in short, is that the public interest in positive psychology research is fueled by an interest in the value-laden notion of well-being, which a theoretical framework supplies. People are interested in the facts about emotions and cognitive achievements that psychologists discover in large part because they are interested in how these things add up to a good life. Therefore, psychologists whose research has significant implications for individual decision making and public policy cannot sidestep philosophical questions about the value of well-being.

Subjective and objective theories

Let us define subjective theories of well-being as theories according to which whether something counts as part of a person's well-being depends on her subjective

³ We do not mean to assume that a personally good life (the life of well-being) and the morally good life are identical. There is a sense of the goal or end of life that corresponds to well-being, however, which is what we mean to invoke here.

psychological states. (Because the word ‘happiness’ is ambiguous, we will use the word ‘well-being’ here for the normative concept, reserving ‘happiness’ for positive affective mental states such as those of interest in the SWB research.⁴) On this definition, the life satisfaction theory counts as a subjective theory of well-being insofar as it says that a person achieves well-being to the degree that she makes a positive assessment of how life is going for her overall. Hedonism is a subjective theory insofar as it says that well-being is constituted by pleasant states of consciousness and nothing can contribute to well-being unless it also contributes to pleasure. Let us define objective theories as theories that claim that there are at least some components of well-being whose status as components of well-being does not depend on people’s attitudes toward them. So, Aristotle’s theory is an objective theory because it says that virtuous activity is good for us because of our human nature not because we like it or are pleased by it (though we usually are). These definitions over-simplify matters somewhat, but they will do for our purposes.

One thing we can see from these definitions is that there are grounds for the worries expressed by psychologists. In particular, Kashdan et al. (2008, p. 227) acknowledge one worry about an objective notion of well-being: that it is elitist and that promoting objective well-being will amount to imposing our values on others against their wishes. If, by definition, objective theories hold that something can contribute to a person’s well-being independently of her attitude toward it, then it seems clear that doing something to promote another person’s well-being might entail doing something that the person doesn’t care for or want. And we agree that this is a troubling implication of a theory of well-being. We will return to this problem later in the paper. For now, we want to point out that subjective theories have their own problems.

⁴ Ryan and Huta (2009) and Keyes and Annas (2009) also make a distinction between happiness (as a feeling) and well-being (as the end or goal of human life) in their responses to Kashdan et al. We want to keep this distinction because a significant proportion of the debate within philosophy and psychology concerns whether or not happiness *is* well-being—whether or not having well-being just amounts to having these positive mental states—and such a debate can seem trivial without a careful distinction between these terms.

The philosophical motivation for objective theories of well-being

Philosophy has a long history of disagreement over whether well-being should be understood in subjective or objective terms. From this history, we can discern several abiding criticisms of subjective theories. These criticisms have a similar form: they begin with counter-examples that undermine our confidence in psychological states to reveal what is good for a person and they conclude that positive subjective states of consciousness do not capture what's important about well-being assessments.

Adaptive preferences

Kashdan et al. acknowledge one worry with subjective theories of well-being: if well-being is purely subjective, then only the person herself can say whether she is living well, but self-reports are not completely reliable. While this is a concern for philosophers, it is typically not the main one. More troubling is the possibility that, even if we *could* get a reliable report from someone, reliable self-reports of high levels of happiness or life-satisfaction can arise even in bad situations. It seems that people can be happy with their lives even when they really *shouldn't* be. This concern is often described as a concern about adaptive preferences.

The problem of adaptive preferences was originally levied by Amartya Sen against subjective theories of well-being. As Sen pointed out, a person's pleasures and preferences are shaped by her culture, opportunities, and position in her community. And as psychologists have made very hard to ignore, pleasures and preferences adapt to these circumstances whether they are good or bad, oppressive or liberating. Sen explains the problem this way:

A person who has had a life of misfortune, with very little opportunities, and rather little hope, may be more easily reconciled to deprivations than others reared in more fortunate and affluent circumstances. The metric of happiness may, therefore, distort the extent of deprivation, in a specific and biased way. The hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed or the over-exhausted coolie may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it

would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy (Sen, 1987, p. 45-6).

Assessments of life-satisfaction are similarly subject to the effects of adaptation, which causes Sumner (the main proponent of the life satisfaction theory of well-being in philosophy) to declare that Sen's criticism is "surely the main reason for questioning the adequacy of any subjective theory of welfare, whatever its constituent ingredients, and for favouring more objective accounts" (1986, p. 162).

For Sen and other philosophers who worry about adaptive preferences, the problem is caused by the fact that action is taken on the basis of well-being assessments. If we were just sorting people into the happy and the unhappy for knowledge's sake, no one would worry that some people's happiness is the result of injustice. But if assessments of well-being and happiness are used to decide what resources people need and how those resources should be distributed, we have reason to worry. After all, if people's attitudes toward their circumstances adapt to injustice, then a focus on such states may perpetuate oppression. Notice that here the crux of the problem with subjective theories has to do with what such theories give us reason to do.

Children

Another problem that has been raised for subjective theories of well-being is what to say about the well-being of children. In a way, the problem is similar to the problem posed by adaptive preferences because in the case of young children their preferences, satisfactions and pleasures have not yet developed; they will adapt to their circumstances and will learn to find pleasure and satisfaction in different things depending on how they are raised. Given this, a theory according to which the goal of life is a positive psychological response to the life one has seems misguided. A child can come to have positive responses to all sorts of things, but (the objection goes) surely there are some things it is better to derive pleasure from than others. Many parents would like their children to have the capacities to enjoy activities of value such as sports, music, and friendship even if they could be just as satisfied with lives of diminished capacities and

achievements. Many parents would like their children to be satisfied with living lives in which they develop their talents rather than lives in which they happily waste them.

