

Well-Being and Moral Constraints: A Modified Subjectivist Account

****Penultimate Draft****

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that a modified version of well-being subjectivism can avoid the standard, yet unintuitive, conclusion that morally horrible acts may contribute to an agent's well-being. To make my case, I argue that "Modified Subjectivists" need not accept such conclusions about well-being so long as they accept the following three theoretical addenda: 1) there are a plurality of values pertaining to well-being, 2) there *are* some objective goods, even if they do not directly contribute to *well-being*, and 3) some of these values and goods (from 1 and 2) are bound-up with one another.

Keywords: Well-Being; Health; Morality; Value.

1. Intro:

Subjective theories of well-being—which claim, roughly, that well-being can only be increased by increasing goods or experiences toward which an agent has some pro-attitude—generally allow that moral behavior is only indirectly related to well-being.¹ Indeed, on such views one's well-being may even increase through grotesquely *immoral* activity. But such views also face extremely counterintuitive cases: cases where activities like serial murder, or producing child pornography, can actually *contribute* to the perpetrator's well-being. In this paper, I will argue that the subjectivist need not accept that well-being may be generated through very immoral activity. They need not accept these cases so long as 1) they are pluralistic about values pertaining to well-being, 2) they allow that there are some goods that are objectively good for us, even if these goods do not

¹ See Feldman (2004), Heathwood 2006).

directly constitute well-being, and 3) they allow that some of these values and goods can be bound-up with one another.

In order to explore this possible middle road of subjectivist well-being with moral constraints, I will begin with the framework put forward by Daniel Hausman in his book *Valuing Health: Well-Being, Freedom, and Suffering* (2015).² I will refer to his model, and others relevantly similar to it, as “Modified Subjectivism.”³ Hausman’s book has two qualities that make it suitable for this inquiry: first, it provides a complete, and well-thought out, model of Modified Subjectivism; second, even in its current formulation, it still leaves no room for moral constraints on well-being. It will therefore provide a suitable test subject for my proposed addenda, which will nudge it toward the more fully middle course I wish to illustrate (and for which I will advocate). As a Modified Subjectivist, Hausman argues that the activities an agent prioritizes and orients her life around may become valuable for her by generating a self-conception, goals, and a set of personal values. This sense of identity and set of values can then be used to rank health states for her, based on how much a particular state helps or hinders her activities. But Hausman’s model allows for cases of “flourishing” that are highly unintuitive, involving agents whose passion and devotion are directed toward *immoral activities*. Hausman’s model allows for such examples because of its claim that one’s passions and devotions may be founded on entirely “arbitrary valuation”, and therefore needn’t themselves be morally good or even permissible in order to generate well-being. It is the devotion itself, and the success of this devotion, which results in the agent “flourishing”.

² All references to Hausman in this paper will refer to this book.

³ Hausman never names his framework, but this moniker seems to me to accurately capture the spirit of the view.

2. Modified Subjectivism:

Heathwood (2014) provides a helpful description of the difference between well-being subjectivism and well-being objectivism:

Subjectivists maintain that something can benefit a person only if he wants it, likes it, or cares about it, or it otherwise connects up in some important way with some positive attitude of his. Objectivists deny this, holding that at least some of the things that make our lives better do so independently of our particular interests, likes, and cares. (202)⁴

But this description of the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism does not fill in the entire picture of well-being subjectivism. Does subjectivism claim that the connection with a “positive attitude” is merely necessary for something being good for someone, or is the connection both necessary and sufficient? And what is the nature of this connection? Furthermore, many subjectivists hold that things independent of our “particular interests, likes, and cares” bear on our well-being, such as those things our *ideal selves* or our *fully-informed selves* would like and care about (Sobel 1994). Lin (2019:2) provides a more precise description of well-being subjectivism in the following passage:

Subjectivists about welfare claim that something is basically good (bad) for you if and only if and because it satisfies (frustrates) a favorable attitude that you have under the right conditions. Furthermore, they claim that the extent of something’s basic goodness (badness) for you is determined by, and proportional to, the strength of the attitude that it satisfies (frustrates).

The word “basically” here denotes a distinction Lin makes between “basic” goods and other sorts of goods. Basic goods/bads are those things that are “good or bad for you, but not solely in virtue of being appropriately related to other things that are good or bad for you” (2). For example, food when I am hungry is a basic good for me, but the particular conditions that allow me to get food—

⁴ Finnis (2011) is a standard example of an objectivist view of well-being.

say, the supermarket being open—is not a basic good, but rather a kind of instrumental good. On Lin’s view, the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism about well-being depends on their characterization of what the basic goods are. According to Lin, on the subjectivist framework, the satisfaction of a favorable attitude (or a favorable attitude one would have under the right conditions) is both necessary and sufficient for something being good for you. Further, the connection the good bears to the satisfaction of the attitude *explains why* the good is a (well-being) good.

