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Well-Being as Fitting Happiness

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12.1 Introduction

There is an intuitive connection between well-being and happiness, so much so that these terms are often taken to be synonymous. This is not how we will use them here. In this chapter, we will take ‘well-being’ to be an evaluative term, referring to a specific kind of value, i.e. prudential value, while we will take ‘happiness’ to be a psychological term, referring to a favourable mental state or a combination of favourable mental states.[[1]](#footnote-1) Accordingly, when we say that an individual has a high well-being, we mean that that individual’s life is going well for them from a prudential point of view. Instead, when we say that an individual is happy, we mean that they are in a positive mental state, or else a combination of positive mental states. Given this use of the terms, the relation between well-being and happiness is, if there is any, a substantive one.

Even so, many well-being theorists have argued that well-being and happiness are intimately connected. There exist different kinds of happiness-based theories in the literature. These accounts differ with respect to two main dimensions. One concerns the theory of happiness on which they are based. Historically, the most popular theory of happiness is *hedonism*.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to it, happiness consists in a positive balance of pleasures and displeasures. An alternative theory of happiness that has made inroads amongst psychologists and economists over the past forty years, and that has eventually reached philosophers, is *life satisfactionism*.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to it, happiness consists in an attitude of satisfaction towards one’s life.

The second dimension over which happiness-based theories of well-being differ concerns how they conceive of the relation between well-being and happiness. One group of theories holds that well-being consists in happiness *tout court*. According to these theories, an individual’s life goes well for them to the extent that, and because, the individual is happy, however happiness is conceived. The second group holds that well-being consists in *properly qualified* happiness, e.g. authentic happiness, deserved happiness, and so on. According to these theories, an individual’s life goes well for them to the extent that, and because, the individual is happy, *provided* their happiness satisfies some additional condition, such as authenticity, desert, and so on. For ease of exposition, we will call the theories in the first group *standard happiness-based theories of well-being*; and the theories in the second group *hybrid happiness-based theories of well-being*.

Despite their variety, happiness-based theories of well-being have gradually fallen out of favour. Standard theories have been attacked for being either descriptively inadequate, i.e. for not matching our paradigmatic judgements about well-being, or normatively inadequate, i.e. for not being normatively useful. These objections have provided the motivation for hybrid happiness-based theories. Yet, the latter have also been challenged. The main objection raised against them is that they are ad hoc, i.e. they combine different elements (for instance, happiness and authenticity) in a non-independently justified way.

These objections have led many scholars to exploring alternative theories of well-being.[[4]](#footnote-4) The main competitors include preference satisfactionism,[[5]](#footnote-5) perfectionism,[[6]](#footnote-6) and objective list theories of well-being.[[7]](#footnote-7) One aspect that these theories have in common, which is relevant for the present chapter, is that they all conceive of the relation between well-being and happiness as being looser than what happiness-based theories assume. According to the typical preference satisfaction theories, for instance, happiness contributes to the individual’s well-being only if it is the object of the individual’s (actual or rational) preferences. According to standard perfectionist theories, instead, happiness is, at best, a psychological effect of the development and exercise of the distinctively human capacities which an individual’s well-being consists in. For their part, objective list theories typically assign happiness a bigger role, for they normally include happiness within the list of items that constitute well-being. But even on such theories, happiness is often regarded as merely sufficient and not as necessary for well-being—the idea being that an individual’s life can go well for them even if the individual is unhappy, provided that their life abounds of most of the other items in the list.

This situation raises the question of whether there is any happiness-based theory that can be successfully defended and that can provide a plausible alternative to the previous theories. In this chapter, we want to offer a positive answer to this question by presenting a new happiness-based theory of well-being. For reasons of space, we cannot compare our theory with all the non-happiness-based theories of well-being currently on offer. Our goal in this chapter is more modest. We will argue that our theory is immune from all the main objections raised against traditional (standard and hybrid) happiness-based theories. To the extent that happiness-based theories can be considered as the intuitive starting point in the elaboration of a theory of well-being, this is sufficient for raising the status of our theory to that of a serious competitor.

Our theory presents two main differences with respect to traditional happiness-based theories of well-being. First, it is based on a theory of happiness, i.e. an affective theory of happiness, which differs from both hedonism and life satisfactionism. Second, while our theory holds that well-being consists in a qualified form of happiness, it qualifies happiness in a different way than traditional hybrid theories. More specifically, it holds that well-being consists in *fitting* happiness. For this reason, we call it the *fitting happiness theory of well-being*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Our theory can be seen as the combination of the following claims. The first is that happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of affective states such as emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures. The second is that emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are different kinds of perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. It follows from this that happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. The third claim is that, insofar as happiness is constituted by states that have fittingness conditions, it is possible to assess happiness itself as fitting or unfitting. In particular, happiness is fitting if and only if its constituents are fitting, that is, when their objects possess the evaluative properties they are represented to have. The last claim is a claim about well-being: it says that well-being consists in fitting happiness thus defined. Accordingly, our theory holds that fitting happiness is the most basic prudential good. It follows that any other item is prudentially good for the individual if and only if, and because, it contributes to the individual’s fitting happiness or makes the individual fittingly happy.

We proceed as follows. In the first part of this chapter, we present our theory of well-being by discussing in more detail each of the previous claims (Section 12.2). In the second part, we argue that our theory does better than both standard and hybrid happiness-based theories of well-being (Section 12.3). As we have seen, our theory counts as a hybrid theory, since it holds that well-being consists in a qualified form of happiness, i.e. fitting happiness. We argue that our theory can capture the main insights of the competing hybrid happiness-based theories in an independently justified way (Section 12.3.1). Next, we argue that our theory is immune from the main objections that plague standard and hybrid happiness-based theories of well-being. We consider five objections: the ‘shallowness objection’ (Section 12.3.2), the ‘lack of value objection’ (Section 12.3.3), the ‘inauthenticity objection’ (Section 12.3.4), the ‘passivity objection’ (Section 12.3.5), and the ‘ill-being objection’ (Section 12.3.6).