Subjective accounts do not seem to accommodate these ideas.

Richard Kraut pressed this objection against subjective theories of happiness in the following way:

What are we wishing for when we say of a new-born baby, 'I hope he has a happy life'? The subjectivist might be tempted to reply: 'We are wishing the child success in attaining the things he will come to value, whatever these things are...' But I do not think this is the right account. For think of all the terrible things that would not be excluded by the wish for happiness, if this were all it amounted to. A newborn child might become retarded – yet still live happily; he might be enslaved, or blinded, or severely incapacitated in other ways – yet still live happily. Even though these are all awful misfortunes, they do not so restrict us that a happy life becomes impossible, given the subjective account of happiness. Yet when we wish a happy life to a new-born baby, we are wishing something better than such lives as these. (Kraut, 1979, p. 187).

What this passage from Kraut's paper makes clear is that the problem has to do with a normative assessment, with wishing something that is supposed to be something *good*.

To wish for someone's well-being (our preferred term for what Kraut means by "happiness" in the above passage) is to wish for something necessarily worthwhile, something that anyone who cares about them will hope they get.

The experience machine

The classic statement of the experience machine objection to hedonism comes from Robert Nozick (1974, p. 43):

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?... Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them... Would you plug in?
What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?

Nozick's answer is that *doing* and *knowing* (as opposed to just seeming to do and thinking that we know) can matter to us. Though Nozick used this thought experiment against hedonism, we can see how similar problems could be raised for other subjective theories. The same story could be told about a life that earns greater overall satisfaction, for example.

Again, we see that the problem for subjective theories arises when the subjective theory of well-being is taken to be normative, that is, when it is taken to provide good reasons for acting. This is so because the experience machine thought experiment makes some people question whether the fact that something is pleasant or would produce life-satisfaction is the only reason that one has for choosing to live one way or another, even from the point of view of one's own good.

The need for a normative theory

We have tried to show that in the philosophical literature reservations about subjective theories have one cause in common, namely, the assumption that a theory of well-being is supposed to be normative, reason-giving, or essentially related to the good. A natural response to this discussion, particularly for psychologists, might be to reject the need for a normative theory and to insist that an empirical account of well-being is sufficient. While it may be that a purely descriptive theory of well-being (one that has no pretension to being inherently reason-giving or related to the good) is sufficient for some purposes, we will argue that there is a need for a normative theory of well-being.

The argument goes like this: First, many of the questions we have with respect to well-being require normative, reason-giving answers. Consider policy questions and life-decision questions. In both cases when we ask about well-being we very often do so with the purpose of getting guidance about what to do. Second, the empirical facts – whether about positive affect, life-satisfaction, pleasure, other psychological states or their causal relations to each other or the world – do not by themselves tell us what to

do.⁵ If these premises are true, it follows that there is a need for something beyond the empirical facts that will ground the recommendations of empirical work, and normative theory meets this need.

We take it that the first premise is not terribly controversial, but that the second stands in need of some defense. Basically, this premise insists on a gap between is and ought. Since the existence of such a gap has been a matter of some philosophical controversy for centuries, we do not expect to settle the matter here. What we hope to do instead is to provide some reasons for psychologists to accept that there is a gap between empirically measurable psychological phenomena such as pleasure, positive affect or life-satisfaction and that at which we ought to aim.

As one kind of evidence, consider an analogy to the species concept debate in biology. Of course, the analogy isn't perfect, but such an example can still be useful for illuminating how the choice of concept is itself not a matter for empirical investigation.

In biology, there are a number of different species concepts. For instance, there is the evolutionary species concept, which defines species and subspecies in terms of shared lineage; the genetic species concept, which determines species according to genetic similarities; the ecological species concept, according to which species are groups that share a particular environmental niche; and the biological species concept, which delineates species in terms of interbreeding groups. (De Queiroz, 2007; Ereshefsky, 2007; Baker & Bradley, 2006) There is no one species concept that is universally accepted and applied, and the empirical similarities and differences among animals – phenotypical, genetic, behavioral, and so on – do not settle the matter. Are the similarities between the two organisms enough to make them count as the same species, or do their differences preclude this? The answer depends on which species concept we start with.

⁵ Our point here does not apply to Waterman's notion of "feelings of personal expressiveness" insofar as these feelings are defined in evaluative terms. For Waterman, feelings of personal expressiveness arise from the development of a person's *significant* potentials and strivings for *excellence* (Waterman 1993), which suggests that normativity is built into the account of these feelings from the outset. As we hope will become clear, our own account has some similarities to Waterman's interpreted this way. We thank Alan Waterman for helpful comments on this point.

Similarly, the facts about what can be measured, what correlates well with life-satisfaction, what brings about positive affect, and so on, cannot settle whether *well-being* is best thought of as pleasure, life-satisfaction, virtuous activity, or something else.