Objective theories of well-being often take the form of “objective list” views: well-being consists in having a sufficient number of items on a list of objective goods, where “objective” means something like “good independent of whether it satisfies some pro-attitude/desire/interest”. Objects on these lists of objective basic goods generally are taken to be contributing to the same goal. For Aristotle, for instance, the objective goods of a good life are all those necessary for, or helpful for attaining, *eudaimonia* (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1197b). Hurka (1993) holds a similar view, with the “perfection” of human nature as the telos that gathers together all the goods on his list.

Well-being subjectivism is widely favored over objective theories, specifically subjectivism which focuses on the satisfaction of the preferences or desires of the agent. Crisp (2017) argues that these strains of well-being subjectivism are currently dominant because of the rise of welfare economics. While theories of well-being that focus on pain and pleasure may be more intuitive, Crisp writes that they are also “hard to measure—especially when we have to start weighing different people’s experiences against one another.” Because of this difficulty with measuring, economists have tended to focus on apparent indicators of well-being that are

measurable: the satisfaction of desires or preferences. Of course, it would likely be equally easy (or at least possible) to measure well-being if well-being were understood as an objective list of goods necessary and/or sufficient for the good life. But objective list views face their own common and compelling objections. Namely, that objective views of well-being are, by their nature, “elitist” in virtue of prescribing the conditions of the majority (or, perhaps, of the powerful and influential) as a universal. For example, objective list view of well-being that include features like “health” may imply that people with physical disabilities are (other things being equal) worse off than people without these disabilities, even if the disabled people themselves prefer the body they have.⁵ Further, objective list views seem to have a harder time getting off the ground initially because of the unignorable intuition that *how we feel* and *what we desire* plays a dominating role in our well-being. Susan Wolf writes that “it would be a mistake to think that the objective good of a meaningful life is one that is wholly independent of the subject's experience or preferences” (1997:208). Someone whose life was full of things found on a list of “objective goods” would nevertheless not be thought to have a good life if they were miserable or unable to attain anything they desired. For these reasons, objective theories of well-being are, by far, less prominently held among philosophers than are subjective views. This paper should not, however, be understood as an argument against objectivist frameworks of well-being. Rather, I want to argue for a more modest claim: insofar as someone is inclined toward subjectivism, a subjectivism modified in the ways I propose here can better explain tough cases of gravely immoral lives.

⁵ Though the precise origins of this critique are unclear, see Fletcher (2013:210) for a discussion of this objection to objective list views.

2.1. Modified Subjectivism

Hausman's Modified Subjectivism should be understood as standing in contrast to what Hausman calls a "purely subjectivist" model—one that labels notions of objective goods "illusory" (138) when it comes to measuring well-being. The Modified Subjectivist agrees with the Subjectivist that the satisfaction of the agent's (or the agent's ideal self's) desires, interests, and passions constitute the *basic* goods of well-being, but Modified Subjectivism rejects the idea that only basic goods can truly be said to be good for you. The Modified Subjectivist accepts that there are objective non-basic goods that are *good for you*, and considers these goods to be *necessary conditions* for some goods that are basic to an agents' well-being (that is, not merely instrumental goods). However, while the Modified Subjectivist holds that the category of non-instrumental good-for-you goods includes more than the basic subjective goods of standard Subjectivism, she agrees with the Subjectivist that well-being can never increase *in virtue of* these non-basic goods. The Modified Subjectivist treats these non-basic objective goods as necessary background conditions from which the relevant basic goods may arise. It is not merely that the non-basic objective well-being goods of Modified Subjectivism *cause* the basic subjective goods; rather, the objective goods bear a unique connection of necessity (or near necessity) to the possibility of the subjective goods. So while well-being does not increase in solely in virtue of these non-basic objective goods, in many cases well-being also cannot increase *without* them. And this will be true due to a relationship of necessity, not merely contingent conditions.

