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## Well-Being

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### 1. Introduction

The question of what it is to achieve well-being is of obvious practical significance. Whatever well-being is exactly, the concept is meant to point to something we aim at for ourselves and ought to promote for others. Insofar as well-being is an action-guiding, or normative, notion that has a role in personal deliberation and public policy, accounts of well-being are subject to competing pressures. On the one hand, “well-being” aims to pick out an empirical phenomenon that can be measured, compared, and (one hopes) realized in people’s lives: to achieve well-being is to enjoy a certain kind of life or set of experiences that we can investigate and influence. On the other hand, it has a kind of normative significance: it *makes sense* to promote well-being, procuring it is a *good* thing to do. In this chapter we aim to give an account of well-being that meets both of these demands.

Historically, philosophical conceptions of well-being (and related notions such as happiness and flourishing) have been responsive to the paired demands for normative and empirical adequacy.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s conception of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*, in his Greek), for example, is clearly intended to be action guiding: for Aristotle (NE I.8.1097b), *eudaimonia* is that at which everything aims, and his is an account of the *best* life for a human being. But Aristotle is also concerned with the empirical foundations of his conception of flourishing. In particular, since virtue is on his view necessary for happiness (NE I.8.1099b), he is pressed to give an account of the developmental psychology of virtue (NE: see II and III, esp. II.1–5). Utilitarians since Bentham (1789/1970) have been very concerned with the measurement of happiness, but they have also been at pains to argue for its value. Taking Aristotle and Bentham as our

<sup>1</sup> These notions are not coextensive, but it does make sense to compare accounts of each insofar as the account is put forward as describing the central goal of life; some of the complications this presents will emerge as we proceed.

examples, we can see, first, that questions about well-being are philosophical questions. Empirical psychological research may tell us how to measure pleasure, how to cultivate virtue, or what causes happiness, but it cannot tell us whether we ought to aim for pleasure, virtue, or happiness. Second, it makes a big difference what conception of well-being one adopts. Policies for promoting the development of virtue may be quite different from policies that produce more pleasure, and, for the individual deliberator, choosing one may be in conflict with choosing the other. Finally, we can see that though these questions are philosophical, the answers almost always make crucial empirical assumptions. For example, Aristotle (*NE*, esp. III.5) assumes that it is possible to inculcate robust and stable traits of character like the virtues, and Bentham (1789/1970, see esp. ch. 5 sec. 18–19) assumes that pleasures can be quantified and compared.

While it is true that philosophers interested in well-being have often been concerned about the empirical assumptions of their theories, few philosophers have made an effort to take account of the empirical research on this topic.<sup>2</sup> In large part, this is because this psychological research, particularly the burgeoning field of “positive psychology,” is so new that philosophers have not had a chance to address it. We suspect, however, that another part of the explanation is uncertainty about the shape that a truly interdisciplinary study of well-being would take. In this chapter we employ a methodology that we hope will reduce this uncertainty. Our argument aims to characterize well-being in a way that is both empirically grounded and able to play the role in our ethical practice that it needs to play. *Normatively*, if our account of well-being ends up being something we have no reason to care about, then we have gone wrong somewhere. *Empirically*, if an account of well-being implies that it cannot be investigated, measured, and achieved, there is reason to look elsewhere. We might call this approach, following Haybron (2008a), a “reconstructive analysis.”<sup>3</sup> In developing our own analysis, we hope to arrive at a conception that is both normatively and empirically adequate and also to provide the reader with some background and insight into the main concerns and issues in both empirical and philosophical approaches to well-being.

<sup>2</sup> Recent exceptions are Haybron (2008a) and Tiberius (2008). See also Haybron (2008b). L. W. Sumner (1996) briefly discusses the empirical research in his very influential book *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*. See also Peter Railton (unpublished ms).

<sup>3</sup> Haybron distinguishes reconstructive analysis from conceptual analysis and a scientific naturalist approach that would treat the question of the definition of well-being as purely empirical. L. W. Sumner’s (1996: 6–7) method for defining well-being is similar to reconstructive analysis, occupying a middle ground between the empirical and the conceptual.

With these goals in mind, our method for defending our preferred account of well-being will be to articulate the three main approaches to well-being in positive psychology, hedonism, eudaimonism, and life satisfaction, and to ask how well these theories meet the normative criterion. In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, we briefly argue that hedonism and eudaimonism, as represented in psychology, have difficulty explaining the normative status of well-being. Our intention is not to refute these theories (a feat that it would be foolish to attempt in a single contribution), but to motivate the turn to the life-satisfaction view, which we believe has an easier time accounting for the normative significance of well-being. Unfortunately, the life-satisfaction account of well-being has its own problems, which we consider in the remainder of Section 2. Given the instability of life-satisfaction reports, there is reason to wonder whether there is any stable phenomenon of “life satisfaction” that psychologists are investigating. If there isn’t, then the life-satisfaction theory would not be empirically adequate. We argue, in Section 3, that solving this problem for the life-satisfaction theory leads to a modified life-satisfaction account, which is superior on both empirical and normative grounds. We call this account the Value-Based Life-Satisfaction Account. In the final sections of the chapter we refine this account and take up some objections to it.

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## 2. Well-Being in Psychology

Positive psychology is a new field of psychological research that aims to correct a perceived imbalance in psychology as a whole. Since World War II, psychology has tended to focus on the negative—mental illnesses, weakness, stress, dysfunction—and how to remedy these problems when they occur; positive psychology, on the other hand, focuses on the positive aspects of human life and aims to help people live truly good lives rather than just to avoid misery (Seligman, 2002). The fact that positive psychology is gaining in popularity among researchers is evident from the number of new academic anthologies and review articles that have appeared recently.<sup>4</sup> As one might

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<sup>4</sup> Three very useful anthologies are *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-lived* (Keyes & Haidt, 2002), *The Positive Psychology Handbook* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002), and *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999). *The American Psychologist* has devoted two issues to the topic that give a good overview of the state of research: Vol. 55 (1) (2000) and Vol. 56 (3) (2001). There is also a new journal devoted to positive psychology, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, published by Routledge. The first issue of the journal begins with a report on the state of the field (Linley et al., 2006).

expect regarding such topics as happiness and the good life, positive psychology is also drawing attention outside the academy.<sup>5</sup>

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According to Martin Seligman (2002), director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, the new field of positive psychology has three pillars: positive subjective experience; positive individual characteristics (strengths and virtues); and positive institutions and communities. Given this broad account and the broad definition of “positive subjective experience,” the research projects that fall under the rubric of positive psychology are very diverse.<sup>6</sup> Of the three areas, the first two have received the most attention, as seems reasonable; we need to understand what well functioning is before we can think about designing institutions to attain it. Since the topic of virtue gets much attention elsewhere in this volume, our chapter will focus on the first and most fundamental area of research in positive psychology: the nature of happiness, well-being, or flourishing. In this domain there are three distinct research paradigms distinguished by their views about which goal of human life we ought to measure: pleasure, life satisfaction, and eudaimonia.