As another kind of evidence of the need for normative theory, consider some of the reactions to the positive psychology movement. Anecdotally, there seem to be a number of people who do not appear to care much about feeling happy. Consider the example of Ludwig Wittgenstein who by all accounts had a life lacking in positive affect and satisfaction, but whose last words were “Tell them I've had a wonderful life” (Monk, 1990, p. 579). At least among philosophers and artists this attitude does not seem uncommon. While many people do view happiness as one of the most important—if not *the* most important—aspects of a good life, this view is by no means unanimous. For instance, in *Against Happiness*, Eric G. Wilson argues that happiness often inhibits a critical examination of life, which is crucial for a meaningful, rich existence. He writes,

I for one am afraid that our American culture's overemphasis on happiness at the expense of sadness might be dangerous, a wanton forgetting of an essential part of a full life. I further am wary in the face of this possibility: to desire only happiness in a world undoubtedly tragic is to become inauthentic.... (Wilson, 2008, p. 6)

The novels of Walker Percy portray a similar embrace of authenticity over happiness, and the psychologist Steven C. Hayes argues that a focus on happiness shuts us off from experiencing a good life in a fuller sense. He says, “What people mean by happiness is feeling good. And there are many ways to feel good. And many of the ways we feel good actually limit the possibilities for living the way we want to live our lives.” (quoted in Traister, 2006, ¶19) Similarly, the sociologist Frank Furedi argues that “...it is worth recalling that a good life is not always a happy one... Discontent and ambition have driven humanity to confront and overcome the challenges they face.” (Furedi, 2008, ¶10) What these diverse views share is *not* a different view of happiness in the affective sense (an argument that happiness is something other than a positive mental state), but rather a different view of *well-being*, and of how happiness matters to well-being. In other

words, not everyone will view evidence that some option tends to increase happiness as a *reason* for pursuing and recommending that option.

A related type of evidence is to be found in one source of resistance to educational programs designed to promote students' happiness. While there has been a lot of positive response to these programs, there are also a number of detractors. Some have argued that subjective happiness isn't the right goal for educators. For example, Michael Henderson (2007, ¶15) in an opinion piece on the UK's Daily Telegraph website warns about these happiness-promoting educational initiatives that "There is something more important than happiness, and that is contentment. But too many of our school-leavers will never know contentment because they haven't acquired... the disciplines essential for every aspect of social engagement").⁶ Walker Percy, although writing before the advent of these initiatives, would likely have sided with those worried about the harms such programs could cause. In his essay "The Man on the Train," he makes the point forcefully:

One has only to let the mental-health savants set forth their own ideal of sane living, the composite reader who reads their books seriously and devotes every ounce of strength to the pursuit of the goals erected: emotional maturity, inclusiveness, productivity, creativity, belongingness—there will emerge, far more faithfully than I could portray him, the candidate for suicide. (Percy, 1975, p. 85)

Most people seem to agree that happiness has some value, but there is disagreement about *how* valuable it is relative to other valuable goals and, hence, what reason we have to pursue it. The gap between the empirical research on happiness and what we have reason to do can only be closed by an argument that tells us how important being happy is to living well; arguments that purport to show that happiness is more important than anything else are unlikely to be persuasive to everyone.

Both when it comes to living our own lives and when it comes to deciding on social policy it seems that there is at least room to question whether psychological findings

⁶ For a related critical discussion of happiness as a policy goal see Brittan (2001). According to Brittan, an economic commentator and columnist for the Financial Times, "...the pursuit of happiness is and should remain a personal matter".

about empirical notions of well-being or happiness have implications for action. If psychologists are going to contribute to practical questions about how we ought to live for ourselves and others, a normative theory that connects these empirical notions to reasons and values would fill a crucial gap.

Objective theories of well-being and the normative demand

In one way, objective theories of well-being provide a good answer to our normative questions. Such theories build values in at the outset, so they are reason-giving by design. (Whether they have good grounds for assuming objective values is a separate question, which we raise again at the end of this section). Take for example the simplest kind of objective theory, the so-called objective list theory, which defines well-being in terms of a life that achieves certain goods (Arneson, 1999, 2003; Brink, 1989; Gert, 1998).

For example, according to Arneson

A life that has lots of pleasure, especially when this comes by way of enjoyment of what is truly excellent, a life that includes sustained and deep relationships of friendship and love, a life that includes significant achievement in art or culture or systematic scientific understanding, a life that includes significant and sustained meaningful and interesting work--these features of a life inherently make it a better one for the one who lives it. One responds well to the challenge posed by one's life, so far as prudence (gaining a life that is good for oneself) goes, insofar as one brings it about that one gets more rather than less of these and whatever other objectively valuable goods there are (2003, p. 22).

Objective theories, then, are supposed to track what is objectively valuable. In this way, we can see how such theories would provide an answer to our normative questions: if there are indeed objective values, and if objective theories capture them, then we would have good reason to take the recommendations of these theories.

Objective list theories have not really been favored in philosophy in large part because they are not really theories in an interesting sense. They do not explain why the items on the list of goods make it on the list, nor do they unify or systematize the various things that contribute to well-being. The more widely accepted type of objective theory,

in philosophy, is Aristotelian. On the Aristotelian picture, the good life for a human being “consists in those lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul” (Kraut, 2007). Put another way, a flourishing life for a human being is one that develops and exercises important human capacities in an excellent way. According to Aristotle’s teleological worldview, human nature is itself normative. This means that the fact that engaging in some activity would develop your human nature is a good reason for doing it. In this way, an Aristotelian objective theory also has a response to our request for reasons.

Even if we agree that objective theories have this advantage, we may find other problems with them. Many psychologists seem disinclined to consider objective theories seriously. The reason for rejecting objective theories that psychologists frequently reference is that these theories are elitist:

The search for something ‘better’ than SWB or a better form of happiness connotes a potential elitism, that the Good Life is an experience reserved for individuals who have attained some transcendence from everyday life (Kashdan et al., 2008, p. 227).⁷

While it is true that objective theories posit something better than subjective well-being, it is not clear how this amounts to an objectionable form of elitism.⁸ Objective theories do hold that a good human life has certain contours and contents, but they do not hold that this life is only available to an elite few.⁹ Moreover, the idea that there is a kind of life that is good for a human being that constitutes something to aspire to, something we have good reason to pursue independently of our current level of satisfaction or positive affect, is not an entirely alien idea. It is, in fact, the very idea that is inherent in the complaints that were raised about subjective theories. The same concerns (about adaptive preferences, children and good reasons) that led us to doubt the validity of

⁷ A similar criticism is implied in Diener and Suh (2000, p. 4).