By including a discussion of objective goods in the Modified Subjectivist account of well-being, one may initially conclude that "Modified Subjectivism" is really no subjectivism at all, but is instead a form of hybridism, which Hawkins (2010) defines as "the possession of certain

objective goods, combined with certain subjective attitudes toward them.” But Modified Subjectivism is not a form of hybridism. The difference lies in the way in which goods are required for well-being. On hybrid models of well-being, objective features of one’s life only become a “good” for the agent if the good satisfies a pro-attitude or interest of the agent—it is the feature of appreciating or enjoying certain (objective or subjective) which gives rise to well-being. Objective goods come to constitute well-being when they become a satisfier of an agent’s desire/pro-attitude/etc. For a Modified Subjectivist view like Hausman’s, objective goods are required for well-being in a non-constitutive way. For example, clean water is required for most life-forms to do well, though “clean water” is unlikely to be named among a list of features in virtue of which some life form flourishes. On this view, clean water is a good that is *good for you*, even though it is not a basic good. So, while Modified Subjectivism does involve both objective goods and subjective attitudes, the goods are not incorporated into the picture of well-being required for the view to be properly labeled as “hybrid.” Now that we have determined what Modified Subjective is *not*, I want to go into more detail about what it *is*, starting with Hausman’s central illustrative character.

2.2. *Jill the Dancer*

Hausman illustrates his personal Modified Subjectivist framework of well-being through the case of Jill the dancer (139). Jill has dedicated her life to dancing; it is her consuming passion, her sense of identity, and her means of making a living. Suppose that Jill contracts an illness, and the potential treatments have different side-effects. Drug A will give her a moderate cognitive impairment, while drug B will moderately impair her flexibility. Hausman argues that, based on what we know of the situation, Jill should probably prefer to take drug A, even though a majority of people may prefer the side-effects of B instead. Why is that? Because the impairment to Jill’s

flexibility would impede her flourishing far more than a moderate cognitive impairment would. “Although one cannot pluck values from thin air, one can germinate them through action, even if that action may be grounded on arbitrary valuation.” (140) In this case, the ranking of a mild cognitive impairment as better for Jill’s well-being than a mild flexibility impairment was produced by certain actions of Jill’s—namely, the amount of time she had dedicated to making herself into a dancer. The actions she chose to take throughout her life formed an objective value-ordering of various health states, based on how much they help or hinder the flourishing of the individual. Hausman writes, “In judging that she flourished I mean that in centering her life around dancing, she found a way to construct a life that is coherent and rich in the values found on lists of objective goods.”⁶ (141)

On Hausman’s model, well-being consists in flourishing, which in turn consists in, “the dynamic coherent integration of objective goods into an identity,” primarily achieved through devotion to certain activities. (141) Further, Hausman argues, well-being, grounded in flourishing, provides truth-conditions for comparisons of various health states for individuals (e.g. for the claim “health state x is preferable for agent A than health state b”)—something he earlier argues is probably impossible to achieve with any other view of health or well-being. (39)

“Human flourishing involves a complicated set of goods combined into a meaningful and coherent whole, which is directed by people’s inclinations but constituted by the success of their choices at structuring a coherent and fulfilling combination of goods. Social interaction, individual choices, and chance combine to give direction and structure to a human life and to the ways in which people flourish.” (141)

But while his framework appears to be value-pluralist to a fault, Hausman’s insistence that value-generating activities may be founded on “arbitrary valuation” leaves open the possibility of such

⁶ Although Hausman does not explicitly name goods to be found on such lists, we can infer he must mean to include things like quality human relationships, bodily pleasure, a sense of meaning and purpose, enjoyment of beauty, etc.

activities being morally horrible. And, of course, *purely* subjectivist frameworks of well-being generally do seek to completely separate moral activity from well-being: while moral activity may be *good*, subjectivists argue, it is not always *good for you*, and thus not the concern of well-being (Bramble 2016). But Modified Subjectivism is not *purely* subjective, and therefore does not explicitly *aim* for the separation of morality and well-being. It is therefore confusing why Hausman's version of this framework must allow for the following case to count as a case of flourishing.

3. Cannibal Jill

Suppose that, instead of being a dancer, Jill is a devoted and passionate cannibal. Let us stipulate that Cannibal Jill has spent a decade honing her skills of capture, killing, and meal preparation. Jill is no lone cannibal, either; she has a network of fellow cannibals with whom she shares interests and engages in supportive friendships. Suppose Cannibal Jill contracts a disease from a recent ill-advised dinner and has the choice between two different resulting health states; one health state will leave her with soft teeth, and the other will cause her to lose a leg. Faced with this choice of health states, most people would probably rather have softer teeth. However, on Hausman's Modified Subjectivism, Jill should probably choose to lose a leg. After all, she has dedicated her life to making herself into a connoisseur of human flesh. True to Hausman's criteria, cannibalism structures Cannibal Jill's character, shapes her values and activities, and is rich in objective goods. Additionally, cannibalism aligns with her immediate and long-term desires. According to Hausman's criteria, the health state which most negatively affected these would be the most detrimental to her well-being. Cannibal Jill would be worse-off with soft teeth than with a missing leg.