12.2 The Fitting Happiness Theory of Well-Being

In this section, we begin by presenting our theory of psychological happiness. For the most part, we will simply illustrate the main tenets of our theory, without providing a detailed defence. This is partly for reasons of space and partly because we have offered such a defence elsewhere.[[9]](#footnote-9) Our aim, in this section, is to bring together the different threads so as to present a complete picture in the hope of conveying its attractiveness.

*12.2.1 Psychological Happiness*

Let us start with some preliminaries. When interpreted as a psychological term, ‘happiness’ is sometimes used to refer to a single mental state, such as an emotion or a mood, and sometimes to a combination of mental states. While we do not wish to deny that the term ‘happiness’ can legitimately be used in the former sense, in this chapter we will take ‘happiness’ to refer to a combination of mental states. We think that this is indeed the best way to do justice to the role that happiness plays in deliberation. For example, when we deliberate whether to choose a career as a musician or as a surgeon, and we choose the former because we think it will make us happier, it seems that we are not just thinking of happiness as an emotion or a mood, but as a more encompassing psychological state, one that involves a plurality of mental states. In this sense, providing an account of the nature of happiness requires specifying which mental states happiness consists of, or, equivalently, which mental states are happiness-*constituting*.

Our theory of happiness belongs to a family of theories that has recently emerged as an alternative to hedonism and life satisfactionism, namely, emotional state theories of happiness. The most popular of these is certainly the theory put forward by Daniel Haybron ([2008](#B14)). To motivate our account, it is thus useful to compare it to Haybron’s. According to Haybron, happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of occurrent affective states such as emotions and moods, on the one hand, and purely dispositional states such as mood propensities, on the other. To clarify the terminology: occurrent states are mental episodes that possess a specific phenomenology; by contrast, purely dispositional states are dispositions to experience occurrent states, with no phenomenology over and beyond that of their manifestations. According to Haybron, happiness is determined both by the intensity and by the centrality of these happiness-constituting states. By intensity, he means phenomenal intensity, that is, the degree to which a state ‘feels’ a certain way. By centrality, Haybron at least primarily means the disposition to cause other affective states or actions.

Haybron’s theory aims at offering an account of happiness that, in addition to matching our paradigmatic intuitions, can do justice to the role that happiness plays in the explanation of people’s behaviour and in people’s practical deliberation, and that can be useful for normative theorizing. By making centrality a defining feature of happiness, Haybron is able to show how we can predict and explain behaviour by appealing to happiness ascriptions and how happiness can function as an important consideration in normative decision-making and normative theorizing.

We agree with Haybron’s affective approach and with his emphasis on the notion of centrality. However, we think that Haybron’s theory faces some problems, which we have discussed elsewhere (see Rossi [2018](#B24), Rossi and Tappolet Manuscript-a). For present purposes, consider just the following. According to Haybron’s account, both occurrent and dispositional affective states are determinants of happiness in their own right. One implication is that his account classifies as very happy an individual who has strong positive mood propensities, but who, for some reasons (e.g. because they are asleep, in a coma, or simply in unfavourable circumstances that prevent their mood propensities to manifest), has no positive occurrent affective states, i.e. no positive emotions or moods. This is counter-intuitive. In fact, happiness seems to have an essential phenomenal dimension. The lesson is the following: we need an account that preserves Haybron’s insight about the importance of centrality for happiness, but that can also do justice to happiness’s phenomenology. Here is where our theory comes in.

According to our theory, happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of occurrent affective states such as emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures. On our account, positive emotions and moods, as well as sensory pleasures, are happiness-constituting states; negative emotions and moods, as well as sensory displeasures, are unhappiness-constituting states. (Note that, for simplicity, in what follows we will only focus on happiness.) We agree with Haybron that intensity and centrality are two important dimensions of the happiness-constituting states, which are relevant for determining how happy an individual is. However, we characterize the notion of centrality differently from Haybron.

Consider this. In general, when we desire happiness, we desire to experience not a series of positive yet disconnected and ephemeral states, but states that have solid bases and some sort of internal coherence. When do the happiness-constituting states have these properties? In our view, this is the case when the happiness-constituting states are based on and reflect the individual’s values.[[10]](#footnote-10) For terminological clarity, let us distinguish between *what* the individual values and the individual’s attitude of *valuing* these things. What matters for our purpose are the individual’s valuings. Valuings are stable mental states, which play a significant role in practical deliberation. They have robust dispositional properties, in the sense that they dispose the individual to experience a variety of affective states related to the valued objects. In addition, they provide a sort of ‘thematic unity’ to these states. The most important valuings of an individual, i.e. the individual’s ‘core valuings’, are closely tied to the individual’s own identity.[[11]](#footnote-11) Considering this, we can reformulate our previous point by saying that, when we desire happiness, we typically desire to experience states that are based on and reflect our valuings. We are happier, the more our happiness is so based.

With this in place, we can distinguish two relevant senses of ‘centrality’. On the one hand, there is what we will call ‘output-centrality’. This is the extent to which a state is causally productive of other affective states and behaviours. It corresponds to Haybron’s understanding of centrality. On the other hand, there is what we will call ‘source-centrality’. This is the extent to which a state is based on other output-central states. Valuings can be seen as the most output-central states in an individual’s mind. They are indeed the attitudes that most fundamentally guide and motivate our behaviour and define our identity. As for the happiness-constituting states, they can be either output-central or source-central, or both. That said, if what we have suggested above is correct, what matters for happiness is primarily whether, and to what extent, these states are based on and reflect the individual’s valuings. That is, what matters for happiness is whether its constituent states are source-central. On our account, then, happiness is a function of the phenomenal intensity and the source-centrality of the happiness-constituting states.

This idea distinguishes our theory from Haybron’s. We think that our account is perfectly able to do justice to the role that happiness plays in the explanation of people’s behaviour and in practical deliberation. Insofar as the happiness-constituting states are based on and reflect dispositionally robust states like valuings, we can indeed derive a range of predictions about how an individual will act and explanations about their past behaviour from ascriptions of individual happiness. Similarly, we can explain the importance of happiness for practical deliberation by referring to the connection between the happiness-constituting states and the individual’s valuings. The more happiness is based on the latter states, the more important it will typically be for the deliberating individual. Unlike Haybron’s account, moreover, our theory preserves the intuition that happiness has an inherent phenomenological dimension, since it is constituted by occurrent affective states. By so doing, it avoids the counter-intuitive implications of Haybron’s theory.