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### 2.1. *Hedonism*

Some of the most intriguing research in the hedonistic program has to do with people’s ability to predict future pleasures and pains and to report on past pleasures and pains.<sup>7</sup> One of Kahneman’s findings is that, in reflecting on their experiences, people’s assessments of these experiences tend to observe what he calls the “peak-end” rule (Kahneman, 1999, 2000). This means that people put greater emphasis on the most pleasant (or most painful) point of a temporally extended experience and on the quality of the experience at the very end of it. People tend to remember less well the duration of the experience, even if they were in moderate pain for the duration.

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<sup>5</sup> The *New York Times Magazine* and *Time* have both run cover stories, and popular books with yellow smiley faces on their covers abound; psychologist Dan Gilbert’s recent book *Stumbling on Happiness* was, at least for a time, ubiquitous at airport booksellers.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that “positive psychology” is not the label that would be preferred by all psychologists. Some would prefer to describe their research as “well-being research” or “hedonic psychology.” Since Martin Seligman has been very active in promoting this new field, his label seems to have the most currency at the moment. We shall use his definition of positive psychology as our working definition here.

<sup>7</sup> As an aside, one might think that this research does not, strictly speaking, fall into the category of positive psychology because it is focused on pain as well as pleasure. This raises a possible criticism of positive psychology as a field, which is that it does not make sense to think about positive experiences in isolation from negative ones (see Lazarus, 2003). Many of the responses to this target article point out that psychologists whose work is described as positive psychology do not ignore negative affect and emotions, and that the real point of the new field is to emphasize an aspect of psychology that has historically been ignored.

As Kahneman (2000: 697) describes the findings, “a simple average of the most extreme affect experienced during the episode (Peak) and the affect experienced near its end (End)” does an extremely good job of predicting the way the entire episode will be evaluated—in one study, researchers found a correlation of 0.67 between the Peak–End measure and patients’ (retrospective) evaluations of the painfulness of a colonoscopy (Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996).

Such discoveries have influenced the methods that hedonistic researchers use to measure pleasure and pain. New methods include real-time physiological measurements and online measures of experience (“Palm Pilot” studies), in which subjects are beeped at random intervals and asked to report their current hedonic state. This research should be of interest to philosophers inclined to accept hedonism insofar as they are interested in policy applications of their theories. The unreliability of retrospective self-reports complicates this application and may undermine some of the assumptions about what makes people happy that appear warranted from the armchair.

Another area of interest in hedonic research is adaptation. Studies have shown that at least in certain domains, a person’s level of positive or negative affect will adapt to her circumstances. For example, several studies have observed hedonic adaptation to incarceration after a difficult initial adjustment period.<sup>8</sup> The oft-cited “Lottery Winners and Accident Victims” reports significant adaptation to paraplegia and quadriplegia caused by accidents (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Recent research on adaptation is more cautious. It turns out that adaptation effects are limited to certain domains, that in some cases sensitization occurs instead of adaptation, and that there are other explanations for adaptation besides the existence of a hedonic set-point (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). Furthermore, according to Ed Diener, there is now good evidence that people can change their set-points and that they do not adapt to all conditions (Lucas et al., 2003, Clark et al., 2004). That said, although some think claims about adaptation have been overblown, psychologists agree that hedonic adaptation is real and that it happens to a surprising extent.

Philosophical objections to hedonism as a normative account of the good for a person are numerous, and these objections seem likely to retain their force even with the advance of research in empirical psychology. In fact, psychological research on adaptation seems to make things worse for hedonism. Elijah Millgram (2000), for instance, has used this research on psychological adaptation as part of an argument against utilitarianism. The purpose of hedonic

<sup>8</sup> See Frederick & Loewenstein (1999: 311–13) for discussion.

states, he argues, is to indicate important changes in our circumstances and hence pleasant experiences are not the kind of thing that can be maximized.<sup>9</sup>

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A second objection to hedonism as a normative account of well-being is its inability to distinguish between different kinds of pleasure. According to the psychologists' version of hedonism, the pleasure induced by taking soma is no less valuable than the pleasure caused by the birth of a child or the completion of an important project. Hedonism lacks the resources to draw distinctions between sources of pleasant affect, but many people share John Stuart Mill's (1871/1999, see esp. 56–59) intuition that some pleasures are better than others, independent of their quantity.<sup>10</sup> This criticism becomes especially pointed when we consider hedonism as a basis for policy: if the same amount of pleasure could be produced by piping mind-numbing muzak into the factory as by giving people more leisure time so that they could pursue projects they care about, hedonism cannot tell us where to invest our resources. Those who have the view that pleasures taken in activities that engage our capacities are better than drug-induced pleasures (and we suspect there are many in this camp) will find this conclusion wrong-headed.

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Finally, as has seemed obvious to many philosophers, there just seem to be things that are part of a good life (even a subjectively good life) that cannot be reduced to positive affect: for example, achievement, genuine friendship, and knowledge.<sup>11</sup> To see the point, consider the tortured artist who is living the life he wants to live despite a lack of pleasant affect. Or consider the famously tormented philosopher, Wittgenstein, whose alleged last words were: “Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life” (Monk, 1990: 579).

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## 2.2. *Eudaimonism*

Worries about the normative significance of positive affect and other psychological notions are one reason to embrace eudaimonism. Eudaimonistic researchers develop accounts of well-being that focus on vital human needs and emphasize self-actualization or development rather than positive affect. Two such programs are Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2008) self-determination theory of well-being and Ryff and Singer's multidimensional account. Ryff and Singer's (1998) account “taps six distinct aspects of human actualization:

<sup>9</sup> Railton (unpublished ms) makes a similar argument.

<sup>10</sup> Mill distinguishes different *qualities* of pleasure. Hedonists in psychology have not followed Mill in attributing different worth to different kinds of pleasures. Philosophers have also been skeptical about this distinction; for a discussion of criticisms of Mill, see Feldman (1997), ch. 6.

