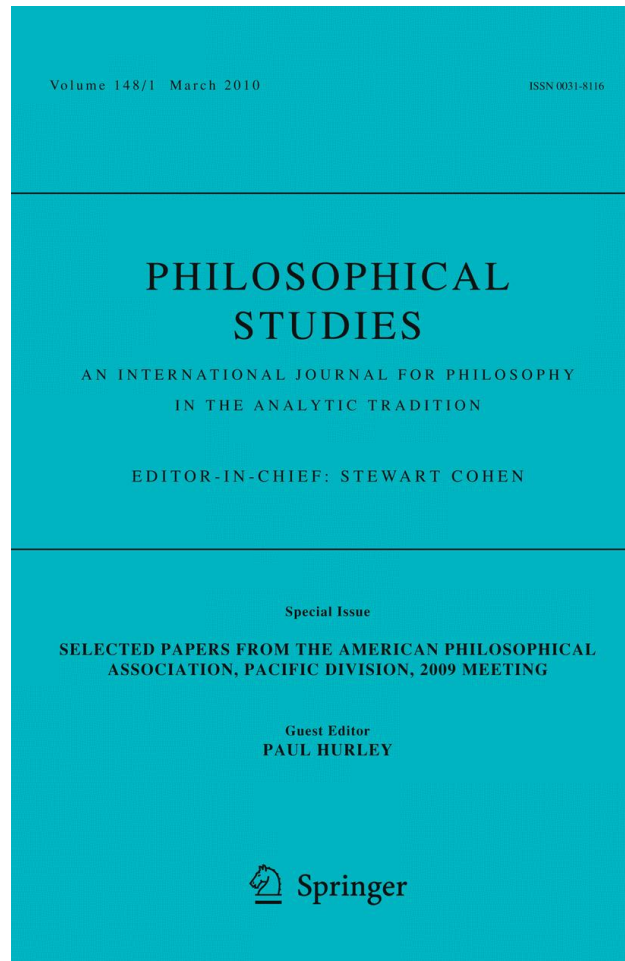


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The subjective intuition

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Abstract Theories of well-being are typically divided into subjective and objective. Subjective theories are those which make facts about a person's welfare depend on facts about her actual or hypothetical mental states. I am interested in what *motivates* this approach to the theory of welfare. The contemporary view is that subjectivism is devoted to honoring the evaluative perspective of the individual, but this is both a misleading account of the motivations behind subjectivism, and a vision that dooms subjective theories to failure. I suggest that we need to revisit and reinstate certain features of traditional hedonism, in particular the idea that felt experience plays a role that no theory of welfare can afford to ignore. I then offer a sketch of a theory that is subjective in my preferred sense and avoids the worst sins of hedonism as well as the problems generated by the contemporary constraints of subjective theorists.

Keywords Well-being · Welfare · Happiness · Good life · Subjective theories of welfare · Hedonism · Affect · Role of depression in a theory of well-being

Philosophers of well-being typically divide all such theories into subjective and objective.¹ Subjective theories are those which make facts about a person's welfare depend on facts about her actual or hypothetical mental states. Theories vary in the mental states focused upon, but the common thread is that welfare is constructed from purely psychological materials.

¹ For example, Sumner (1996, Chap. 2), Brink (1989, Chap. 8).

I am interested in what *motivates* this approach to the theory of welfare. Despite its popularity it turns out to be harder than one might expect to articulate the guiding vision of subjectivism. I shall refer to this as-yet-unarticulated vision of what the link between welfare and psychology must be as *the subjective intuition*. Contemporary theorists have, I believe, lost sight of the real subjective intuition to the detriment of the whole subjective approach to well-being. I here suggest that we need to revisit and reinstate certain features of traditional hedonism, and I offer a sketch (and I do mean sketch!) of a theory that does so in a useful way. The aim is to identify a new and improved vision of what a subjective theory aims to do.