⁸ Keyes and Annas (2009, p. 197) make this point in a footnote, though they dismiss the charge of elitism without argument.

⁹ At least not necessarily. Aristotle himself was notoriously elitist, but current Aristotelians have rightly abandoned this aspect of his theory (e.g., Nussbaum, 2000).

subjective theories are the ones that make attractive the idea that a good human life is more than a life that seems good from the inside.

We want to insist on this point: the claim that a good human life is not the same as a subjectively good human life is not necessarily elitist; rather, it is responsive to the demand for good guidance that is implicit in many of our questions about well-being.¹⁰ The idea that there may be a gap between SWB and well-being, flourishing, or a good life proper, we maintain, is assumed in our ethical questions about how to live. Nevertheless, this does not mean we should accept an objective theory. These theories have other problems. In particular, objective list theories impose values from the outside and therefore lose the important connection between the flourishing life and the subject of the life. Furthermore, objective theories are saddled with the difficult task of defending claims about objective values or the inherent normativity of human nature.

Must we be objectivists?

What we need is a theory that can sustain a gap between a good life and a life that seems good to a person from the inside (a gap large enough to make room for our normative questions about how we should live) without need of a defense of objective values. We will argue that idealized subjective theories fit the bill. In order to make this argument, we will make use of an example of such a theory, the Value-Based Life Satisfaction theory of well-being (VBLS). Notice, though, that one need not accept this particular theory in order to accept our other theses. One could agree with us that a normative theory is needed without agreeing that idealized subjective theories will suffice and one could agree that idealized subjective theories are the right way to go without agreeing that VBLS is the right variety. We use VBLS as our example, in part, because it was devised with compatibility with psychological research in mind (Tiberius & Plakias, 2010), but this

¹⁰ Cf. Ryan and Huta (2009, p. 203): “considering the functions and processes through which subjective states accrue” is not “elitist; it is simply good clinical practice”.

does not mean that it is the only theory that would meet the requirements we have set out.¹¹

Subjective theories of well-being begin with the insight that what is *good for* a person must be connected to the well-being subject in a way that other kinds of goods (e.g. moral goods) need not be (Sumner, 1996). The most basic sort of subjective theory would begin with preference or desire satisfaction as capturing what is good for a person. Taking desire satisfaction theory as our initial example, it is not difficult to see why philosophers have been keen to add idealizing constraints to subjective theories. Imagine a person with a gluten allergy and more or less constant intestinal pain who desires to eat bagels for breakfast. According to the very simple theory that what is good for us is getting what we want, having bagels for breakfast is what is good for our bagel lover. But this result is highly implausible, at least on the assumption that if she knew the bagels were the cause of her intestinal pain, she would no longer want them.¹² Counterexamples such as these gave rise to the “Informed Desire Theory” of the good for a person, according to which what is good for a person is getting what she would want if she were fully and vividly informed of all the relevant facts. In this way, the good for a person is identified with a subjective psychological state (desire satisfaction) that meets certain criteria or standards. Idealized subjective theories such as this one create a gap between subjective experience and the good by imposing standards on which subjective states count. Such theories do need to make assumptions about the right standards, but these assumptions do not necessarily refer to substantive objective values.¹³

Informed desire theories have notorious problems (Rosati, 1995; Velleman, 1988; Tiberius, 1997). Further, they have no analogue in the psychological literature, perhaps for good reason. The subjective theory we will consider takes life satisfaction to be the

¹¹ Indeed one of the authors of this paper has defended a different idealized subjective theory, the narrative capacity theory of well-being. See Hall (2008).

¹² This is a modified version of an example from Railton (1986).

¹³ One could argue that “informedness” is a value that is presupposed by these theories, though it at least seems to be a value in a different domain from typical well-being values.

relevant subjective psychological state and adds idealizing conditions that make reference to a person's *values*.

The value-based life satisfaction theory¹⁴

The theory we will describe says that what counts as well-being is satisfaction with how one's life is going overall *with respect to one's values*. In other words, life satisfaction constitutes well-being when it is a response to how life is going according to certain standards, and these standards are provided by a person's values.¹⁵ The value-based life satisfaction theory is inspired by L. W. Sumner's (1996) theory, which identifies well-being with informed and autonomous life satisfaction. The main modification we have made to Sumner's theory is the emphasis on values, which we take to be necessary in order to explain why well-being doesn't vary with irrelevant changes in context (even though ordinary judgments of life satisfaction may do so).¹⁶ Before elaborating the view, it will help to say more about the notion of a value.

We mean to be very inclusive about what counts as a value: values can include activities, relationships, goals, aims, ideals, principles, and so on. This is not the place to defend a fully developed conception of a value, but there are three features that we think are important if values are to play a role in an account of life satisfaction.¹⁷ First, values must be normative from the point of view of the person who has them: that is, a person

¹⁴ The following is a summary of the view explored in greater detail in Tiberius and Plakias, 2010.

¹⁵ The view is similar to a subjective theory of happiness defended provisionally by Richard Kraut (1979), according to which the standards for happiness must be the agent's own standards. Kraut moved away from subjectivism in later work (1994). VBLS also has echoes in the work of psychologists. For example see Diener and Suh (2000, pp. 4-5).

¹⁶ The assumption here is that well-being is, as a matter of the concept, relatively stable. We think this is a fair assumption: well-being is supposed to be attributed on the basis of how well someone's life is going *overall* and should not change significantly with small changes such as changes in the weather. See Tiberius and Plakias, 2010, for discussion of the psychological literature on the context sensitivity of life satisfaction judgments and its relevant to the philosophical arguments.