<sup>11</sup> For the classic statement of the objection see Nozick (1974). See also Sumner's chapter on hedonism in his 1996 and Haybron (unpublished ms). For defenses of hedonism, see Feldman (2004) and Crisp (2006).



autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness” (Ryan & Deci, 2001: 146). Ryan and Deci’s account posits three basic human needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The fulfillment of these needs, according to their theory (2000: 247), is essential for psychological growth, integrity, and well-being (by which they mean life satisfaction and psychological health).

Because of the emphasis on relatedness as a cause or constituent of well-being, the eudaimonistic paradigm has also fostered interesting work on the nature of good or positive relationships (Reis & Gable, 2003). One example with philosophical relevance is psychologist Shelly Gable’s work on relationships, which shows that the quality of intimate relationships people have affects their well-being in ways that go beyond their direct contribution as a component of well-being. According to Gable, good, trusting relationships contribute to the construction of well-being by providing an outlet for capitalization on good fortune. By having subjects keep a diary of the “most important positive event of the day” and whether or not they shared this event with others, and then having subjects complete daily assessments of both life satisfaction and positive and negative affect, Gable et al. (2004: 241) found that “telling others about positive events [capitalization] was associated with higher positive affect and greater life satisfaction.” In addition, receiving “active and constructive” responses to one’s sharing increased these effects above and beyond the sharing itself. They offer several explanations for this phenomenon: sharing these events may allow one to relive the positive experience, and in doing so may increase the salience and accessibility of the event in one’s memory. Furthermore, when others respond positively to such reports, this may enhance and strengthen the “social bond” one feels with others, while also reinforcing the impression that others are pleased on one’s behalf, which, Gable et al. hypothesize, may increase self-esteem.

Consequentialism in moral philosophy is standardly understood as the view that the morally best action is the one that produces the best consequences overall, taking everyone into consideration (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). This view has been attacked on the grounds that it makes insufficient room for personal connections and the partiality we show toward our loved ones in virtue of our relationships with them (Smart & Williams, 1973; but see Railton, 1984). Lori Gruen (2003) has argued that Gable’s work adds to the case for the importance of personal relationships in a consequentialist framework. Personal relationships, the thought is, have complex and pervasive causal influence on happiness that we miss if we focus only on the pleasures of friendship itself. In a survey of research on relationships and happiness, David Myers cites several studies that corroborate this hypothesis. For example, students who named five

or more close friends with whom they had discussed important events during the last six months were 60% more likely to describe themselves as “very happy” than their peers who had fewer than five friends with whom they’d discussed such matters (Myers, 1999: 378).

The philosophical debate about whether the value of friendship can be accommodated within a consequentialist framework will not be settled by this empirical work. Even if Gruen is correct that Gable’s research provides resources for the consequentialist, the charge that consequentialism misses the true value of friendship by putting it in the maximizing hopper still looms. However, this debate may be enriched by thinking about what exactly is important about friendship, and this is an area where empirical psychology has something to contribute.

The eudaimonistic program has also produced work on materialistic values (roughly defined to include, primarily, money, and status) and their relationship to well-being. Psychologists have found that, while income has relatively little effect on subjective well-being, caring a lot about income and possessions is a good predictor of low scores on many well-being indicators (Kasser, 2002).

Kasser and Ryan (1996) found that subjects to whom financial success was important were more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, and less likely to experience positive emotions. They were also less likely to report overall satisfaction with their lives. Interestingly, this result is found not only in adults, who are in the workplace, but also in teenagers who had not yet entered college (Kasser, 2002). Furthermore, Kasser reports that individuals who had attained their materialistic goals experienced no increase in subjective well-being, and that individuals who prioritized material achievements to the point of exclusion of non-materialistic achievements actually experienced lower subjective well-being overall than their counterparts who prioritized non-materialistic goals. Finally, attaining non-materialistic goals led subjects to experience an increase in subjective well-being, while attaining material goals caused no increase (Kasser, 2002).

Eudaimonism has in its favor that it can acknowledge differences between types of subjective experience. According to eudaimonism, pleasures that result from self-actualization or relating to other people would be more valuable than physical pleasures because the value of pleasure would supervene on the satisfaction of a vital human need. It also makes sense of our well-documented inability to predict what will make us happy (Gilbert, 2006; Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999). To many of us, at times, it seems that if we just had a little bit more money, a bigger house, a better car, we would really be happier. This turns out to be much less often the case than one might have thought.

According to eudaimonism, this is because what matters is getting what we need, not getting what we want.

Eudaimonism makes sense of this phenomenon at a cost, however. The eudaimonistic paradigm builds quite specific norms into its account of well-being and thereby invites the charge that it creates too large a gap between well-being and subjective experience. This gap gives rise to concerns about the justification of eudaimonistic norms. If the justification of needs-based norms ultimately depends on the assumption that satisfying these needs brings us more pleasure, or makes us subjectively happier, then the theory on offer is not really a distinct alternative to hedonism or life satisfaction. Moreover, if this is *not* how needs-based norms are justified, it is difficult to see how eudaimonism can have a legitimate claim to be action-guiding in general (and not just for people who already identify with it). Since well-being is supposed to be a good *for* the subject (Sumner, 1996), norms that have authority in virtue of something external to the subject are suspect. In the context of policy application, these concerns take the form of the charge of paternalism.<sup>12</sup> Given that the eudaimonistic program relies on substantive normative assumptions about what constitutes a good life, the question might be posed: why should researchers' and academics' assumptions about what constitutes well-being serve as a guide to policy that will affect individuals who may not share those assumptions?

Unlike hedonism, eudaimonism gives advice and recommendations that are compelling from a normative standpoint. Our argument, though, is that eudaimonism must piggy-back on some other account of well-being for its normative force. Insofar as such theories furnish compelling advice about how to live, this is so because we want, prefer, or care about the things that eudaimonism tells us we need.

### 2.3. *The life-Satisfaction Program*

According to the life-satisfaction theory (LST), well-being consists in holding an overall positive appraisal or endorsement of your life. At first glance, LST seems well suited to answer our normative concerns. Unlike hedonism, LST can distinguish qualitative differences between pleasurable experiences and count them differentially as part of a person's well-being: if the subject does not find pushpin to be as important as poetry to how her life is going, then LST will place more value on poetry in its assessment. Unlike eudaimonism,

<sup>12</sup> Diener and Suh (2000: 4), for example, suggest that eudaimonism is paternalistic and that life satisfaction ought to be privileged because it is more democratic.

LST does not build in arbitrary external norms about what must be achieved for a life to go well: it is the subject's *own* norms that count.