*12.2.2 The Nature of the Happiness-Constituting States*

Let us move to our next claim, concerning the happiness-constituting states. This is the most distinctive claim underlying our theory. We can ask the following question to introduce our account. What do emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures have in common, in virtue of which they count as happiness-constituting states? Our response is that they are all kinds of affective evaluations, that is, evaluations with a phenomenal dimension. Take emotions for a start. Consider an emotional episode such as the fear you experience at the sight of a dog. The dog is the intentional object of your fear, in the sense that your fear is about (i.e. it is directed at) the dog. But your fear is not a merely neutral attitude towards the dog. Rather, your fear is a way of presenting the dog to you as fearsome. Being fearsome is an evaluative property. Thus, by presenting the dog as fearsome, your fear provides you with an evaluation of the dog. Moreover, it provides an evaluation that is distinctively ‘felt’, since fear typically comes with a distinctive phenomenology. The property of being fearsome is often thought to be what identifies all the episodes of fear as belonging to one and the same emotion type. All these episodes are instances of fear because they present their intentional objects as being fearsome. The fearsome is typically called the ‘formal object’ of fear. The notion of a formal object is generally considered to be useful to distinguish between different types of emotions.[[12]](#footnote-12) Accordingly, all episodes of joy are instances of the same emotion type, i.e. joy, in virtue of the fact that they present their intentional objects as having the same evaluative property, namely, the joyful. All episodes of anger are instances of the same emotion type, i.e. anger, in virtue of the fact that they present their intentional objects as being offensive. And so on. Generalizing, we can say that emotions are phenomenologically salient ways of presenting their intentional objects as possessing different evaluative properties. As such, different emotion types count as different types of affective evaluations.

The claim that emotions are affective evaluations is compatible with different theories of emotions. The theory that we favour, and that one of us has defended at length elsewhere (Tappolet [2000](#B36), [2016](#B37)), is the perceptual theory of emotions. According to it, emotions are perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. More specifically, they are perceptual experiences that (non-conceptually)[[13]](#footnote-13) represent their intentional objects as possessing specific evaluative properties. Thus, for instance, an episode of fear consists in a perceptual experience that represents its object as being fearsome, an episode of joy consists in a perceptual experience that represents its object as being joyful, and so on.

As stated above, we think that moods and sensory (dis)pleasures are also affective evaluations. Like emotions, they are perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. However, they differ from emotions in some important respects. Consider a mood such as apprehension. When you are apprehensive, you have an experience of looming danger. A bit more technically, you have an experience of fearsomeness being instantiated. In this, apprehension is not distinct from fear. We can express this idea by saying that both apprehension and fear are perceptual experiences of the same evaluative property, namely, the fearsome. Unlike fear, however, apprehension does not seem to be directed at anything in particular. This points to a more general feature of moods. Unlike emotions, moods do not seem to have specific intentional objects. This idea has been elaborated in different ways in the literature. For instance, one of us has argued that moods have undetermined objects, that is, objects that the individual is unable to identify. Combined with a perceptual theory, this leads to the view that moods are perceptual experiences that represent undetermined objects as possessing specific evaluative properties (Rossi [2021](#B25)). Other views are nonetheless possible. For instance, moods can be conceived as having generalized (e.g. Solomon [1976/1993](#B32), Prinz [2004](#B22)), plural (Siemer [2009](#B31)), probable (Price [2006](#B21)), or modal (Tappolet [2018](#B38)) intentional objects. For present purposes, the only point we are committed to is that, while moods are a kind of perceptual experience of evaluative properties, like emotions, they differ from emotions at the level of their intentional object, which is non-specific.

Similar considerations apply to sensory pleasures (and to sensory displeasures). By sensory pleasures, we mean any sensory experience that possesses the property of being pleasant, that is, any pleasant sensory experience. Thus, to understand what sensory pleasures are, one needs to understand, first, what sensory experiences are and, second, what pleasantness and unpleasantness are. As an example, consider the pleasure of tasting coffee in the morning. One of us has defended the following evaluativist account (Rossi Manuscript). First, a sensory experience consists in a perceptual experience that represents an object (e.g. the coffee) as possessing some sensory qualities (e.g. a particular taste). Let us summarize this by saying that a sensory experience consists in a perceptual experience that represents a ‘sensory object’. Next, a sensory experience being *pleasant* consists in its additionally representing the sensory object *as* *pleasurable*. Note that, on this account, pleasantness and pleasurableness are two distinct properties. Pleasantness is a phenomenological property of the sensory experience, whereas pleasurableness is an evaluative property that the sensory object is represented to have (and that can genuinely possess if the representation if veridical—see Section 12.2.3 for more on this). More specifically, pleasurableness is a *determinable* evaluative property, that is, a property that has different determinate specifications. This means that there are different ways for a sensory object to be pleasurable. For instance, the taste of coffee can be exquisite, delicious, comforting, and so on. One implication is that, while the class of sensory pleasures is unified by the fact that all sensory pleasures have the pleasurable as their formal object, different types of sensory pleasures can be distinguished in terms of the particular way of being pleasurable that their tokens represent. That said, the main point to retain here is that, insofar as sensory pleasures consist in perceptual experiences that represent sensory objects as pleasurable (in a determinate way), and insofar as being pleasurable is an evaluative property, then sensory pleasures too count as perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. In this, they are like emotions and moods. They differ from emotions and moods in two respects. The first is that they always have a sensory object as their intentional object. The second is that, arguably, not all positive emotions and moods represent evaluative properties that are determinate specifications of pleasurableness.