¹⁷ See Tiberius (2000, 2008) for a more fully developed picture.

takes her values to provide good reasons for doing things. This must be the case if the resulting theory is going to help answer our normative questions. Second, values include an affective component: part of what it is to care about something in the way distinctive of valuing is to have some positive emotional response toward it. This must be the case if values are to provide the ground for the positive attitude of life satisfaction. Third, values are relatively stable, as they must be in order to support the plausible assumption that well-being itself is relatively stable.

A value can be more or less reason-giving from a person's own point of view, more or less suited to produce desirable emotions for a person, and more or less stable. Given this characterization, we can say that values are subject to *standards of appropriateness*. Our rough characterization of values suggests two such standards, which we might call the standard of affective fitness and the standard of information. According to the former, the most appropriate values for a person to have are ones that fit her affective nature in such a way that acting in accordance with these values produces (on balance) rewarding emotional responses. According to the latter, the most appropriate values for a person to have are ones that would not be undermined by new experiences and knowledge about the world. Information hasn't been mentioned yet, but its importance is clear: Values that are sustained by false beliefs are unlikely to be stable because new information will put pressure on them to change. Moreover, values based on false beliefs about what one's emotional needs are, or what one will find satisfying, are unlikely to produce a positive emotional response over the long term. We will call values that meet these standards of appropriateness *appropriate values*.

It is important to note that we mean "appropriate values" to be a subjective notion in an important sense: which values are appropriate will differ from person to person so that "appropriate values" in our sense may not be *morally* appropriate values.¹⁸ If our theory is to retain the close relationship between well-being and subjective

¹⁸ We do not think this is an objection to our theory; rather, it is a natural result of distinguishing between the prudential and moral good.

experience, it must be the case that the standards of affective appropriateness and information are standards that the person herself would count as making her values more justified. Further, what counts as meeting the standards must also be a subjective matter. Whether it was appropriate for Wittgenstein to value philosophy is up to him, not his parents, and he may have a different view from others about which emotions are the ones it is important to fit. Whether or not people actually think their values ought to be informed and compatible with their emotional constitution, or whether there are, perhaps, other standards that people have, are empirical questions that we cannot answer here. We think it reasonable to assume, however, that people want to be committed to things that fit their emotional natures, because negative affect has detrimental effects that are not confined to the subjective character of our experience. We also think it reasonable to assume that people want not to be misinformed, because false information has a way of frustrating long term goals.

The fact that the standards of appropriateness for values are subjective standards does not mean that the subject is always right. Although people themselves are the ultimate arbiters of what to value and what standards to follow, they can be mistaken about the facts. People can be wrong about how well they are meeting a standard that they themselves uphold and they can even be unaware that they have a standard until someone else points it out to them. For example, a person who values luxury goods may be unaware that this value is based on misinformation (perhaps she believes that when she acquires the right piece of jewelry she will attain inner peace) and her friend (or therapist) may be in a better position to notice this.

On our view, then, what a person in fact claims to value has *prima facie* authority that can be defeated when her holding these values does not adhere to the standards of affective appropriateness and information. For example, consider a young medical student who claims to value being a physician. The reason-giving authority of her commitment as a goal for her life would be undermined if it were the case that the actual practice of medicine makes her miserable (in which case the goal is not affectively

appropriate) and her underlying motivation to be a doctor is a desire for her parents' approval (in which case the value is sustained by false beliefs about her real motivations). In this case the standards that would make her values appropriate are not met.

This line of thought leads us to the *Values-Based Life Satisfaction Theory* of well-being. According to VBLS, life satisfaction is "a positive cognitive/affective response on the part of a subject to (some or all of) the conditions or circumstances of her life" (Sumner, 1996, p. 156). We can say that life satisfaction counts as well-being when it is not defeated by considerations that undermine its normative authority; this is the standard that life satisfaction must meet to count as well-being. Defeaters can be of two types: First, life satisfaction does not count as well-being if it is not based on one's values at all, that is, if the connection between satisfaction and values is defective. This would happen if, for example, the feeling of life satisfaction is primarily the result of an irrelevant change in circumstances, such as a change in the weather, or if it is not responsive to what is actually going on with respect to one's values. Second, life satisfaction does not count as well-being if the values that it is based on do not meet the standards for appropriate values, that is, if they are ill-informed or ill-suited to the person's affective nature (or if they don't meet whatever other standards a person has for values). When life satisfaction is based on appropriate values, it is value-based life satisfaction and it constitutes well-being. The judgments of overall life satisfaction that a person makes when answering questions on a life satisfaction scale are, on this view, *evidence* for value-based life satisfaction.

In short, VBLS says that well-being consists in life satisfaction that is based on subjectively appropriate values. To put the view more intuitively, your life goes well for you if you have a good sense of what matters in life and you feel good about your life because you are achieving it.

This idealized subjective theory does preserve a gap between subjective experience and a good life because whether or not one meets these conditions is a different matter from how one feels about it. In other words, the fact that life

satisfaction must meet certain conditions to count as well-being makes room for the possibility that how a person feels about her life does not completely answer the question about how it is. For example, if our medical student really believes that what she values in a career ought to be responsive to her interests and abilities, then her valuing a medical career is inappropriate even before she is unaware that it is.¹⁹

According to VBLS, this means that as long as she continues studying medicine, she is not doing as well as she would be if she began to pursue something that was better suited to her. Similarly, a person who is successfully pursuing appropriate values but who lets trivial annoyances suppress his satisfaction may be doing better than he thinks he is, according to VBLS.