As mentioned above, what is absent from Hausman’s list of considerations related to human flourishing is a “morality” component—whether an activity is right or wrong, moral or immoral, virtuous or vicious, does not, on its own, hinder an activity’s ability to generate value for an agent. And for his part, Hausman may be fine with this; just as well-being has no “close connection” to evolutionary fitness, perhaps it also has no “close connection” to moral activity. He writes, “[W]hat is good for me depends heavily on who I am—on my goals and values—while my self-definition is less relevant to how good my health is” (121). And while humans are certainly capable of thriving in myriad ways, and while what makes me thrive may of course be partially dependent on my goals and values, my “self-definition”, should we take this fact to imply that all goals and values, all self-definitions, can potentially contribute to my well-being? Our intuitive response to the case is to say that being a cannibal is *not like* being a dancer, because being a cannibal is *bad*. One of these activities, dancing, seems to be objectively good or valuable, while the other, cannibalism, is objectively bad. While having sharp teeth may do more to advance Jill’s cannibalism career than having both legs would, it doesn’t seem as though this fact is sufficient to get us to Hausman’s further claim—that, given Jill’s activities, goals, and values, having sharp teeth would contribute more to Jill’s *flourishing*, to her *well-being*, than working legs would. Why? Because we tend to think that some activities are evil or harmful, either to the agent herself or to others, and that these activities inhibit our well-being or flourishing, regardless of how devoted we are to them. Moreover, we may intuitively see Cannibal Jill’s choice of sharp teeth over legs to be a bad choice for her, since lower-body mobility seems good for her (maybe much better for her than sharp teeth), while cannibalism seems quite bad for her. Additionally, even though Hausman insists that the activities of the agent may be founded on “arbitrary valuation”, must it follow that

the moral quality of Jill's activities have no effect at all on her well-being? In the following section, I will discuss the role that moral/immoral activity plays in Hausman's framework.

4. Biological Functioning and Morality

Cannibal Jill is similar to canonical cases like Sharon Street's Ideally-Coherent Caligula (2009), or Rawls' grass blade-counter (1971: 432). In both Street's and Rawls' case, the bullet—that the agent in question is doing *well*—is bitten for the sake of being consistently constructivist. But subjectivist views of well-being are committed to no such metaethical or political constructivism. For Hausman, the moral quality of the activities of the agent is simply not an aspect of *well-being* proper, though moral actions may be valuable in other ways.

Consider the following person—a man attempting to beat a world-record for body weight. Of course, such an activity is deeply physically damaging, and it is hard to imagine someone flourishing through devotion to such a destructive activity. And Hausman recognizes the record-breaking as an activity which necessarily includes a feature that reduces *biological functioning* (a term he uses distinctly from “health”, as “healthy” bodies are those that allow for the agent's engagement with her activities), but contends that reductions in biological functioning do not necessarily entail reductions in well-being. There may be other reasons to prefer health states which allow the record-breaker to keep gaining weight, which override the damage to his health and make these states most conducive to his well-being.

Modified Subjectivist views of well-being are not committed to the claim that deviations from the norms of biological functioning or moral behavior are *not* objective goods—only that these goods do not directly affect *well-being*. And, Hausman contends, this is because the complexity of the human creature, compared to other animals, makes it such that there are no

identifiable species-typical capacities that reliably track how well individual humans are doing. (31) But although he rejects an attempt to measure *human* well-being by measuring the development of proper capacities in individuals, he admits that a notion of flourishing which makes reference to the natural capacities characteristic of a species helps us to explain the *correlation* that exists between subjective and objective reports of individuals' well-being. (130) Still, there are many cases where subjective reports and objective reports differ, which is the motivation for his rejection of an "intimate connection" between flourishing and any particular objective good.

4.1. Objective Goods

But rejecting an intimate connection between biological functioning and well-being does not entail that such capacities are *irrelevant* to well-being. In fact, although biological functioning cannot, on Modified Subjectivist views, be used to *measure* well-being, it plausibly still plays a role in the model. Hausman maintains that activities that promote flourishing are those that enrich an agent's life with "values found on lists of objective goods." It is no stretch to include biological functioning in a list of objective goods—many philosophers do (Nussbaum and Sen 1994). As a value found on lists of objective goods, biological functioning *can* contribute to well-being on Hausman's model (although, beyond a bare minimum amount, it is *unnecessary* for well-being) by being integrated into an agent's life in a way that provides her with a rich, coherent sense of self and a set of goals and values.