Life-satisfaction researchers try to measure the degree to which people are satisfied with their lives overall. As Diener, Scollon, and Lucas (2003: 196) put it, “[p]resumably, individuals can examine the conditions in their lives, weigh the importance of these conditions, and then evaluate their lives on a scale ranging from dissatisfied to satisfied.” Life satisfaction itself is “a positive cognitive/affective response on the part of a subject to (some or all of) the conditions or circumstances of her life” (Sumner, 1996: 156).<sup>13</sup> Subjective well-being (SWB), according to Diener and his colleagues, comprises life satisfaction, domain satisfaction, high positive affect, and low negative affect (Diener et al., 2003: 189).

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Psychologists typically discover people's judgments of overall life satisfaction by using self-report measures. One of the most widely used scales for assessing life satisfaction is Ed Diener's *Satisfaction With Life Scale*, a five-item instrument designed to measure global assessments of life satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> Diener's scale asks subjects to indicate their level of agreement (on a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) with the following five items:

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- In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Self-reports, though important, are not the only method used. Peer-informant reports and online measures of experience (such as the Palm Pilot studies mentioned above in the context of hedonism) can also be used to measure life satisfaction and, according to Diener and Suh (2000: 6): “We will find ourselves standing on more firm ground if we find that our conclusions converge across measurement methods.”

A major concern of life-satisfaction researchers has been to discover its causes and correlates. One reason for this might be an important study by Lykken

<sup>13</sup> We follow the philosopher Sumner here, since his definition of life satisfaction is consistent with most of what psychologists say and since psychologists' definitions are sometimes confused. For example, Diener, Scollon, & Lucas (2003: 196) *identify* life satisfaction with the judgment: “We refer to this global, cognitive judgment as life satisfaction.” But this can't be what they really intend. After all, if we're not filling out a questionnaire, we're unlikely to be making such judgments explicitly; nevertheless there is a fact of the matter about our subjective well-being even when we are not filling out questionnaires or answering psychologists' questions.

<sup>14</sup> Other scales are sometimes used (e.g. Veenhoven, 1997; Andrews & Withey, 1976), but the differences between them are not significant for our purposes.

and Tellegen (1996), which showed that life satisfaction has a large genetic component. If well-being were entirely genetically determined, it would not be a helpful goal for social policy, short of technological advances in gene manipulation, or ethically suspect and politically untenable eugenics. Concerns about the practical applications of their work have therefore influenced psychologists to look into other causes. Fortunately for this research program, life satisfaction is not entirely a matter of one's genes; while there is evidence for a significant genetic contribution to subjective well-being, life-satisfaction researchers believe that there is enough evidence for an environmental contribution that it makes sense to think about well-being as something that might be influenced by personal effort or social intervention. (Of course, no one, save the most extreme Stoics,<sup>15</sup> doubts that many things that might affect our well-being are outside of our control, such as illness, bereavement, etc.; the point here is just that well-being is not genetically determined, and that, within certain limits, we can take actions and make decisions that will affect and change our well-being.)

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In this light, life-satisfaction researchers have been particularly interested in correlations between life satisfaction and conditions of life over which people might have control. Their findings are that many things correlate well with life satisfaction: mental health, strong social ties, satisfying work, satisfying leisure time, goal achievement, self-esteem, and frequency of sex and exercise.<sup>16</sup> Recent work also shows that volunteer work and other altruistic actions are correlated with life satisfaction (Piliavin, 2002). One of the most robust correlations is with strong social ties. In one study, Diener and Seligman (2002) divided subjects into three groups (based on peer reports of affect, self-reports of life satisfaction, and self-reports of affect both global and daily): high-, average-, and low-happiness individuals. They found that all members of the high-happiness group reported having good social relationships (reports that were corroborated by informants), and therefore concluded that "social relationships form a necessary but not sufficient condition for high happiness."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Annas (1993) and Nussbaum (1994) for discussion of the Stoic position.

<sup>16</sup> Correlations range from 0.48 for self-esteem to 0.68 for satisfying leisure time. Correlations for mental health, social ties, satisfaction with work and leisure, and frequency of sex and exercise are from Argyle (1999). Correlations with self-esteem are from Diener & Diener (1995). It is worth noting that the correlations presented here for work satisfaction and satisfying leisure time are based on surveys conducted in European nations. Argyle points out that the results have been found to be reversed in some Asian cultures, such as Japan. On the correlation of life satisfaction with goal attainment see Emmons (2003). Because of the flexibility of goals, some psychologists have come close to taking the satisfaction of goals to be the defining feature of well-being. See, for example, Oishi (2000); Schmuck & Sheldon (2001).

<sup>17</sup> Argyle (1999) also reports a large correlation between happiness and "strong social support" (0.50, although number of friends correlates much less strongly with happiness, at 0.15).

The discovery that people who are satisfied with their lives have close friendships and social ties will not come as a shock to anyone, of course: perhaps more surprising is what does *not* correlate with life satisfaction. Diener and Seligman, in the above study, found little or no difference between their groups when it came to activities such as eating, sleeping, religious participation, television watching, and factors such as income, grades, and physical attractiveness. Perhaps the most surprising result, at least to those not steeped in ancient philosophy, is that income is not a great predictor of life satisfaction or other well-being indicators. Diener and Biswas-Diener (2002) report that, across a wide range of individuals and societies the correlation between individual income and life satisfaction is only about 0.13. There is evidence that GDP per capita is not highly correlated with high life satisfaction (Diener & Oishi, 2000), and that a nation's economic growth does not correlate with an increase in life satisfaction (Diener & Biswas-Diener 2002).<sup>18</sup>

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While it is well established that some expected strong correlations between wealth and happiness do not exist, it is important not to overstate the case. Getting one's basic needs met is surely an important factor in life satisfaction, and cross-cultural studies seem to confirm this idea. For example, mean national income correlates strongly with subjective well-being, with a correlation of 0.60 (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, at an individual level, correlations between income and SWB increase in strength as the wealth of the society decreases. Thus income is much more highly correlated with life satisfaction in the slums of Calcutta than in upper-class neighborhoods in the US. So, for example, Diener and Suh report correlations between income and life satisfaction in the US ranging from 0.10 to 0.15, whereas this correlation rises to 0.38 in South Africa, and Argyle reports a correlation of 0.68 in Tanzania. One explanation for these results is that, in very poor countries, greater income may mean the ability to meet basic human needs such as the needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Thus Argyle proposes, "money makes a greater difference to the quality of life when it is spent on food, housing, and other necessities than when it is spent on larger cars, works of art, antiques, and jewelry" (1999: 358). Finally, the research on income has generated some controversy over how to interpret small correlations between life satisfaction and income. Some psychologists are now arguing that these small correlations

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<sup>18</sup> For a very recent challenge to this last claim (known as the Easterlin paradox—Easterlin, 1974), see Stevenson & Wolfers (2008).