Any theory of value that employs idealizing standards has to confront the question: how ideal is ideal enough? How appropriate do a person's values have to be for her life satisfaction to count as well-being? How much does her satisfaction with her life have to be based on her values for it to count? Our answer is that there is no principled answer, but that the degree of idealization required must be sensitive to the context. For example, personality is one variable relevant to how idealized a person's values need to be. Someone who, like a character in a Walker Percy or Richard Ford novel, is highly introspective and often wonders about whether she's made the right choices in life would need 'sturdier' values to survive the scrutiny she will place on them, while the standards might be lower for someone who is more content with what she sees as good enough and does not tend to second-guess her decisions. The fact that stakes can be high is another factor that argues for making sure that one's values (and hence one's assessment of how one's life is going) are informed. If our aspiring physician were contemplating taking on \$50,000 worth of debt, it would be more important for her to reflect on the value she places on a medical career.

How to choose a theory

¹⁹ Granted, we can't get beyond our own perspective, but the gap still matters. For one thing, it opens the door to getting advice from others about what would make one's life better (by one's own lights) even if one cannot see this from one's own point of view at the time.

The Value-Based Life Satisfaction theory is a formal theory that makes room for many different views about the components of well-being. Still, it is a *theory* and one might wonder why we should accept it rather than some other theory, say, a similarly formal theory according to which what's good for us is satisfying our needs, whatever they turn out to be. On this topic, all of the parties to the debate seem to be on the same page: they are all pessimistic about there being any rational basis for choosing one definition or theory over another. As Keyes and Annas put it (2009, p. 198) "There is no independent standard for judging whether definitions, like works of art, are good or bad, so it is a matter of taste". We think this overstates the case. There are some criteria for what counts as a good theory of well-being.

First, a good theory of well-being needs to find some way to account for the *subject relativity* of well-being; that is, it needs to show how the things it designates good are actually good *for* any given person. This is the kind of value well-being has: *value for a person* (Sumner, 1996).²⁰ (Another way of putting this, to pick up on a theme from Delle Fave and Bassi 2009, would be that a good theory should be responsive to individual and cultural diversity). The value-based life satisfaction theory accomplishes this by making people's own values central to what constitutes a good life for them.

Second, a good theory of well-being is empirically sound: that is, it does not make false assumptions about what human beings are like and it makes well-being something that can be measured, investigated and pursued. We do not think VBLS makes false empirical assumptions, though we stand ready to be corrected if it turns out that people are incapable of improving their values, or of living life in accordance with the values they have. Further, VBLS lends itself to application in the context of empirical psychology because many of the well-being components that psychologists already measure (e.g., self-reported life-satisfaction) are evidence for VBLS. We say more about this in our final section.

²⁰ We do not think this criterion begs the question against eudaimonist theories, because the best such theories do take account of subjective experience.

Third, a good theory of well-being should track something that is recognizable as the right thing to track. To put the point in philosophical parlance, it should not be subject to obvious counter-examples. Dan Haybron (2007) has argued that life satisfaction theories of well-being fall short here because how satisfied we are with our lives depends on our perspective (our point of reference or comparison and what we are focused on at the moment) whereas well-being is not arbitrary in this way. Not only is life satisfaction arbitrary (the critique goes), but it also doesn't closely track happiness (in the mental state sense); people can be happy when they are not satisfied with their lives, and unhappy when they are satisfied. If happiness and life satisfaction are poorly correlated, then well-being cannot be identified with both, and if life satisfaction judgments are arbitrary, it makes more sense to identify well-being with happiness.²¹ We think that anchoring life satisfaction to a person's values helps solve this problem with life satisfaction theories.

There are different perspectives we can take on our lives, but this does not mean that there is no non-arbitrary way to choose among them. According to VBLS, when life satisfaction judgments are informed and grounded in appropriate values, then these judgments are made from a perspective that is authoritative for a person's well-being. If happiness is the only thing a person values, then, insofar as this value is appropriate for the person and she is not uninformed or mistaken about her life, her value-based life satisfaction will track her happiness; this is so because from her own point of view, her life won't be going well according to her "happiness standard" if she is unhappy. On the other hand, for a person who doesn't value happiness, well-being and happiness will diverge, but this is no longer terribly odd. (It is the generalization of the claim that a tortured artist or a Wittgenstein can be achieving well-being). Most of us, of course, fall somewhere between these two extremes—we value happiness, but not exclusively. If happiness is just one of the things we value, then it would also be unsurprising and not terribly counterintuitive that happiness and well-being might diverge. If we are happy but

²¹ Fred Feldman (2008) raises a similar objection.

other things we greatly value are missing from our lives, we won't be completely satisfied. Furthermore, if we do have something of great value in our lives—such as a challenging and rewarding career—then this could help to compensate for a lack of happiness so that we could, on balance, still be satisfied with our lives (though perhaps not quite as satisfied as we would be if we were both happy *and* had the meaningful job).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a good theory of well-being should be useful to the enterprise of figuring out how to live better or how to help others do so. When we ask questions about well-being, we are looking for good reasons to make one choice rather than another, or for a sense of why doing this rather than that would be worthwhile. Does an idealized life satisfaction theory of well-being meet this need? We think that it does because in order to apply the theory one must think about how conclusions about what we should do could be improved upon. The theory therefore builds in room for aspiration to better reasons and more worthwhile goals, and in doing so it supplies evidence that is relevant to questions about what we ought to do. To see how this works in more detail, we will return to the motivations for objective theories that we discussed above.