Some people maintain that the subjective/objective distinction in theories of well-being is hopelessly confused and ought to be abandoned.² If they are right, then it would seem I am wrong to speak of the “real subjective intuition.” However, this objection is less worrisome than it seems. The main point is that popular theories of well-being have traditionally depended heavily on psychology. Whether or not we can all agree on how to divide subjective theories from objective ones, we can still ask what leads so many theorists to place a heavy emphasis on mental states. By “subjective intuition,” I simply mean the intuition, shared by many, that the psychological is the way to go in a theory of well-being—that mental states must play a significant role in any successful theory (even if we aren’t quite sure what that role is). Several contemporary theorists have tried to articulate what drives this move, and my aim is to show that these articulations are flawed. If taken too seriously, these views will hamper our ability to develop improved theories of well-being.

1 The authority of the subject’s evaluative perspective

Contemporary theorists of well-being typically view the driving intuition of subjectivism as an attempt to honor the subject’s own evaluative judgments about her life. Many believe that certain subjective theories (for example, desire theories) are the only ones that can fully account for the fact that many things are good for a person simply in virtue of the fact that she cares about them, values them, or in some way judges them to be worthwhile. L.W. Sumner adds to this standard characterization the idea that subjectivism about welfare is respectful of individual autonomy.³ I take this to mean that, just as in ordinary life we are often reluctant to insist to someone that something she values or wants is not in fact good for her (to do so could seem arrogantly paternalistic), subjective theorists of well-being are reluctant to adopt theories that stipulate that certain items are good for a person who does not herself see them as good. In short, they are reluctant to set up theories that contradict the individual’s own evaluative judgments. Subjectivism so conceived is committed to what I shall call *the authority of the individual’s evaluative perspective*.

Of course, any plausible theory of welfare will have to take issue with *some* of an individual’s attitudes and judgments. Desire theories of welfare, for example, are only plausible in the informed-desire version since our actual desires can be

² For example, Griffin (1986, p. 33).

³ Sumner (1996, Chap. 2).

uninformed, irrational etc. Rather than equate a person's good with getting what she wants such theories equate the person's good with getting what she *would* want if she had all the relevant facts, were fully rational, free from any disturbing passions, etc.

Another way to state the problem is in terms of a ranking. All theories of well-being aim to tell us not only what a good life is, but what makes one life better than another. Hence, every theory implies some sort of prudential ranking of the possible lives open to an individual (as well as a prudential ranking of the possible choices she has at any given moment). Desire theories produce a ranking in terms of the sheer number of desires satisfied. But without "improving" actual desires in an appropriate way, desire theories can yield highly counterintuitive rankings.

How then do subjective theorists combine their commitment to the subject's evaluative perspective with their commitment to producing a ranking that meshes with important intuitions about welfare? *First*, the attitudes of the subject are to be "corrected" only in ways that the subject herself could see as having authority. Most people understand that ignorance and irrationality are flaws in decision-making, and that decisions lacking these flaws are better. *Second*, alterations to the subject's current attitudes must leave untouched the central value commitments of the subject. Even if some particular values shift with the acquisition of knowledge, the general evaluative profile of the person remains untouched. Ultimately it is the subject's values that drive the theory and enable it to produce concrete answers to questions about her good. However, the problem with this approach is precisely its inability to question the subject's evaluative perspective, for this perspective may *itself* be distorted in various damaging ways.

Consider a kind of case that has been widely discussed: the case of a woman named Savita, who, because of the cultural environment she lives in, has come to embrace a set of life ideals that seem contrary to personal welfare.⁴ Savita was brought up to believe in the importance of a woman adopting a subservient role. Importantly, she thinks it is *good for her* to embody this ideal—not just good for others. Now that she is an adult she is trying to live up to it under quite difficult circumstances. Her husband is unkind and demands extremely hard work from her. Moreover, regular food shortages combined with a local norm that dictates that men and boys are to be fed first and fed well ensure that she is constantly hungry and malnourished. In short, Savita is leading a miserable existence.