Before moving to our next claim, let us say a few words about valuings, as these are relevant for determining the source-centrality of the happiness-constituting states. Historically, the most popular accounts have construed valuings either as a form of first-order or second-order desires (e.g. to value *x* is to desire *x*; or to value *x* is to desire to desire *x*) or as a form of value judgement (e.g. to value *x* is to judge that *x* is valuable). However, both accounts are subject to serious objections (see e.g. Seidman [2009](#B30), Scheffler [2010](#B29), Svavarsdóttir [2014](#B35)). As a result, some scholars have moved to a caring account of valuings, according to which to value an item *x* is to care about it (e.g. Seidman [2009](#B30)). We think that this is a step in the right direction, but it is not entirely satisfactory yet. Care is a mental state that belongs to the class of sentiments. The class of sentiments includes, however, other mental states, such as love, hatred, jealousy, and so on. What unifies this class is the fact that all these mental states are multi-track emotional dispositions, that is, dispositions to experience a variety of emotions related to the intentional object of the sentiment. What matters for present purpose is that *all* sentiments, not just care, possess the characteristics that are typically associated with valuings. Elsewhere, we have thus proposed to take the notion of valuings to refer to the class of sentiments, rather than simply to a single mental state type such as care, and to consider sentiments as different types of valuings (Rossi and Tappolet Manuscript-a).

As dispositional states, sentiments have no phenomenological dimension of their own, over and beyond the phenomenology of the occurrent affective states that they dispose an individual to experience. They have, however, a representational content akin to that of occurrent affective states. In particular, they have an intentional object, which is (non-conceptually) represented as possessing a particular evaluative property. For instance, when you love your partner, your love has an intentional object, i.e. your partner, which is represented as possessing a particular evaluative property, i.e. the property of being lovable. This type of representational content distinguishes sentiments from simple affective dispositions that do not represent a particular object as having a specific evaluative property. Sentiments are standing affective states that have representational contents of the form ‘*x* is F’, and that, when activated, generate occurrent states. As a non-affective example, consider your standing belief that this chapter is entitled ‘Well-Being as Fitting Happiness’, which we have just activated by writing this line.

*12.2.3 Fitting Happiness*

Let us take stock. We have claimed that happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of affective states such as emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures, where the balance depends, amongst other things, on the relation between these states and the individual’s sentiments. Second, we have claimed that emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are kinds of perceptual experiences of evaluative properties, and that sentiments are a kind of standing evaluative states. It follows from these claims that happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of perceptual experiences of evaluative properties, which is based on the individual’s standing evaluations. This account has an immediate implication for our understanding of happiness. Happiness can be conceived of as a composite state that affectively informs us about the values (and disvalues) that we encounter in our life. In this sense, happiness counts as a global affective evaluation, which takes into account the individual’s more general evaluative stance.

We can now move on to our third claim. As we have seen, emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are perceptual experiences that represent their intentional objects as possessing specific evaluative properties. As kinds of perceptual experiences, they can be assessed as fitting or unfitting. By fittingness, we mean the same as representational correctness.[[14]](#footnote-14) Accordingly, emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are fitting if and only if the world is as they represent it to be. In other words, emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are fitting if and only if their objects really possess the evaluative properties that these states represent them to possess. Consider, as an example, an episode of fear of a dog that is attacking you. As we have seen, this episode consists in a perceptual experience that represents the dog as fearsome. On our account, such an episode of fear is fitting if and only if there really is a dog attacking you (rather than, e.g. a hologram of a dog) and the dog is really fearsome (rather than, e.g. an innocuous puppy). Similar considerations apply to moods and sensory pleasures. We should add that, on our theory, sentiments have fittingness conditions too. Consider, for instance, a sentiment such as love for a particular person. Arguably, this sentiment can also be assessed as fitting or unfitting. It is fitting provided that such a person genuinely is worthy of love or, equivalently, ‘lovable’. It is unfitting otherwise.

Our theory holds that, insofar as happiness is constituted by states that have fittingness conditions, it is possible to assess happiness too as fitting or unfitting. The first condition for happiness to be fitting is that the states that constitute it are fitting, that is, that their intentional objects do possess the evaluative properties that they represent them to possess. Since these states are typically based on sentiments, which play a role in determining the extent to which an individual is happy, another condition must be added for happiness to be fitting: happiness must be based on fitting sentiments. This account has two implications. The first is that happiness can be more or less fitting, depending on the extent to which its constituents and their standing bases are fitting. The second implication is that, insofar as fitting happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of *fitting* perceptual experiences of evaluative properties, which are based on *fitting* standing evaluations, then fitting happiness provides the individual, at the same time, with (a) a broadly positive experience of items that are genuinely valuable, and (b) a correct ‘global’ evaluation of their life (at a given time or in an interval of time).

*12.2.4 Well-Being as Fitting Happiness*

This leads to our final claim. This is simply that fitting happiness is what well-being consists in. We can sum up our theory more precisely by reference to three questions that any theory of well-being must address. First, *which* items are non-instrumentally good for an individual? Second, what *makes* these items non-instrumentally good for the individual? Third, what dimensions of these items are relevant for determining an individual’s *degree* of well-being?

Our theory holds that the basic prudential good is fitting happiness. This is what well-being ultimately consists in. Fitting happiness constitutes well-being in virtue of its being an *affective experience of the good*. This is what makes it non-instrumentally good *for* an individual. As for the variables that determine the degree of an individual’s well-being, these are the phenomenal intensity of the fitting happiness-constituting states and their source-centrality. In light of what we have said before, it follows that the extent to which an individual’s life goes well for the individual living that life is determined by the degree to which that individual affectively experiences genuinely valuable items and by the degree to which these experiences are based on, and reflect, the individual’s standing affective evaluations.

One complication should be noted. In some cases, an individual’s happiness-constituting states may be fitting at the level of their objects, i.e. insofar as they represent as valuable objects that are really valuable, but not at the level of their intensity, i.e. insofar as they represent as valuable to a given degree objects that are valuable to a different degree. Similarly, in some other cases, an individual’s happiness-constituting states may be fitting at the level of their objects and intensity, but they may be based on sentiments that are either unfitting or only partially fitting. For instance, this may happen when an individual correctly experiences joy at an event *x*, but the individual’s joy derives from valuing items of the class X, where not all the members of this class are joyful. In all these cases, the individual’s happiness-constituting states are only partially fitting. This introduces some difficulties in the estimation of the overall degree of fitting happiness, which we do not have space to explore in this chapter, but which need to be addressed.