<sup>19</sup> In this and other papers on the topic, Diener and his colleagues use life satisfaction as their primary indicator of subjective well-being; however, they do sometimes use additional measures, and emphasize that the addition of other measures—such as asking subjects about their financial satisfaction—does not significantly alter the results.

“result from the large variability in happiness between individuals but do not indicate trivial mean-level differences between rich and poor” (Diener, 2008: 499).

Cross-cultural studies have not been confined to questions about income. Life-satisfaction researchers have done significant work investigating cultural differences in causes of life satisfaction other than material resources.<sup>20</sup> An interesting finding is that life satisfaction is less highly correlated with self-esteem in so-called collectivist cultures (for example, Asian cultures) than it is in so-called individualistic cultures (for example, North American cultures) (Diener & Diener, 1995). This is not entirely surprising in light of the fact that individualist cultures characterize persons in terms of “personal attributes” rather than social context, whereas collectivist cultures employ a conception of the person that “understands persons in relation to group affiliations and social roles” (Doris & Plakias, 2008: 323; see Nisbett, 2003 for an in-depth discussion). Similarly, some psychologists argue that the correlation between life satisfaction and autonomy varies depending on whether one is in a collectivist or individualistic culture. These findings about autonomy have been disputed, however, on the grounds that the definition of autonomy used in the studies is incorrect. According to Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2001: 160), “a major conceptual issue in research on autonomy and well-being concerns the constant confusion in the literature between independence (nonreliance) and autonomy (volition).” The authors argue that while the correlation between autonomy as freedom from other people and positive subjective states is culturally variable, there is good evidence for the claim that autonomy as “self-endorsement” correlates well with positive affect in all cultures.

Research on cultural differences may also be of interest to those interested in developing substantive accounts of human flourishing or well-being for the purpose of providing relevant standards for international justice and human rights. Diener and Seligman, two of the most prominent psychologists in this field, are keenly aware of the public policy implications of their research. Further, their recent work demonstrates an interest in promoting this use of the research. For example, they are involved in a project to develop national indicators of well-being, and have recently co-authored a paper in which they argue explicitly for including well-being measures in addition to standard economic measures in the assessment of policy. The conclusion of this jointly

<sup>20</sup> A number of studies have also been done to measure relative degrees of life satisfaction in different cultures. The data here show that Iceland, Denmark, and Switzerland are the happiest, closely followed by certain Latin American nations. Eastern European cultures (Bulgaria, Russia, and Belarus) are the least happy. Diener and Suh (1999).

authored paper gives a good indication of how this research might inform policy:

The existing findings suggest the following partial formula for high well-being:

- Live in a democratic and stable society that provides material resources to meet needs
- Have supportive friends and family
- Have rewarding and engaging work and an adequate income
- Be reasonably healthy and have treatment available in case of mental problems
- Have important goals related to one's values
- Have a philosophy or religion that provides guidance, purpose, and meaning to one's life. (Diener & Seligman, 2004: 25)

Diener and Seligman are not focused only on life-satisfaction research here, but they clearly think that satisfaction with life measures will play an important role in policy evaluation.<sup>21</sup>

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#### 2.4. *A Problem for the Life-Satisfaction Program*

The life-satisfaction program is well established and fruitful. It also seems not to be subject to the same worries about normative inadequacy that troubled psychologists' versions of hedonism and eudaimonism. Before we can conclude that LST is the way to go, however, we need to confront a serious problem that arises for it, namely, that the life-satisfaction program as it stands must treat all positive responses to the conditions of one's life as equally authoritative.

The life-satisfaction program presupposes that people make overall assessments of their lives that represent or express something important, something that answers to the concerns people have when thinking about well-being, and something that can be used to make meaningful comparisons between people or across the lifespan of a single person. We suggested above that these judgments are important in virtue of their expressing a relatively stable positive cognitive/affective attitude toward one's life.

According to some empirical studies, however, these assumptions are problematic. Such studies tell us that the judgments people make about how their lives are going as a whole are highly context-dependent. Judgments of overall life satisfaction (JOLS), it seems, are dependent on several variables: what information (memories, facts about oneself and one's options, and so forth)

<sup>21</sup> The use of happiness and life-satisfaction measures by governments to assess national progress is already under way in the UK and, to an even greater extent, in Bhutan (see [www.number-10.gov.uk/su/ls/paper.pdf](http://www.number-10.gov.uk/su/ls/paper.pdf); also <http://bhutanstudies.org.bt>).

is accessible at the time of making the judgment, how the information is used (whether it is assimilated into the target of judgment or used as a point of comparison), one's perception of social norms, and one's mood.<sup>22</sup> These studies suggest either that JOLS are not reliable measures of people's stable feelings and life-satisfaction attitudes, or (worse) that life-satisfaction attitudes themselves are not stable responses to the relevant, objective conditions of life. We focus on the latter challenge to LST since the former challenge is not fundamental and could be solved by improving measurement tools, and since it seems to us that psychologists who press this criticism do indeed intend the latter, more serious challenge (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). On this view, JOLS and life-satisfaction attitudes are shaped by the information that is accessible to us at the time of making the judgment and by other factors such as mood. (In the discussion that follows we shall continue to talk about *judgments* of overall life satisfaction and to assume for the sake of argument that these judgments accurately represent underlying life satisfaction attitudes.) Which facts people happen to remember and think about while making a judgment about their lives shapes the way in which they construct the bits of their lives to be evaluated, and it helps to determine what we take the relevant standard of evaluation to be.

When psychologists manipulate the information that is accessible, they can change the kinds of judgments subjects tend to make. For example, priming subjects so that they are thinking about excitement makes these subjects more likely to evaluate their own lives in terms of how much excitement they have (Oishi et al., 2003). Similarly, some studies have shown that changing the item order on questionnaires influences the subjects' reports of life satisfaction. For example, Strack, Martin, and Schwarz (1988) asked students two questions: "how happy are you?" and "how many dates did you have last month?" When the general happiness question was presented first, there was no correlation between the two responses, but when the dating question was presented first, the correlation rose to 0.66.