Recall that the worry about adaptive preferences was that a purely subjective theory may recommend courses of action that would serve to perpetuate oppression. Consider a person whose satisfaction with life has adapted to her impoverished circumstances and lack of real options. She is satisfied with how her life is going, in part, because she cannot imagine how things could change. The Value-Based Life Satisfaction theory gives us some grounds for discounting her self-reported life satisfaction if it is the case that her feeling about her life is based on misinformation about how well her life is actually going with respect to the values she holds dear. For example, imagine that one of the values that is most central to such a person is the welfare of her children and that she makes a positive assessment of her life on the basis of this value because she does not even consider certain options for her children that would be possible if she lived in a more just society. VBLS allows us to say that while this person is satisfied with her life

(and that is a good thing), she could nevertheless be better off.²² Her life satisfaction is responsive to her values in a minimal sense, but not fully, since she would not be satisfied if she had a more informed assessment of what it could really mean to achieve them.

On the other hand, a person's life satisfaction might be based on her values in the right way, and yet her life still might not be going well if her values are themselves inappropriate. We can make an assessment that a person's values are bad or unhealthy without needing to resort to an objective account of value. As we said, a person's values would be bad if they are not appropriate for the type of person she is or if they are based on misinformation. This can often be found in cases of adaptation of the type Sen worries about (both Sen and Martha Nussbaum, 2000, have written about women's adaptation to oppression within certain parts of India), but we don't need to look to India to find examples of this. For instance, in the recently published memoir *Lost in the Meritocracy*, Walter Kirn (2009) writes of how, as a student in high school and college, he relentlessly pursued a high GPA, academic honors, and admission to Princeton. What he valued at the time was not learning itself, but rather the sort of recognition and praise bestowed on a particular kind of accomplishment. Kirn had adapted his values to the academic culture that surrounded him, but these values were (by his own lights) bad ones for him.

According to VBLS, then, actual life satisfaction is evidence of well-being, but not conclusive evidence. To fully answer our questions about what we ought to do to help others, for example, we need to engage in thinking about how satisfied people *would* be if their assessment really reflected how their lives are going in the respects that matter to them.

Notice that VBLS also helps address some of the concerns raised in the responses to Kashdan et al. For instance, Keyes and Annas argue that researchers should focus on a

²² Of course, even if we think someone would be better off with more education, a more equal marriage, and life in a more just society, this does not mean we ought to force these things on him or her. Whether or not paternalistic actions are ever justified is a different question from the question about the nature of well-being.

person's *functioning* in life, rather than just her feelings about her life. VBLS can accommodate this recommendation. Rather than being a competing account of well-being, VBLS is a higher order theory that helps explain *why* functioning matters to well-being: it matters because people *value* functioning.

The Value-Based Life Satisfaction theory helps with experience machine examples in a similar way. Ryan and Huta (2009, p. 203) point out that eudaimonism solves Nozick's experience machine problem in a way that hedonism cannot. An idealized subjective theory also provides a solution to this problem: most people value *actually* accomplishing goals and experiencing things such as love and happiness, and not just feeling as if they had experienced these things. For those who value having real experiences (as many of the people who read Nozick's example do), life satisfaction would not be a response to how they are succeeding at meeting their standards if it is based on false beliefs about how they are actually doing. Of course, the thought experiment stipulates that the person in the experience machine doesn't know that he is, so there will not be a difference in well-being that can be perceived from the inside. Nevertheless, one of the "superduper neuropsychologists" (as Nozick called them back in the 1970s) who asks questions about whether what he is doing is good for the person in the machine can make such distinctions. According to VBLS, the subject's pleasure does not guarantee that being hooked up to the machine is good for him; rather, the neuroscientist must ask what the person appropriately values and whether his values are being upheld in the life attached to the machine. If the subject values only pleasure, then he is doing just fine even according to VBLS.²³ But if the person values "being in touch with reality", for example, then the neuropsychologist applying VBLS should conclude that this treatment is not good for him and that there is reason to pull the plug.

What to say about the well-being of children is a difficult topic for any subjective theory, but we think that an idealized subjective theory such as VBLS leads us in the right

²³ Thus, we agree with Sumner (1996) that real experiences are privileged only for those who value them.

direction. If we consider that a central goal of human life, according to VBLS, is a life lived in accordance with values that suit your emotions, skills, and interests, then we can see that a goal for parents in raising children would be to help them cultivate such values and to live accordingly. Because values can be more or less appropriate, values present an ideal at which to aim. The fact that appropriate values are an ideal to aspire to means that when we wish someone a life that lives up to their values, we are wishing for something necessarily worthwhile. So, according to VBLS, when we wish children well we are not simply wishing that they are satisfied with whatever they get; rather, we are wishing that they have appropriate goals and feel satisfaction in achieving them.

We argued above that what the major philosophical criticisms of subjective theories of well-being have in common is that they put forward examples that undermine our confidence that subjective psychological states reveal what is good for a person. We also argued that these criticisms get their force in the context of normative questions, that is, questions that require answers that provide good reasons or guidance based on what is worthwhile. We can now see how an idealized subjective theory such as VBLS answers these criticisms. VBLS shares with objective theories the assumption that actual subjective psychological states may not reveal what is good for a person. Life satisfaction isn't good for a person and does not constitute well-being when it is not responsive to a person's values, or when the values that it is responsive to are inappropriate for the person. VBLS does not, however, hold that what is good for people is independent of their psychological states. What is good for people depends on what kinds of satisfactions they are able to experience and what kinds of standards they themselves hold for their own values and goals. This theory does not impose values from the outside, though it does make room for a gap between judgments about how people do experience their lives and how their lives would go best.

Does theory matter to psychologists?