12.3 The Case in Favour of the Fitting Happiness Theory of Well-Being

To provide a full defence of our theory of well-being, we would have to compare it with all the main competitors in the literature. This task clearly exceeds what is possible to do in one chapter. So, in what follows, we adopt another strategy. We start from the intuition that there exists a close connection between well-being and happiness. We take this intuition to offer a *prima facie* reason to take happiness-based theories of well-being as the default starting point in the analysis of well-being. Next, we argue that our own happiness-based theory is immune to all the objections raised against competing, standard and hybrid, happiness-based theories of well-being. In fact, it also presents some important advantages over them. If we are right, then our theory emerges as a plausible account of well-being, one that deserves close consideration.

*12.3.1 Advantages*

We begin by discussing some advantages that our theory has over alternative happiness-based theories of well-being. As we have seen, our theory holds that well-being goes beyond unqualified happiness and consists in *fitting* happiness. As such, our theory counts as a hybrid happiness-based theory of well-being. In the introduction, we suggested that hybrid happiness-based theories face an explanatory challenge. They must provide a convincing, and non-ad hoc, explanation of why happiness needs to be qualified in a particular way for an individual’s life to go well. As we will now illustrate, we think that our theory does better than its competitors in this respect.

Consider the theories according to which happiness must be deserved or authentic to benefit an individual. One may argue that these qualifications are required to make the resulting theory of well-being descriptively and/or normatively adequate. In other words, these qualifications are required to reach reflective equilibrium. We do agree that some of the intuitions that motivate these qualifications are very powerful. Below, we will ourselves consider an objection against happiness-based theories that appeals to the importance of authenticity. That said, it seems to us that the explanatory challenge remains. Qualifying happiness as these theories do can *accommodate* the data, by better fitting our judgements about particular cases. But can it also *explain* the data?

It seems to us that our theory brings an additional layer to the explanation. Recall that, on our account, happiness consists in a broadly positive affective balance of states that are directed and aim at specific evaluative properties, that is, at determinate specifications of the good. Insofar as happiness is a combination of these states, we can say that happiness is a composite state that aims at *the good*. As we have seen, happiness can achieve its aim to various degrees. We expressed this idea by saying that happiness can be fitting to various degrees. Considering this, we can say that fitting happiness is happiness that *fully* achieves its aim. This provides the basis for our account of well-being. Insofar as we tie well-being to happiness and we think of happiness as aiming at the good, then it is only natural to think that an individual’s life goes well for them when, and to the extent that, their happiness fully achieves its aim. Thus, the qualification ‘fitting’ that is attached to happiness is not an unrelated element, which is added just to accommodate the data. Rather, this qualification is a way of providing a complete explanation of what makes happiness a determinant of well-being.

*12.3.2 The Shallowness Objection*

In the remainder of this chapter, we explain how our theory avoids the main objections against traditional happiness-based theories of well-being.

The first objection says that happiness is either too shallow or too ephemeral a psychological state for it to be the ultimate constituent of an individual’s well-being. For simplicity, let us call this the ‘shallowness objection’. This objection targets standard and hybrid happiness-based theories of well-being alike. The shallowness objection is a challenge both to the descriptive and the normative adequacy of these theories. On the descriptive side, suppose that an individual experiences no displeasure and a number of very superficial and transient pleasures, e.g. the pleasure of eating a cracker, the pleasure of a warm shower, etc. Happiness-based theories should conclude that the individual’s life goes very well for them. However, the individual’s happiness seems to be too superficial to really benefit them. On the normative side, it appears that, if happiness is shallow or ephemeral, then it cannot play the appropriate normative role. Such an account would, indeed, fail to vindicate the role of happiness in normative theorizing and in ordinary instances of practical deliberation.

This is a genuine objection against *some* happiness-based theories of well-being. For instance, it threatens well-being theories that adopt a hedonist theory of happiness according to which happiness consists in a positive balance of pleasures and displeasures, and according to which pleasures and displeasures consist in mere qualia or phenomenal properties. If one adopts this theory, then happiness turns out to be a positive balance of mere feelings. It is then justified to attack the resulting theory of well-being on grounds of descriptive and normative adequacy, since mere feelings are both shallow, insofar as they lack depth, and empty, insofar as they lack content.

However, the objection does not apply to our own theory of happiness. We conceive the happiness-constituting states not as mere ‘feelings’, but as states possessing an important cognitive dimension. Through this dimension, they provide the individual experiencing them with information about evaluatively significant circumstances. That is, happiness provides a global affective evaluation of the individual’s situation. This feature of our theory allows us to reject the charge that happiness is empty. In addition, we hold that the degree of an individual’s happiness depends not just on the phenomenal intensity of the happiness-constituting states, but also on their (source-)centrality. As we have seen, this means that an individual’s happiness is greater, the more its constituents are based on, and reflect, the individual’s valuings. This allows us to reject the charge that happiness is a shallow state.

*12.3.3 The Lack of Value Objection*

The second objection, which we call the ‘lack of value objection’, states that happiness cannot be a constituent of well-being, because one may derive happiness from items that lack any genuine value. They may lack value either because they are pointless activities, such as when an individual derives happiness from counting the blades of grass in their lawn (Rawls [1971](#B23)); or because they are genuinely evil activities, such as when an individual derives happiness from torturing a living being; or because, although the activities appear to have value, their value is not actually realized, such as when an individual derives happiness from activities in an ‘experience machine’ (Nozick [1974](#B20)). In all these cases, the objection goes, happiness does not benefit the individual.

This objection targets happiness-based theories according to which happiness matters for well-being independently of the value of its sources. According to these theories, if an individual derives happiness from counting the blades of grass or from other pointless activities, it is still the case that their life goes well for them. This is deemed to be a counter-intuitive implication.