Studies also show that memories of experiences and feelings can play different roles in the construction of life-satisfaction reports. Strongly valenced experiences, for example, influence people's JOLS based on how they are used. Extreme negative experiences can cause people to evaluate their lives more positively if they are seen as the contrast class to how things are now, or they can cause people to evaluate their lives negatively if they are seen as part of the target of the judgment. How we attempt to answer questions about how

<sup>22</sup> For a review of this literature see Schwarz & Strack (1999). See also Kahneman (1999) and Oishi et al. (2003).

our lives are going also has effects on our answers. For example, the act of trying to explain a negative experience can cause people to become self-pitying and depressed, and so to evaluate their lives as going less well than otherwise (Martin & Tesser, 1989). JOLS are also influenced by the comparison class a person constructs for herself. What a person chooses as a point of comparison is again influenced by the information that is accessible at the time and also by the goals she is pursuing at that moment (Schwarz & Strack, 1999: 74). This phenomenon is illustrated by a study that demonstrated the effect that having a disabled person in the room has on people's reports about their well-being (Strack et al., 1990).<sup>23</sup> People tend to evaluate their lives as going better when there is a disabled person in the room than they do when the disabled person is not there, presumably because the disabled person changes the evaluative standard that the person uses in her judgment.

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This study highlights the problem of intrapersonal comparisons given the practical nature of the notion of well-being. The average subject in this study makes two different assessments of the conditions of her life and the question is which (if any) is most relevant to her well-being. One could say that both assessments are relevant because well-being itself is variable from context to context. But this response abandons the plausible thought that well-being is a relatively stable state—as Aristotle famously remarked, “one swallow does not make a spring . . . nor does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy” (*NE* I.7). Moreover, it would be seriously problematic for practical purposes. Insofar as our interest in well-being is driven by a concern to improve the conditions of people's lives, we need to have a stable basis of comparison. In other words, we need to know which of these assessments we should take as the basis for comparing subjects' well-being over time.

The problem with context sensitivity for psychological research in the life-satisfaction paradigm is that it introduces the suspicion that there isn't any stable disposition underlying the particular self-reports corresponding to a notion of life satisfaction that can be plausibly identified with well-being. An alternative explanation is that there is an underlying disposition but we do not have a good way of measuring it. Psychologists who have pushed this objection against the life-satisfaction program seem to think that in the absence of other evidence for a stable underlying disposition, the deeper skepticism is warranted (Schwarz & Strack, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> This experiment relies on the fact that people *assume* that disabled people are doing less well than non-disabled people. This may very well be an incorrect and prejudiced assumption, but it is the view many people seem to have.

### 2.5. *Stability After All?*

While some studies show life-satisfaction judgments to be variable and context-sensitive, there are other studies that indicate stability for a subset of life-satisfaction judgments. For example, the correlation between overall life satisfaction and domain satisfaction has been well established. A domain, in this context, is simply an aspect of an individual's life that the individual deems important to how her life is going in general. So, for example, Schimmack and Oishi (2005) asked their subjects to list the five most important aspects of their lives, and asked them how satisfied they were with these aspects. Examples of domains include "social relationships, achievements, conditions of your life, or the performance of your favorite sports team" (ibid.: 14). In their study, Schimmack and Oishi correlated subjects' satisfaction with these domains with life-satisfaction judgments and found high retest stability in judgments that correlated well with domain-specific satisfaction (this stability was also found when the domains were not self-generated but rather chosen from a list provided by the researchers). In other words, people who are satisfied in the domains they think are most important will report high overall life satisfaction consistently. Schimmack and Oishi report a general global-specific correlation of 0.70, meaning that subjects' ratings of satisfaction with "important domains" of their lives were highly correlated with overall ratings of global life satisfaction. Furthermore, item order did not appear to have a significant effect on correlations between satisfaction with specific (important) domains and global life satisfaction (ibid.: 15–17).

In addition, Schimmack and Oishi found high retest stability in life-satisfaction judgments and have argued that this stability is due to the fact that people rely on relevant and chronically accessible information in order to form the judgments.<sup>24</sup> These studies indicate that changes in *domain* satisfaction predict changes in *overall* life satisfaction.

Studies that demonstrate stability due to reliance on relevant sources also recognize that there are causes of variability in JOLS; for example, the studies are consistent with variation in JOLS that has to do with a person's mood.<sup>25</sup> Diener does not deny that there are sources of instability in life-satisfaction judgments, but he thinks that there is enough stability in them to support

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<sup>24</sup> Retest correlation of global life-satisfaction judgments at the beginning and the end of a 3-month semester was 0.73 (Schimmack et al., 2002). See also Pavot & Diener (1993). Pavot & Diener's study shows a retest correlation of 0.82 over a 2-month period and 0.54 over a period of 4 years.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, Schimmack has shown that people can successfully eliminate the effects of mood when they are asked to do so. See Schimmack et al. (2002: 359).

FN:26 the claim that they are meaningful.<sup>26</sup> These studies, therefore, do not entirely eliminate concerns about instability, but they do give us reason to think of them as measurement problems rather than as evidence that there is no stable underlying disposition to be measured.

Instability in JOLS causes a problem for the life-satisfaction program because it raises the suspicion that there is no object of measurement that corresponds to the original notion of overall life satisfaction. Given context effects, JOLS look like made-up pronouncements about how things are going overall that are really determined by temporary and situational factors. The research we have been discussing in this section tries to solve this problem by pointing to enduring factors that provide a basis for stable JOLS. The implication here is that only certain JOLS—those that report a stable condition of life—are closely related to well-being. JOLS are relevant to assessments of well-being, then, only if they abstract from mood and irrelevant distractions and focus on important domains.

It seems that overall life satisfaction that is based on satisfaction in important domains is stable enough for the purposes of psychological studies. Whether it meets the normative criterion central to philosophical accounts is the question we turn to next.

### 3. Life Satisfaction and Normativity

The problem of instability points to a different problem for life-satisfaction theories of well-being, one which is not necessarily solved by appeal to the conditions under which such judgments are stable. This problem is the *normative arbitrariness* of JOLS. The empirical studies highlight the problem of arbitrariness because they reveal that selective attention heavily influences a person's subjective point of view, and what people happen to attend to seems arbitrary in a way that other things do not.<sup>27</sup> The instability of life-satisfaction judgments in response to apparently arbitrary changes in circumstances (such as the weather) highlights the worry that such judgments

<sup>26</sup> According to Diener & Lucas (1999: 214), "Researchers know that the strong form of this hypothesis—that SWB judgments reflect only stable and meaningful conditions of people's lives—is untrue. Momentary factors such as current mood and even current weather conditions can affect judgments of life satisfaction . . . Yet in spite of these transitory influences, SWB is moderately stable across situations . . . and across the life span . . . suggesting that long-term SWB does exist."