Even if everyone were to agree that well-being is a value-laden concept, some might still wonder what need there is for a normative *theory*, or whether it matters which theory one subscribes to. After all, psychologists do very well at measuring psychological phenomena without the help of philosophical theories and distinctions, and many of the things they measure are obviously important to people. On the other hand, as evidenced by recent activity in *JPP*, many psychologists seem to be interested in the theoretical rationale behind their research programs. Moreover, as positive psychology evolves and becomes even more influential, we think the concomitant development of theory is valuable for two reasons.

First, the application of different normative theories of well-being can lead to different conclusions about what to do. In biology (recalling the analogy discussed above) it matters which species concept is used to categorize populations. Which concept is used determines whether a particular group belongs to a separate species or not and this can have considerable impact on conservation efforts.²⁴ Similarly, the choice of which conception of well-being to operationalize is not purely academic; different choices may lead to different answers to our practical questions. To see this, consider Jim, a biomedical researcher working on developing an AIDS vaccine. Jim has irritating coworkers, works long hours, and his work is beset by numerous setbacks and disappointments, but he is a talented scientist and values the contribution he is making to a very worthy cause. He takes pleasure in his work, but if he were to participate in an experience sampling experiment, his experiences of positive affect would be shown to be infrequent. Compare Jim and his meaningful but stressful life with Will, who recently inherited some money and chucked his life as a physician for a much happier life painting mediocre landscapes and writing worse poetry in a cabin on a lake surrounded by his

²⁴ For example, in the current controversy over the (critically endangered) Red Wolf and the (“of least concern”) Gray Wolf, the biological species concept has been used to argue against any conservation efforts for wolves. After all, red wolves can interbreed with gray wolves, coyotes, and dogs, so, if they are by that fact the same species, red wolves are clearly in no way endangered (IUCN, 2009a; IUCN, 2009b; R.K. Wayne & Gittleman, 1995; B. Wayne, 1995; Kyle, Johnson, Patterson, Wilson, & White, 2008).

family. Which of these lives is better – not morally (that may be obvious), but better for the person living it? The answer depends on how you conceptualize well-being: according to a hedonistic theory of well-being, Will seems to be doing better than Jim and Will's life is more choiceworthy (again, leaving moral considerations aside). But according to a functioning theory of well-being, or the Value-Based Life Satisfaction account, Jim is succeeding in life and his life really has something to recommend it.

Second, which background theory of well-being one accepts might make a difference to the kinds of research questions it makes sense to pursue. It would be presumptuous of us to claim to know just how a theory such as VBLS might shape psychological research, but we would like to offer a few speculative thoughts.

1. A rationale for pluralism in existing measures

According to VBLS, what contributes to one person's well-being may be quite different from what contributes to another's if the two people have very different values.

Therefore, if people do in fact value different kinds of experience, then VBLS provides a coherent rationale for measuring all of these kinds, and not just hedonic experience. One direction for future research, then, would be to find out what sorts of experience people do in fact value. Which of these experiences are more universally valued? Are there any trends in which experiences people value, and can we use these trends to help make predictions about what someone *would* value? VBLS also provides a coherent rationale for objective measures of well-being: insofar as we know that most people appropriately value physical health, intimacy, and success of offspring, we have a reason to measure how well people are doing at achieving these values that derives from our theory.

2. Investigating "improved values".

Since VBLS makes room for the possibility of improved values, it also makes sense to research how values can be improved—how they can become more informed, appropriate, or stable, for instance. One possibility is that certain values are mutually sustaining. It would be useful to know if this is so and to know what kinds of value clusters tend to be more stable throughout a person's lifetime. For example, as Ryan and

Huta (2009, p. 203) point out, materialistic values do not correlate well with many other values that are important to people. Kashdan et al. suggest studying well-being as a dynamic process, and we believe that it would be helpful to learn more about which alleged components of well-being are correlated or causally related over a lifetime. Furthermore, since interest in well-being is often aspirational—people want to know not just how they're doing but also how they could be doing better—there is a rationale for more research on idealized values, satisfactions, or preferences. For instance, what affects people's satisfaction when they're being reflective? What do people care about when they are better informed? What values allow for satisfying pursuit over a lifetime? Answers to such questions could help guide policy and education on how to increase people's well-being.

3. Therapies and interventions

Finally, research guided by VBLS could also provide us with insight and new direction with respect to well-being therapies and interventions. If we learn more about what people value in particular circumstances, and which values tend to be more stable, mutually supporting, and appropriate for particular people, we could also work to identify psychological, institutional or social barriers that tend to discourage the development of improved values. We could use such findings to make better informed policy decisions about which social changes to institute in order to increase people's chances of living well. VBLS would also indicate investigating barriers to experiencing satisfaction that is based on values. Here what we need to know is how and to what degree people can learn to anchor their good feelings in what really matters to them, rather than letting our satisfactions fluctuate with the weather and with other factors we deem trivial.

Conclusion

We agree with Kashdan et al. (2008, p. 228) that psychologists should be careful to make their philosophical assumptions about well-being clear; we would add that no one researching well-being is without these assumptions. There is no philosophically neutral

concept of 'well-being' that a psychologist who wishes to sidestep this debate can employ. The only way researchers could avoid this debate is by stipulating that they are not researching well-being *per se*, but instead that they are studying 'Diener-well-being' or 'Ryff-well-being' and so on. This is an option, but it would reduce the interest of the research to the public at large. We submit that the reason there is such overwhelming interest in well-being research is that this concept is taken to be normative, that is, to be relevant to our value-laden questions about what to do and how to help others. A normative theory is required, then, and once this is acknowledged our attention should be drawn to the long-standing problems with subjective theories of well-being. We think these problems can be solved by moving to an *idealized* subjective theory, which leaves room for many different views about the particular components of well-being and which provides an overarching rationale for diverse programs of research in psychology.

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