There are at least two possible replies open to traditional happiness-based theories. One is to bite the bullet and to say that happiness benefits the individual in virtue of its pleasant character, independently of the value of its sources. A second reply consists in opting for a hybrid happiness-based theory according to which well-being consists in value-based happiness. For instance, a hedonist about happiness may say that what matters for well-being are only pleasures that are based on valuable items or activities. The problem is that resorting to either option exposes one to the explanatory challenge that we raised in subsection 12.3.1.

None of this applies to our theory. As we have seen, our theory holds that happiness contributes to well-being only when it is fitting. In turn, fitting happiness consists in a broadly positive global affective experience of *genuine* values. If so, our theory implies that only happiness derived from valuable items matters from well-being. In this sense, our theory *is* a form of value-based happiness theory of well-being. But unlike other versions, such as the value-based hedonist theory of well-being, our theory can be independently motivated, as explained in subsection 12.3.1.

*12.3.4 The Inauthenticity Objection*

The third objection that we consider, which we call the ‘inauthenticity objection’, states that well-being cannot be based on happiness because happiness may be inauthentic. For example, it may result from adaptation or brainwashing. Consider an individual who, as an effect of perverse conditioning, experiences joy when facing degrading conditions. The individual’s joy does not seem to genuinely benefit them. That is to say that, when happiness is inauthentic, it does not seem to contribute to an individual’s well-being.

This is a serious objection, which has led several authors to adopting hybrid happiness-based theories according to which well-being consists in authentic happiness (see Sumner [1996](#B34)). At first sight, this objection threatens our theory as well. The reason is that happiness may be inauthentic *even when* it is based on valuable items. So, it seems that fitting happiness is not sufficient for well-being, since fitting happiness may lack authenticity.

One difficulty in discussing this objection has to do with the notion of authenticity. There are many different accounts in the literature and, depending on the account that one adopts, the response to the objection will proceed differently. On a plausible reading, however, happiness is authentic if and only if it is based on items that the individual *genuinely* values. We will assume this account of authentic happiness here. The question for us, then, is whether the notion of fitting happiness is broad enough to capture the relation between an individual’s occurrent happiness and the individual’s most genuine valuings, which is necessary for assessing whether the individual’s happiness is authentic or not.

The first thing to note is that, on our view, happiness does depend on the individual’s valuings. As we have seen, happiness depends, amongst other things, on the extent to which emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are based on, and reflect, the individual’s valuings. The second thing to note is that, on our view, well-being requires not just that the happiness-constituting states are fitting, so that the individual derives happiness from genuinely valuable items, but also that the happiness-constituting states are based on fitting valuings. If valuings are sentiments, this implies that well-being requires, amongst other things, that the individual’s happiness is based on fitting sentiments.

At this stage, one may object that our reply does not really solve the problem of inauthenticity. True, our theory holds that well-being depends, amongst other things, on the individual’s fitting valuings. But valuings can be fitting, yet inauthentic. For example, one may love something that is really good such as music as a result of perverse conditioning. So, if authenticity is necessary for well-being, then fitting happiness falls short from providing a satisfactory account of well-being.

Once we have reached this stage, however, we are willing to bite the bullet. That is, we are willing to recognize that fitting happiness may be inauthentic, while insisting that it is nevertheless sufficient for well-being. Our idea is that if an individual affectively experiences genuinely valuable items, if their experiences are based on what the individual values, and if the individual’s valuings are fitting, then the individual’s life goes well for them, even if the individual has acquired their fitting valuings through an improper process. Two considerations may help bite this bullet. The first is that, insofar as the process of value acquisition is improper, this is likely to have an impact on the individual’s affective states. This means that inauthenticity is likely to involve some costs for the individual’s happiness and, thus, for their well-being, at some point in time. The second consideration is that, while authenticity is not necessary for well-being, it does of course matter for morality and justice. This means that, although (e.g.) brainwashing may not reduce an individual’s well-being, it is nevertheless an impermissible and unjust act.

*12.3.5 The Passivity Objection*

The fourth objection states that happiness-based theories are too ‘passive’, since they allow for the possibility that an individual may derive well-being from happiness without exercising their capacity for agency. At the extreme, an individual’s life can go well for them from the merely passive enjoyment of pleasurable experiences, without any form of active engagement from the individual’s part. This is deemed to be counter-intuitive. We call this ‘the passivity objection’.

Our theory acknowledges the important role that agency plays for well-being. In our theory, agency intervenes at three different levels. First, exercises of agency, e.g. activities, achievements, project realizations, are often the sources of happiness-constituting states, such as emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures, which contribute to well-being when fitting.

There is more. Some forms of agency are *necessary* for certain evaluative properties to be genuinely instantiated or, equivalently as we use the terms, for some values to be realized. Think about flow (Csikszentmihalyi [1975](#B9)). Flow is a state one enters in while performing an activity that requires the exercise of skills. The activity in question is perceived as one that represents a challenge that matches the skills of the individual. Because flow shares all the characteristics of emotions, there is good reason to hold that flow is in fact an emotion (see Tappolet 2022). Indeed, flow appears to be a kind of enjoyment, one that we take when engaged in activities that we perceive as challenges that match our skills. On this account, flow has an activity as its intentional object. Thus, flow requires agency. As a positive affective state, flow can be fitting or unfitting. Granted the assumption that flow is a kind of enjoyment, it follows that flow is fitting when the activity is worthy of enjoyment. More precisely, flow is fitting when the activity is enjoyable in a specific way, that is, as a challenge that matches one’s skills. When this is the case, flow enhances the individual’s well-being. Combining all this, we get the conclusion that engagement in certain activities is necessary for some values to be realized—in this case, the value associated with, and represented by, flow—and, thereby, for the individual’s affective experiences to enhance their well-being.

The third level at which agency intervenes is at the level of valuings. Activities, projects, achievements are, of course, possible objects of an individual’s valuings. It is likely that the individual will experience various occurrent affective states that are based on these valuings. Thus, agency-based goods will also play a role in determining the source-centrality of these happiness-constituting states.