<sup>27</sup> This is one of Haybron's (2007) main criticisms of life-satisfaction accounts. He thinks that life satisfaction varies with our perspective and that the choice of which perspective to take when judging how our lives are going is arbitrary.



are themselves arbitrary. Since well-being is supposed to be a normatively significant notion, the thought that it is made up of arbitrary assessments, or that the judgments that are relevant to it are arbitrarily chosen, is unsettling.

One obvious response to these problems is to give up on life satisfaction as the key to understanding well-being as a normative notion. One could do this by giving up on subjective well-being altogether or one could do it by substituting a different understanding of what precisely is relevant about subjective experience, for example, by returning to hedonism and the view that pleasurable subjective experiences are the key to well-being.

We want to resist both of these alternative directions. Instead, we seek to vindicate overall life satisfaction as crucial to well-being. The main reason for doing this is the need to ensure the *normative authority* of well-being so that we can justify the role it undoubtedly plays in discussions of practical reason and public policy. We can understand “normative authority” as the feature in virtue of which people have a reason to follow the imperatives of the normative theory. A theory of well-being that has normative authority, then, will be one that people have a reason to follow. For well-being in particular, these reasons must be motivating and justifying reasons. Therefore a good theory of well-being must make sure (1) that people (everyone to whom the theory is supposed to apply) will have some motivation to care about what the theory recommends and (2) that there are standards of justification (correctness or appropriateness) for these recommendations; there is no normativity without the possibility of error, nothing we *ought* to do unless we could fail to do it. We think a theory that takes life satisfaction to be central to well-being is best suited to meet these two criteria.

Life-satisfaction theories have a leg-up, we argue, because of the particular way in which they locate well-being in the subjective point of view. We will elaborate on this point in the next section. For now it will help to compare life-satisfaction theories with our two alternatives. Eudaimonist theories, insofar as they represent a distinct alternative, do not locate well-being in subjective experience at all, thus creating a gap between the theory’s recommendations and people’s motivations. Hedonism arbitrarily privileges a particular subjective experience (pleasure) without regard to how important this experience is from the subject’s own point of view. Such arbitrary privileging will make the theory’s recommendations seem unjustified to those who do not care most about pleasure. Of course, it remains to be seen how a life-satisfaction theory can solve this problem of arbitrariness; we turn to this problem in the next section.

### 3.1. *The Values-Based Life-Satisfaction Account*

The instability of life-satisfaction judgments gives rise to worries about the basis for these judgments and the underlying disposition they are meant to report. Once we acknowledge that people's judgments of life satisfaction can be influenced by all manner of variations in their circumstances, we begin to wonder why these judgments are normatively significant. If a person can make different assessments of how her life is going depending on whether she compares herself to someone worse off or better off than her, whether she factors in or ignores her current mood, or whether she thinks about her marriage, health, or career before thinking about her life overall, then it makes sense to ask which of these judgments matters and why. Insofar as they are concerned only with empirical adequacy, psychologists can solve the problem by insisting that the judgments that matter are whichever judgments lead to a stable object of measurement. But this does not answer our normative questions: the fact that something is stable does not guarantee that it is a good thing to promote. For example, a smoker may have a very stable desire for tobacco, but this does not necessarily make cigarettes good for him, even from his own point of view. In particular, restricting our attention to life-satisfaction assessments made on the basis of domains that are important to the subject will solve the problem only if subjectively important domains are themselves normatively significant.

Notice that the subjectively important domains that underlie stable life-satisfaction reports are very similar to a person's *values*. Insofar as values are a normative notion, introducing values into our life-satisfaction theory can help to answer the problem of normative arbitrariness. In short, the view we shall defend says that it is satisfaction with how one's life is going overall *with respect to one's values* that counts as well-being. In other words, life satisfaction constitutes well-being when it is a response to how life is going according to certain standards, and these standards are provided by a person's values.<sup>28</sup> Before elaborating the view, it will help to say more about the notion of a value.

We mean to be very inclusive about what counts as a value: values can include activities, relationships, goals, aims, ideals, principles, and so on. This is not the place to defend a fully developed conception of a value, but there are three features that we think are important if values are to play a role in an

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<sup>28</sup> The view is similar to a subjective theory of happiness defended provisionally by Richard Kraut (1979), according to which the standards for happiness must be the agent's own standards. Kraut moved away from subjectivism in later work (1994).

FN:29 account of life satisfaction.<sup>29</sup> First, values must be normative from the point of view of the person who has them: that is, a person takes her values to provide good reasons for doing things. This must be the case if values are to answer the problem of normative arbitrariness. Second, values include an affective component: part of what it is to care about something in the way distinctive of valuing is to have some positive emotional response toward it. This must be the case if values are to provide the ground for the positive attitude of life satisfaction. Third, values are relatively stable, as they must be on our view since well-being itself is relatively stable.

This way of characterizing values introduces the possibility that values are subject to *standards* of justification. A value can be more or less reason-giving from a person's own point of view, more or less suited to produce positive emotions for a person, and more or less stable. This is convenient, because (as discussed above) if values are to solve the problem of normative arbitrariness, they must be subject to standards of correctness or appropriateness. We think that our rough characterization of values above suggests two such standards, which we might call the standard of affective appropriateness and the standard of information.<sup>30</sup> Information hasn't been mentioned yet, but its importance is clear: values that are sustained by false beliefs are unlikely to be stable because new information will put pressure on them to change. Moreover, values based on false beliefs about what one's emotional needs are, or what one will find satisfying, are unlikely to produce a positive emotional response over the long term. We shall call values that meet these standards of appropriateness *justified values*.

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

<sup>29</sup> See Tiberius (2000, 2008) for a more fully developed picture.

<sup>30</sup> If our theory is to retain the close relationship between well-being and subjective experience, it must be the case that the standards of affective appropriateness and information are standards that the person herself would count as making her values more justified. Whether or not people actually think their values ought to be informed and compatible with their emotional constitution is an empirical question that we cannot answer here. (Notice that this question opens the door for another interdisciplinary research project the aim of which would be to ascertain which norms of value improvement people accept.) We think it reasonable to assume that people want to be committed to things that fit their emotional natures, because negative affect has detrimental effects that are not confined to the subjective character of our experience. We also think it reasonable to assume that people want not to be misinformed, because false information has a way of frustrating long-term goals.

case the goal is not affectively appropriate) and her underlying motivation to be a doctor is a desire for her parents' approval (in which case the value is sustained by false beliefs about her real motivations). In this case the standards that make her values normative are not met. As long as we make room for the possibility of defeaters when the context requires, a psychologically realistic conception of a person's values can do the necessary work in a normative account of well-being.