Can we explain why another life would be better for her within the constraints of contemporary subjective theories? I think not. Although the quality of her life is low, her assessment of the value of such an existence is no doubt quite different from ours. If one doubts that she could—given such an existence—rank her life highly, remember that we need only suppose that she will rank it more highly than our intuitions tell us it should be. She need not think her life is the best. But if she fails to see how bad it is, and this leads our theory to say it is not so very bad, this is a problem.

Informed desire theories typically focus on what a person would want for herself under conditions of full information and rationality. Such a theorist would explain

⁴ More precisely, adaptive preferences (of which my case is an example) have been discussed at length. Less has been said about adaptive preferences in relation to a theory of well-being. A few exceptions are: Sumner (1996), Hawkins (2008), Feldman (2010).

that a different life would be better for Savita by appealing to the fact (if it is one) that she herself would want a different life for herself if only she had full information and rationality. But it is not clear that there is any such fact to appeal to here.⁵ Even with information her ranking of the possibilities might vary widely from plausible intuitions. In addition to factual information and rationality, a person's values influence how she will rank options. For Savita, having full factual information would mean learning something about what it is to live within a more egalitarian system that takes her needs seriously. But having knowledge of these other types of lives may not lead her to judge that they are *better* than her own life. Even if a more egalitarian system would allow her to eat better and gain more respect, unless she *values* these things more than the ideal of womanhood she has grown up with, she may not view these lives as *better*.

2 Significant features of traditional hedonism

Interestingly, hedonism, though clearly a type of subjective theory, does not fit the subjective vision articulated by contemporary theorists. Rather than focus on the authority of the subject's evaluative perspective, hedonism focuses on what I shall call *the authority of experience*. First, hedonism focuses on mental states that are not evaluative judgments. The theory is built around pleasure and pain. Whatever else pleasure and pain are (and there are many competing views) it is most plausible to view them as either sensations or affective states of some sort.⁶ They are *feelings* or *qualitatively distinctive experiences* of some sort. Second, the hedonist is willing to embrace a ranking that may clash with the ranking the individual herself would give—even from a position of full information. According to hedonism, one's life is going better to the extent that one has a greater net balance of pleasure over pain. More pleasure is always better. Greater pain always makes a life worse. Even if I prefer a life of greater pain, hedonism implies that my preferences are prudentially irrational. If I think that life is better for me I am just wrong. Hedonism is a very unpopular view these days for a number of good reasons. However, without reintroducing any of the familiar problems of hedonism—I do wish to suggest that there is something important to be learned from the structure of the hedonist theory.

3 The authority of experience

Hedonism focused exclusively on experience, and on experience of a certain simplistic kind (pleasure and pain). However, without saying that experience is all

⁵ Some theorists have argued that the notion of full information is incoherent—that there is no answer to the question what an individual would want with full information. See e.g. Rosati (1995). Here, for the purpose of argument, I assume such views are coherent, but argue that even so we have no guarantee that with full information Savita will see her situation as being as bad as it is.

⁶ On this point I disagree with theorists like Fred Feldman who defend an attitudinal account of pleasure. See Feldman (2004).

that matters, it may be useful to reintroduce the idea that certain kinds of experiences have a degree of prudential authority overlooked by contemporary theorists. Moreover, we may need to express this idea in terms of an objective ranking—one that is not entirely determined by the evaluative rankings of the individual. I shall begin my exposition of an alternative by considering the more sophisticated psychology needed to make this work.

Rather than focus on pleasure or pain I shall focus on affect. 'Affect' is my word for that which underlies and informs both emotions and moods. An emotion is a complex set of dispositions to have certain occurrent experiences: dispositions to feel, act, or think in certain ways when prompted by one's environment. Moods are also dispositions, though famously they have a less specific cognitive content. A bad mood doesn't dispose one to any particular bad thought, action, or feeling, but to bad thoughts, actions, and feelings generally. Moods influence what emotions we experience and shape our occurrent outlook on life. Moods, however, are generally taken to be relatively short lived. But there are, I think, more general, long-lasting dispositions that underlie and shape both our moods and emotions. Call these deeper dispositions *affective dispositions* and the state of possessing a relatively stable set of such dispositions an *affective state*. A deeply negative affective state leads us to experience many more negative moods and emotions. Most importantly, however, it shapes the value judgments we make of the world around us and of ourselves in relation to this world. Affect can thus be thought of metaphorically as an evaluative lens through which we view ourselves and our environment.