Like traditional happiness-based theories, our theory does not exclude the extreme case where an individual derives well-being from happiness without exercising their capacity for agency. But, we think, this is how it should be. It seems implausible to hold that well-being *always* requires activities or exercises of agency. We think that a theory that recognizes the importance of agency, while allowing for the possibility that well-being does not consist solely in activities or exercises of agency is more descriptively adequate. In fact, this position has some advantages over the alternative. To give just one example, our theory can do justice to the claim, often made in disability studies, that even individuals with significantly impaired capacities for agency can have a good quality of life.

*12.3.6 The Ill-Being Objection*

Let us consider one last objection. According to it, our theory implies that if unhappiness is wholly unfitting, then an individual’s life does not go bad for them at all. Surely, however, this is incorrect, for unhappiness has a negative phenomenology and its negative phenomenology makes unhappiness bad for the individual experiencing it, even when their unhappiness is otherwise unfitting. Thus, our theory seems to deliver the wrong verdict about the individual’s ill-being. This objection, which we call ‘the ill-being objection’, targets all theories according to which ill-being is determined by qualified unhappiness, such that the qualification functions as a discount factor, which reduces—and potentially even annuls—unhappiness’s impact on ill-being.[[15]](#footnote-15)

For ease of the discussion, we reformulate this objection by reference to the unhappiness-constituting states. The idea underlying the objection is that negative affective states, whether they are emotions, moods or sensory displeasures, have a negative phenomenology, which makes them bad for the individual, even when they are unfitting.

Our strategy consists in pointing out the similarity between the present objection and an objection that has been put forward against evaluativist theories of unpleasant pain in philosophy of mind, an objection known, alternatively, as the ‘shooting-the-messenger objection’ or as the ‘normativity objection’. We will focus on what we take to be the most promising reply that has been offered in this context and see how it applies to the ill-being objection.

Evaluativist theories of unpleasant pain conceive of unpleasant pain as an interoceptive experience that represents a bodily condition as possessing a negative evaluative property. For instance, according to David Bain, ‘[a] subject’s being in unpleasant pain consists in his (i) undergoing an experience (the pain) that represents a disturbance of a certain sort, and (ii) that same experience additionally representing the disturbance as bad for him in the bodily sense’ (Bain [2013](#B2): 82). In other words, Bain thinks that unpleasant pain consists in an interoceptive experience that represents a bodily damage as bad for the individual. Thus, according to Bain, the evaluative property that is represented in instances of unpleasant pain is the property of being bad for the individual.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Here is the objection that evaluativist theories of unpleasant pain such as Bain’s face. On these theories, unpleasant pain has the function of providing information about the badness of a bodily event for the individual. However, the information provided by an episode of unpleasant pain might be non-veridical. For instance, in cases of phantom limb experiences, where an individual feels pain in an amputated limb as if it were still attached to their body, unpleasant pain represents a bodily damage as bad for the individual, yet there is really no bodily damage there, since the limb where the individual feels pain has been amputated. So, a fortiori, there is no bodily damage that is bad for the individual. In our terminology, such an unpleasant pain is unfitting, because it has an incorrect representational content. This creates the following problem. On this view, unpleasant pain is like a messenger of bad news. But in some cases, the bad news turns out to be false. Now, if unpleasant pain is just a messenger, and if messengers are simply neutral vehicles of information, it follows that when the bad news is false, there is nothing bad for the individual that takes place. However, this conclusion seems to ignore the fact that the individual still experiences an unpleasant pain. Even when the information provided by an unpleasant pain is non-veridical, the individual’s pain remains unpleasant. Surely, *this* is still bad for the individual. If not, why would one take a painkiller? The problem is that evaluativist theories of unpleasant pain seem unable to account for this feature. On their accounts, taking a painkiller is the equivalent of shooting the messenger.

The similarity between the ill-being objection and the shooting-the-messenger objection is evident. The ill-being objection states that unhappiness is bad for the individual even when unfitting, because it feels bad. The shooting-the-messenger objection states that an unpleasant pain is bad for the individual even when unfitting, because it feels unpleasant (which is a way of feeling bad). Considering this, we can hope that some of the strategies explored to address the latter objection can help address the ill-being objection as well.

There are three main strategies that have been developed to address this objection.[[17]](#footnote-17) We consider these strategies in detail in Rossi and Tappolet (Manuscript-c). For reasons of space, here we will only focus on the strategy that we consider most plausible. Before doing that, we will briefly mention the two other strategies. The first is instrumentalism (cf. Martínez [2015](#B17)). This strategy accepts the implication that, if an unpleasant pain is unfitting, then it is not bad for the individual *in itself*. However, it adds that an unpleasant pain may be *instrumentally* bad for the individual, in the sense that it may have other non-instrumentally bad consequences for the individual. The second strategy—perceptualism (Bain [2017](#B3))––holds that, while some evaluative representations of a bodily damage are not bad for the individual in themselves, such evaluative representations *are* non-instrumentally bad for the individual when they appear in a perceptual *mode*, that is, when they are perceptual evaluative representations of a bodily damage. This means, for instance, that, although the judgement that a bodily damage is bad for you is not itself non-instrumentally bad for you, the interoceptive experience of the bodily damage as bad for you, which unpleasant pain consists in, is itself non-instrumentally bad for you. Crucially, this is true even when the unpleasant pain is unfitting.

Both solutions can be generalized so as to apply to our theory. However, we think that they fail to offer a complete story. For this reason, we will move to considering a third possible reply to the shooting-the-messenger objection, put forward by Paul Boswell ([2016](#B5)). In our opinion, this offers, when generalized, the most plausible reply to the ill-being objection. The key notion is that of ‘secondary unpleasantness’. As we have seen, according to evaluativism, a pain being unpleasant consists in a representation of a bodily damage as bad for the individual. Such a representation determines what may be called the pain’s *primary* unpleasantness, or unpleasantness1. Based on the empirical literature on pain, Boswell claims that some pains also possess a kind of *secondary* unpleasantness, or unpleasantness2. Secondary unpleasantness is intentionally attached to the unpleasant1 pain itself, in the sense that it consists in a representation of the unpleasant1 pain as bad for the individual. It can be identified as the unpleasantness characteristic of *suffering* pains.