Cannibal Jill is plausibly in a similar position: her activity contains a feature that necessarily reduces the *moral quality* of her life. Additionally, moral activity is a value to be found on lists of objective goods (Kazez 2007). But, Hausman may contend, like the record-breaker, this does not *entail* a reduction of well-being, and there may be reasons to prefer the activity that generates such a reduction in the moral quality of her life. So, on Hausman's model, depending on

the circumstances, the record breaker may continue his activity while still flourishing at the highest level of well-being possible for him; Cannibal Jill may do the same.

Modified Subjectivist frameworks of well-being, by definition, hold that an agent may flourish while lacking any particular objective good. Yet, as they are *objective goods*, activities that reduce biological functioning or moral action cannot result in flourishing *in virtue of* this reduction. That is to say, the aspect of the activity which reduces some objective good can never itself contribute to flourishing, though one may flourish despite the reduction. Seemingly, because flourishing on Hausman's model involves the integration of objective goods into a life with a coherent set of values and sense of self, the more objective goods that one can integrate, the more she flourishes.

This is not to deny that instances of poor biological functioning or morally bad action can *causally* affect an agent's life in such a way that she ends up flourishing more than she would have otherwise. It is easy to imagine a case where some serious physical impairment becomes integrated into the life of the victim in such a way that she becomes stronger, more emotionally-resilient, an "overcomer" of obstacles, and that these resulting character traits enhance her life in ways she otherwise would not have experienced. Still, as "objective bads", things like terminal diseases or life-altering injuries are never themselves *constituents* of the flourishing of an agent. That is again to say that, all other things being equal, an agent would presumably be better-off without the damage to her biological health. Jennifer Lockhart (2016) writes,

"Humans are rational animals and biological health is an aspect of flourishing that is shared between humans and other animals. It is one thing to say that rationality radically transforms what can count as flourishing for us. This much seems undoubtedly true. But it is something entirely different to claim that the sense of flourishing that applies to rational animals is transformed so radically that it is indifferent to biological health[.]"⁷

⁷ Manuscript, "Eudaimonism, Asceticism, and Well-Being".

But if Modified Subjectivism is *not* indifferent to biological health—if biological functioning counts as an “objective good” (which it surely must)—why does Hausman dismiss an intimate connection between flourishing and biological function?

4.2. *Objective Goods and Trade-Offs*

Judging from the examples and case-studies used in his book, the answer seems to be that, on Hausman’s model, *trade-offs* of some objective goods are sometimes warranted in order to obtain other objective goods. Optimal trade-offs will result in the most flourishing possible for a particular agent. Earlier in the book, Hausman discusses trade-offs of biological functioning, and the overall effects of such trade-offs on well-being:

“[T]he overall functioning of the parts and processes of someone who is blind as measured by the consequences for survival and reproduction in common environments in which humans have lived is much worse than the overall functioning of the parts and processes of someone with persistent severe migraine headaches who also suffers anxiety attacks. [...] Many of the properties and consequences of health states that people care about have little effect on survival or reproduction.” (31)

The sorts of trade-offs discussed above are mostly trade-offs between different sorts of biological functioning. But trade-offs for other kinds of objective goods can also optimize flourishing, even if the reduction of biological functioning is very large. Consider the following case discussed by Philippa Foot in her book *Natural Goodness*:

“I am thinking of the case of some very brave men who opposed the Nazis [...] These are letters from prisoners about to be executed after trial in Nazi Germany [...] The letters give the impression that those who wrote them were especially well fitted for the enjoyment of the best things in life: for great happiness. So one may very naturally say that they knowingly sacrificed their happiness in making their choice. And yet this does not seem to be the only thing we could say. One may think that there was a sense in which the letter writers did, but also a sense in which they did not, sacrifice their happiness in refusing to go along with the Nazis [...] Happiness in life, they might have said, was not something possible for them.” (95-96)

My claim that, while “objective bads” can sometimes *cause* flourishing, they can never be *constitutive* of flourishing, may seem to be in tension with the life of heroes, martyrs, or ascetics. The actions of moral exemplars can be physically damaging, and seemingly utterly opposed to most natural norms of human behavior. Buddhist monks *seem* to work against their well-being in the practice of self-immolation. Yet, devotees and ascetics are revered around the world, often holding a place of great religious importance. Additionally, such devout/ascetic ways of living are often deeply imbedded in the *identity* of the practitioner. But if Jill’s cannibalism cannot be constitutive of her well-being, how can the martyr’s resistance facilitate her flourishing?