Affective states extend along a spectrum from negative to positive. The most negative realms of affect correspond in many ways to what we today label as clinical depression (which itself comes in degrees). But there are negative realms of affect that are not yet negative enough to count as depression. And there are many different degrees of positive affect for which we have no ready-made labels. The badness of a truly negative affective state is twofold: *first*, it is genuinely uncomfortable—depression is a kind of suffering—and *second*, it is a state that distorts a certain range of evaluative judgments. To be depressed or in some similar state is not only a bad experience, it makes us bad prudential judges. It is much more plausible to claim that a life is going poorly when it is dominated by extremely negative affect than it is to claim that a life is going poorly simply in virtue of physical pain. My life is significantly worse to the extent that I spend lengthy periods in the strongly negative region of the affective spectrum.

A few qualifications are in order. First, when I say that negative affective states are bad because they dispose us to experience a greater number of negative emotions, I do not wish to imply that *all* negative emotions are bad. Philosophers typically identify "negative" emotions as those that involve a negative assessment of something. Examples are anger, fear, anxiety, sadness. Obviously, in many normal cases the negative assessments involved are warranted. Nor would we want to lose our capacity for certain negative emotions—grief, for example. My point is simply that having a psychology on the negative end of the affect spectrum disposes one to *excessive* negativity that is *not* entirely warranted. And since the experience of many (though not all) of these emotions is painful, it also leads to unnecessary suffering. Indeed, some negative emotions that are actually good from a prudential

perspective will be experienced *less often* by those dwelling at the extreme ends of negative affect. Justified anger, for example, may actually occur less often in someone with deeply negative affect because such individuals tend to see themselves as deserving of treatment that would produce anger in a healthier person.

This brings us to a second important qualification about the types of evaluation in question. The kind of negative affect that concerns me primarily distorts a person's perception of his or her own worth, either absolutely or in relation to others. People who are depressed feel worthless, and by extension tend to devalue their own projects, commitments, contributions to relationships etc. I am not concerned here with specifically *moral* evaluation, and while it is no doubt impossible to pull the two apart entirely, I doubt that negative affect has anywhere near as great an impact on a person's moral judgment as it has on her prudential judgment. It is distorted *self*-assessment that matters from the perspective of a theory of well-being.

4 The right balance between affect and judgment?

Using the idea of affective states, I now want to sketch a type of theory that relies on a new and more complex understanding of the subjective intuition. To emphasize its sketchiness, I shall actually name the theory SKETCH.

The basic idea is this: Like a traditional hedonist theory, SKETCH stipulates that it is bad for a person to occupy the negative levels of the affective spectrum. This is true whether or not the individual in question is capable of fully appreciating this fact. However, unlike hedonism, SKETCH still retains a role for the evaluative judgments of the individual subject, albeit a much more circumscribed role. The ranking that SKETCH produces is one that *combines* in an innovative way the individual's own evaluative rankings and the rankings that a pure appeal to affective states would generate.

Consider Savita again. Imagine first that we could generate a ranking of all the possible continuations of Savita's life in terms of the dominant affective tone of each life. For simplicity imagine a ranking from 10 to 0 in which a life at 10 is dominated by very positive affect and a life at zero is dominated by extremely negative affect. It follows that someone living at 10 has a positive outlook, a very healthy sense of self worth, and little or no evaluative distortion. Someone living at 0, however, has a very negative outlook, little or no sense of self worth and a distorted evaluative perspective. Presumably there can be numerous possible lives that occupy each affective level. Let us further suppose that we can identify a point somewhere along the affective spectrum at which evaluative distortion becomes worrisome and prudentially destructive—a point at which an individual's ability to function normally is disturbed. For simplicity let's just stipulate that this point occurs at the middle of our spectrum at point 5. Call this the *limiting line for affect*.