Three things must be noticed. First, according to this account, secondary unpleasantness is part of the pain experience itself. It is not the unpleasantness of a separate, second-order affective state caused by the pain experience. This distinguishes Boswell’s strategy from instrumentalism. Second, not all unpleasant pains have this kind of secondary unpleasantness, since not all unpleasant pains are suffering pains. Third, the representation of the unpleasant1 pain as bad for the individual, which secondary unpleasantness consists in, is typically a fitting representation, since an unpleasant1 pain is typically bad for the individual in virtue of its unpleasantness1. The combination of the second and third points implies that *some* pains (i.e. suffering pains) can be non-instrumentally bad for the individual *even if* the bodily damage they represent is not bad for the individual. This existential qualifier distinguishes Boswell’s strategy from perceptualism.

This strategy can be generalized to our theory. As we have seen, negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures are unfitting when they involve incorrect representations of their objects as possessing specific evaluative properties. However, *some* of these negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures may possess the kind of secondary unpleasantness characteristic of suffering pains. Note that, within our theory, unpleasantness2 consists in a representation of the unpleasant state to which it is attached as *unpleasurable*, rather than as bad for the individual. *This* representation can be correct, since negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures can indeed be unpleasurable, even when they are unfitting. If this is true, then there is a sense in which unfitting negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures can legitimately contribute to fitting unhappiness and, thereby, to ill-being, namely, when these states have a fitting suffering character. In these circumstances, unfitting negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures contribute to fitting unhappiness and to ill-being in virtue of their fitting suffering character.

The upshot is the following. If we generalize Boswell’s solution to the shooting-the-messenger objection, then we can hold that *some* unfitting negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures are non-instrumentally bad for the individual in virtue of their phenomenology. They are thus ill-being-increasing states. This is not true of *all* unfitting negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures, but only of *suffering* emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures. It seems to us that this is consistent with our considered intuitions. Thus, although the third strategy vindicates the badness for the individual of only some unfitting unhappiness-constituting states, this is a plausible feature of, rather than a problem for, our theory.[[18]](#footnote-18)

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2. Early supporters are [Bentham (1789/1961](#B4)) and [Mill (1863/1998](#B18)). Contemporary supporters include Kahneman ([1999](#B16)); Feldman ([2010](#B11)); Bramble ([2016](#B7)). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Supporters of life satisfactionism include, in psychology, Diener and Lukas (2009); in economics, Anand ([2009](#B1)); in philosophy, Sumner ([1996](#B34)) and Suikkanen ([2011](#B33)). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an overview of contemporary theories of well-being, see Fletcher ([2016b](#B13)). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an overview of preference satisfactionist theories, see Bykvist ([2016](#B8)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an overview of perfectionist theories, see Bradford ([2016](#B6)). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an overview of objective list theories, see Fletcher ([2016a](#B12)). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is important to note that, while the notion of fittingness occupies a central place in contemporary meta-ethical debates, for instance, in debates concerning the analysis or elucidation of evaluative concepts, we use it here to elaborate a *first-order* theory of well-being, that is, a theory of what *makes* an individual’s life go well for that individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See (Rossi and Tappolet Manuscript-b). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Kauppinen (2013) for the similar suggestion that the degree to which an affective state makes a difference to the happiness of an individual is a function of the degree to which it defines the individual’s perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For this characterization of valuings, see, amongst others, Seidman ([2009](#B30)), Scheffler ([2010](#B29)), Svavarsdóttir ([2014](#B35)). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Teroni ([2007](#B41)). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the notion of non-conceptual content, see Tappolet ([2020](#B39)). For simplicity, we will omit this qualification in what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For criticisms of this understanding of fittingness, see Svavarsdóttir ([2014](#B35)) and Howard ([2018](#B15)). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note that a similar objection could be formulated with respect to well-being. The idea is that happiness seems to be good for an individual even when unfitting, in virtue of its pleasant character. This contrasts with what our theory of well-being seems to imply. There are two possible strategies to address this objection. One consists in arguing that well-being and ill-being are asymmetric, and that the present objection applies only with respect to ill-being. For instance, this may be because unpleasantness has a different prudential status than pleasantness. The second strategy consists in holding that the solutions offered to the ill-being objection can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the symmetric well-being objection. We think the latter strategy to be preferable. In what follows, however, we will focus only on the ill-being objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Note that, earlier on, we have offered as slightly different theory of sensory displeasures, according to which the relevant evaluative property that is represented in such instances is the property of being unpleasurable. This difference aside, our theory and Bain’s belong to the same family of evaluativist theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For other strategies, see Bain ([2017](#B3)). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In footnote 15, we claimed, on the one hand, that an objection similar to the ill-being objection can be formulated in terms of well-being, and, on the other hand, that the solutions offered to the ill-being objection can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the symmetric well-being objection. We can now briefly explain how. Suppose, as it is plausible, that there exists a kind of pleasantness2, which is the equivalent for positive affective states of what unpleasantness2 is for negative affective states. Pleasantness2 is the kind of pleasantness characteristic of *enjoyed* positive emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures. On our theory, pleasantness2 consists in a representation of the pleasant1 affective state to which it is attached as *pleasurable*. As with unpleasantness2, *this* representation can be correct even when positive emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures are otherwise unfitting, since these states can nevertheless be genuinely pleasurable. If this is true, then there is one respect in which unfitting positive emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures can legitimately contribute to well-being, namely, in virtue of their fitting enjoyed character. This shows that, under certain conditions, a life lived in an ‘experience machine’ (Nozick [1974](#B20)) *can* be well-being-enhancing. To the extent that life in the machine contains fittingly enjoyed affective states, then it will contain some prudential goodness. However, insofar as this enjoyed affective states are otherwise unfitting, life in the machine will not be as prudentially good as an experientially identical life outside the machine. This is consistent with, and indeed explains, the intuitions underlying the experience machine objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)