Within Modified Subjectivism, religious devotees and moral exemplars whose activities enrich their lives with objective goods *are* likely flourishing, bound together into a coherent self-identity with goals and values. This seems intuitive; the ascetic person seems relevantly different from the body-weight record breaker in that the ascetic’s activities, perhaps even the particulars of their activities which diminish their health, genuinely *do* appear to generate objective values and enrich her life with objective goods.

But I do not think that the example of the Letter Writers poses a problem for my thesis that activities can never promote flourishing *in virtue of* some reduction in physical health. This is because the Letter Writers do *not* flourish in virtue of the reduction of physical biological health. Rather, they flourish 1) by making the optimizing trade-off, and 2) by *choosing* to make this difficult trade-off. That is, the Letter Writers did, in a way, end up well-off (as well-off as was possible for them)—yet, this is not because *they died*, but rather because they were the kinds of people who could, and did, make the *choice* to die instead of giving into Nazism. The disposition required to make such a choice indicates that there is at least some aspect of the Letter Writers’ lives that was going very well. And this admirable disposition, and subsequent rebellion in the face

of Nazism, may have also served to ground their identity/self-conception, generate goals and values for them, and, for the remainder of their short lives, coherently incorporate more objective goods into their lives than they otherwise could have obtained in a much longer lifetime.

It may seem unintuitive that the Letter Writers actually did make an optimizing trade-off, and my response here lies in the vulnerability of the human animal to her environment. Foot's Letter Writers acted within the highly non-ideal environment of Nazi Germany—while flourishing, as a term of success, was probably impossible for them, nevertheless they may be flourished *as much as possible* in virtue of their sacrifice, if that sacrifice optimized the amount of objective goods that could possibly be integrated into their lives. And while death certainly seems like the antithesis of a life rich with well-being, with the only alternative being Nazism, it seems plausible that such a trade-off was actually optimal.

5. Trading Off Moral Action

The conclusion established in the previous two sections—that some values may be generated for certain health states *in spite of* reduction to physical or moral health, but that this reduction in health can never *itself* generate value—have not gotten us far enough. For Hausman may concede all of this, and still argue that Cannibal Jill has generated value for certain health states through her cannibalistic activities. He may argue that in trading off moral action for some other objective goods, her net gain of objective goods was positive, even optimal, and these goods were integrated into her life in such a way that she flourished. Plausibly Cannibal Jill could flourish even more under conditions where she could attain the same objective goods, integrated into her life and self-conception in just as coherent a way, without the cannibalism. Still, this conclusion is a weak one: assuming Jill cannot attain exactly the same integrated objective goods and coherent sense of self

without cannibalism, cannibalism generates values for certain health states and promotes her flourishing.

Indeed, we unflinchingly accept such physical health trade-offs all the time, recognizing that it is often better for someone, all things considered, to have a bowl of ice cream or glass of wine after dinner, despite some negligible health risks. Jessica Flanigan (2013) writes, “[H]ealth is only one component of a good life, and some patients’ lives on balance may go better by making medically risky decisions.” (172)⁸ Likewise, Hausman may contend, it is not a stretch to say that Cannibal Jill could be in a similar position in regard to moral action. While surely it is hard to imagine a cannibal *actually* being able to flourish, as we have stipulated all the relevant facts in Jill’s case, it appears that she has achieved such feat.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—it is a stretch. It is a stretch because making such a claim of equivalence between biological functioning and moral action assumes that moral action, as an objective good, can be traded off *on its own*, for other goods. In fact, as I will argue next, this may not be the case: moral action seems to be intimately connected with many other objective goods, such that trade-offs of moral action would involve losing these other goods as well.

5.1. Morality and Other Goods

Consider someone who gains riches, pleasures, friendships, and knowledge of business and economics by becoming the sole producer of some life-saving drug, and then increasing the price on this drug by 1000%. When asked how he could live with himself for having such a business model, he answers, “Quite well! Profits are great this quarter!” A retort this businessman is likely to hear from someone who opposes his lifestyle is the rhetorical question, “What is wrong with you?” When using this phrase seriously, and not in jest, it indicates that we consider the person to

⁸ See also Veatch (1995)

whom we are speaking to be *pathological*—the nature of their actions, and their responses to their actions, indicates a serious defect. In this case, what is defective about the businessman is not only the fact that he is able to raise prices to such an inhumane degree (humans act cruelly all the time, so while unfortunate, it is hardly abnormal), but rather that he is able to do so without a hint of remorse—indeed, while enjoying the fruits of his cruelty.