In addition to this ranking of possible lives by dominant affective tone, we must also imagine that we have a ranking of values that stems from Savita's own informed perspective. I shall use letters to distinguish the different possible value

bundles that might inform a life. Let A stand for the particular set of values the informed Savita would most like her life to instantiate. B will stand for the set of values she would rank next in line and so forth. Just as there are likely to be many possible lives that occupy the same affective levels, so too there may be many possible lives that instantiate some particular set of values.

What then is the ranking that SKETCH endorses—the ranking that tells us what is better or worse for Savita? SKETCH claims, *first*, that any life above the limiting line for affect is *better* than a life below the limiting line. For many people what is disturbing about the Savita story is the suspicion that she cannot be right that this is a good or tolerable life *if her life contains the kind of suffering that places her below the limiting line for affect*. If we could be convinced that such a life was compatible with being above that line, we would (I think) more easily accept the idea that this is simply a person with very different values from ours, but one who is nonetheless to be trusted in her judgment about the value that life has *for her*.

SKETCH claims, *second*, that when it comes to ranking the various lives that fall *above* the limiting line, affect is not the dominant determiner. Instead the individual's own values are the key to the ranking.⁷ Savita herself would rank more highly any life instantiating value set B than a life instantiating value set C. But suppose that B lives all fall into affect level number 6, whereas C lives fall into level 8. If affect were dominant above the line we would have to say that Savita is wrong in her preference for B over C. But the dominance of affect is limited to the claim that anything above the line is better than anything below it. So here, Savita's informed value preferences are authoritative. If she prefers living according to B values with slightly less good affect in her life, that's a preference that makes sense. The B lives rank higher.

Third, and finally, when it comes to ranking the lives that fall *below* the limiting line for affect, affective experience remains dominant. So the lives below the line are first ranked in terms of affect level and only then, within affect levels, ranked according to the evaluative preferences of the informed individual. Once again, suppose that the informed Savita would think any life embodying value set A to be better than a life embodying value set C. But suppose that all the lives embodying value set A fall within the level 3 affect bracket, whereas C lives fall within 5. SKETCH will say that Savita is simply wrong about what is best for her. She would be much better off living a life at level 5 that embodies C values, than living at 3 with A values. And of course she would be even better off living any life that would put her over the level of 5.

⁷ This part of SKETCH leaves room for handling concerns about pure mental state theories. Those who reject what has come to be known as “the experience requirement”—i.e. those who believe it is not important that someone *know* her life is going well, but only that it *actually* be going well—can interpret the theory so that the ranking of lives above the affect line is done in terms of how well a particular life *actually* fulfills her evaluative preferences. However, my theory places limits on this. Since affect is dominant up to a point, SKETCH would not endorse the idea that a life in which (a) things are actually going well according to one's preferred scheme of values, but (b) one doesn't know this, and so (c) one is miserable, is a good life.

5 Conclusion

SKETCH is just what I have named it: a sketch. Whether or not anyone feels positively about SKETCH's details, I hope that by demonstrating a very different approach to subjectivism I may also motivate people to think about subjectivism in a different way. We should not conceive of the aim of subjective theories as the aim of honoring the evaluative perspective of the individual welfare subject. Nor should we see the aim as that of respecting autonomy. There are too many types of flaws that enter individual judgment to make that kind of approach plausible. Abandoning the constraints that derive from these conceptions frees us to reconsider theories, which, like hedonism, produce objective rankings on the basis of subjective psychological facts.

Hedonism, problematically, focused exclusively on the authority of felt experience, but contemporary theories just as problematically focus exclusively on the prudential judgments of individuals. Although the exclusive focus on felt experience (and the overly simplistic psychology) characteristic of hedonism should be dropped, I think that central to subjectivism is some recognition of the authority of experience. And with SKETCH I have tried to suggest not only that felt experience has some role to play, but that it has a key role to play: up to a certain point, experience has an authority greater than the authority of judgment.

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