Other examples of people with such pathologies— “psychopaths”—include Ted Bundy and Charles Manson. Bundy, a serial rapist and killer, was considered especially unwell due to his friendly demeanor and ability to continue a seemingly-normal relationship with his girlfriend during the years of his murders; Manson, despite his close-knit group of followers and commitment to his vision, appears all the more twisted for these aspects of his life. Pathological liars, similarly, are labeled so because of their ability to lie indiscriminately and without any remorse or emotional tumult.

The picture of well-being given by Modified Subjectivism, which separates considerations of biological functioning and morality from questions about well-being, rests on the presumption that flourishing and moral action are (at least theoretically) extricable from one another. Jill the Cannibal is flourishing, on Modified Subjectivism, only if she can obtain a coherent self-identity rich in objective goods through her cannibalism. Yet, if she can flourish while cannibalizing—if she can maintain close relationships, exist free of the weight of guilt and remorse, fully endorse her sense of self—is she any *different* from Ted Bundy or Charles Manson? And if the Ted Bundys of the world represent, not a potentially-flourishing-though-immoral person, but a human living with a deeply pathological condition, who is all the worse off—certainly not better off—for his ability to feel lighthearted while committing murders, then this presumption must be questioned.

Paul Bloomfield (2017) articulates a similar picture in “Morality is Necessary for Happiness”. There, he argues that morality bears a necessary connection to self-respect, and self-respect, in turn, is necessary for happiness. Not even the possibility of self-deception can save the immoral person from an ultimate fate of unhappiness. He writes,

“Paradigmatic forms of immorality are brought on by one form of weakness or deficiency or another. People who make everyone else think they have ‘won’, when in fact they have only cheated, may fool others into treating them respectfully. But unless they deceive themselves into believing otherwise, they know they do not deserve what they have ignobly attained, and even if they fool themselves into thinking that this doesn’t matter or that they do not care, they still have not found a secure basis for their self-respect” (p. 2627).

Beyond self-respect, there are further reasons to think that people like Bundy’s lack of remorse leaves them worse-off than a remorseful murderer: pathologies make it much harder for the perpetrator to morally improve, make him more vulnerable to being influenced by dangerous others, and leave him, in certain ways, seriously detached from reality. The non-psychopathic human typically experiences life-altering emotional distress at killing another human, and this indicates that moral activity is intimately tied-up with other such goods as emotional stability, feelings of happiness and remorse, guilt/shame/pride, and, importantly for Modified Subjectivism, *sense of self*. Fitting, then, that non-psychopaths who act morally are often said to have *integrity*. Non-psychopathic humans generally have an extremely hard time dealing with conceptions of themselves as deeply immoral people. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, sociologist Samuel L. Perry at the University of Oklahoma observes, “I think that is how we respond to cognitive dissonance. The classic theory is that, if we find ourselves engaging in behavior that we believe violates our values, we can do one of two things: we can stop the behavior or change our values.”⁹

⁹ “Protestants, Porn, and the ‘Purity Industrial Complex’”, by Isaac Chotiner, May 3rd, 2019

It seems that, for non-psychopaths, a trade-off of moral activity must be suffered under, or justified by constructing a new worldview.

So, there appears to be two possible outcomes for the person who structures her life around an immoral activity: 1) she may end up broken, emotionally-distraught, remorseful and guilty, with difficulty having close relationships; 2) if she is psychopathic, she will be dangerously disconnected from reality and resistant to empathy-improvement, in addition to all the incidental bads that will likely befall her (for instance, difficulty maintaining close relationships). An intimate connection between moral action and many, many other objective goods seems difficult to deny; thus, a trade-off of moral action is probably a much larger trade-off than one may initially anticipate.

5.2. The Mild Deviant

Of course, not all immoral activities are as heinous as cannibalism or Nazism. One potential objection to my argument is that Cannibal Jill confuses our intuitions by partaking in such a morally horrible activity, but that flourishing through immoral activities is perfectly possible for what might be called a “mild deviant”. Such a person can be described as doing generally well, while still devoting some part of her life to an immoral activity. There are two ways in which a deviant may be “mild”: they may devote only a small part of their life to some immoral activity, or they may be passionately devoted to some activity that is only mildly immoral. The first sort of mild deviant poses no kind of objection to my argument—so long as the immoral activity is an insignificant part of the life of the agent, it is not included in the activities of passionate devotion that, on Modified Subjectivism, generate well-being and values for health-states. The second sort of mild deviant is more complicated.

Let us imagine a normal-seeming person—call him “Norman”—who maintains a good family life, close circle of friends, and is heavily-invested in his career as a political campaign manager. Norman realizes that much of his job involves manipulation and deception (though perhaps not more manipulation than any ordinary political campaign), pandering, and some shady financial dealings. But Norman is good at his job, he enjoys the rush of a successful campaign, and his talents grant him a greater degree of control over the direction of his country than most people are allowed. He considers himself a “shark”, using his natural cleverness to optimize candidates’ chances at being elected, and he enjoys thinking of himself in such a way. From time to time he may consider doing something more “wholesome” with his life, but generally ends up thinking that he ought to just use his talents to do what he is good at—it’s a dirty job, he thinks, but someone has to do it!

Is Norman flourishing, despite this small trade-off of moral action? It may be hard to say. This mild trade-off, it seems, also entail only a small trade-off in all the other objective goods connected to moral activity. And though these other trade-offs are small, we can already spot Norman beginning to make them. Because Norman is not a psychopath, he must create a sort of justification for his choice in career: “It’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it!” This justification relies on a false idea—of course, campaign managers are not an imperative part of society—but this line allows him to reinterpret his involvement in the less-palatable aspects of his job as an unpalatable necessity. Norman accepts, even for this mild trade-off, the other mild trade-offs that come with the decision, for better or worse. Perhaps the trade-offs are all so mild, even when combined, that flourishing through this activity is possible despite it all. Or perhaps not.

But Norman does not pose a threat to my argument against Modified Subjectivism’s claim that any activity whatsoever may lead to flourishing (given that it fulfills certain conditions). There

are two reasons this case does not work as an objection: 1) one may consistently hold that there are moral limits on the sorts of activities that can generate flourishing, while also holding that activities needn't be morally perfect to do so; 2) Norman's activity does not involve moral deviancy necessarily, and the intuitive results of the case differ when his activity is replaced by one that is necessarily mildly deviant.

Regarding 2), consider that, instead of running political campaigns, Norman's activity of devotion was "catfishing"—the activity of pretending to be someone else online, and tricking people into falling in love with you. Even if Norman did not take the deceitful romances very far, it is much less intuitive that such an activity could be the source of his flourishing. This, I believe, is because catfishing is itself an immoral activity, and does not just involve immoral actions *generally* or *incidentally*. Conversely, while campaign management might generally involve deceit and coercion—or while one may typically need to do both in order to succeed—it is not a conceptual truth that campaign management is deceitful and coercive. Therefore, any intuition that Norman the campaign manager is doing well could easily be understood as him doing well in a benign activity, *despite* the incidental mild moral deviancy.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have sought to carve out a distinct kind of well-being subjectivism about well-being, which I have labeled "Modified Subjectivism." I have argued that certain kinds of well-being subjectivism have room for considerations of moral activity as important for well-being—further, I have argued that we have good reason to accept such a consideration. Here I have focused largely on Daniel Hausman's framework of well-being—particularly on his insistence that

“[a]lthough one cannot pluck values from thin air, one can germinate them through action, even if that action may be grounded on arbitrary valuation” (140). The idea that an agent can make anything valuable for her, given devotion to certain activities, may seem standard for a subjectivist theory of wellbeing; however, I find it doubtful that the moral quality of an agent’s activities themselves have no bearing on those activities’ conduciveness to well-being.

My argument was made in three parts: first, that moral activity is an objective good that an agent’s activity may integrate into her life; second, that while some agents may flourish *despite* trading-off some objective goods, they can never flourish *in virtue* of doing so; and third, that moral activity is intimately tied-up with other objective goods, making trade-offs of moral activity much weightier than one may anticipate. Additionally, I believe that adding these considerations to Hausman’s model is not only consistent with Modified Subjectivism, but that it also provides us with more plausible answers to questions about hard questions about well-being.

This argument will not be convincing to metaethical constructivists or subjectivists, who may think that Cannibal Jill, if internally coherent, is doing nothing wrong. It will also not be convincing to moral nihilists who will reject the claim that moral activity is objectively good. But those who find it plausible that moral activity is somewhere to be found on “lists of objective goods”, and who are hesitant to say that Cannibal Jill really is flourishing, may be convinced of my foundational hypothesis—that not all objective goods can be gained or lost on their own, and that moral activity in particular winds its way around too many parts of our lives to be dismissed as just another good among many.

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