Let us call the resulting account of well-being the *values-based life-satisfaction account* (VBLS). According to VBLS, life satisfaction is a positive cognitive/affective attitude toward one's life as a whole, and life satisfaction constitutes well-being when it is not defeated by considerations that undermine its normative authority. Defeaters can be of two types: first, life satisfaction does not count as well-being if it is not based on one's values at all (e.g. if the feeling of life satisfaction is primarily the result of an irrelevant change in circumstances, such as a change in the weather).<sup>31</sup> Second, life satisfaction does not count as well-being if the values that it is based on do not meet the standards for values, that is, if they are ill informed or ill suited to the person's affective nature. When life satisfaction is based on justified values, it is value-based life satisfaction and it constitutes well-being. The judgments of overall life satisfaction that a person makes when answering questions on a life-satisfaction scale are, on this view, *evidence* for value-based life satisfaction.

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But now we have a problem. To what degree must life satisfaction be "undefeated" in order to count as well-being? Must it be entirely a response to how life is going according to one's values, without any influence at all from irrelevant circumstantial factors? Must the values in question be fully informed and perfectly emotionally appropriate? This sets the bar too high and has two undesirable implications—first, that well-being is quite significantly divorced from people's actual experiences,<sup>32</sup> and, consequently second, that well-being cannot be measured empirically. The problem is that life satisfaction and values must be somewhat idealized to solve the problem of arbitrariness, but too much idealization sacrifices both empirical accessibility and the close connection to the subject that well-being demands. Our question, then, is: how ideal is ideal enough?

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<sup>31</sup> Our answer to the "experience machine objection" (Nozick, 1974) comes from this requirement. For those who value having real experiences, life satisfaction would not be a response to how they are succeeding at meeting their standards if it is based on false beliefs about how they are actually doing. Thus, we agree with Sumner (1996) that real experiences are privileged only for those who value them.

<sup>32</sup> This is a problem for so called full-information theories (Brandt, 1979; Griffin, 1986; Railton, 1986) of the good that idealize subjective responses to a very high degree. For criticisms see Rosati (1995), Velleman (1988), and Tiberius (1997).

Our answer to this question is: it depends. Before we can make this answer plausible, we need to insist that the important question to answer is an epistemological one, not a metaphysical one. In other words, what matters is how certain we must be when we make judgments about well-being that a person's life satisfaction is not defeated by its failure to meet the various standards. There is, obviously, another question about the nature of well-being itself: how ideal must life satisfaction be to *constitute* the stuff of well-being? We think this question does not need to be answered. Insofar as concerns about well-being are practical concerns that have to do with promoting one's own or others' well-being, it is the epistemological question that matters.

To answer the question of how certain we must be that life satisfaction meets the relevant standards, it will help to think about why it is such a common move in philosophy to idealize subjective states in order to account for normative notions. Of course, correcting for errors is desirable—but why? The reason is that judgments about normative notions like well-being lead people to act in ways that have significant costs that are supposed to be offset by significant benefits. We want the benefits to be likely, long term, and real, and we want the costs to be worth bearing. The problem with unidealized subject states (such as desires or feelings of life satisfaction) is that they can go awry in ways that make acting to promote them useless or counterproductive. To take a simple example, Peter Railton's (1986) dehydrated Lonnie wants to drink milk, which is actually bad for him because he is dehydrated. His desire for milk is uninformed and if Lonnie knew he were dehydrated he would want to drink clear fluids, which would help ameliorate his condition. If we try to promote Lonnie's well-being by attending to his *actual* desires, we will fail to benefit him in an obvious way. Since the cost of failure (Lonnie's death!) is high, an account of well-being that does not prevent such failures is a practical disaster.

Lonnie's case is easy. There is an obvious fact that he doesn't know (the fact that he is dehydrated), which if he did know would change his preferences in a way that would make them more beneficial (he would desire clear fluids). But real life is not so easy and there are many cases where someone making judgments about well-being will want to know "how much information is enough?" Or, for VBLS in particular, "how emotionally appropriate do the values have to be?" However, once we see that the question of how much idealization is needed is an epistemological question that arises in the practical context, we can also see that the answer to the question will depend on what is at stake in the particular practical context in question. The right degree of idealization, that is, depends on context. In some contexts, we maintain, it makes sense to question a person's claims about her values and to

investigate further whether these claims adhere to the relevant standards. The more that is at stake, the more it will make sense to ask whether the person's claims about values follow the relevant norms. To put this more concretely, consider a norm that recommends reflecting on the facts. When circumstances demand particular care to ensure that our judgments about well-being are well founded, we should be more careful to ensure that the claims about values we are considering are not misinformed.

We have suggested that the contextual factors that can make a difference to whether or not we should take people's values and life satisfaction at face value have to do with the costs and benefits at stake. To take another example, this time focused on the first-person perspective, if our misguided medical student is contemplating a \$40,000 student loan to finance her dream, she would do well to consider seriously whether the value she places on a medical career is well placed, given her interests and desires. When the potential costs of acting on her judgment that medicine is a good career for her are high, she ought to make sure the judgment is correct. Expected costs and benefits will also vary with respect to the kind of action that is being considered (a large-scale, expensive government program would require more scrutiny of judgments of well-being than other kinds of actions) and the reasons that there are for skepticism (we should be more inclined to investigate when a person says she doesn't care about having friends than we are when she says she doesn't value fine wine).

One might worry that a theory of well-being that makes use of idealization in *any* way creates the possibility of an undesirable gap between well-being and subjective experience. On one interpretation, this is a concern about a worrisome gap between affect and cognition.<sup>33</sup> The problem here is that on a VBLS it seems that we may be justified in judging that a person has achieved well-being even though she is in a persistent bad mood or has a depressed affect, because her life is going well according to the things she values. How much of a problem this is depends in large part on how much distance there can really be on this account between affect and values. Critics of life-satisfaction views seem to think that a large gap is possible so that a person could be clinically depressed and yet be achieving well-being (Haybron, 2008b). This would indeed be an unattractive implication, but it is unfair to saddle VBLS with it. On our view, serious depression will only be compatible with well-being if

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<sup>33</sup> A related worry is about paternalism. If it is possible, according to VBLS, to judge that someone is not achieving well-being even though she thinks she is, then it seems that VBLS would recommend actions that promote her well-being despite how she herself feels about it. But this is not so. Paternalistic recommendations do not follow directly from a theory of well-being; a good deal of moral argument would be needed to get from here to there.

having commitments to values does not require affective engagement and if the person's values do not include her own happiness, enjoyment, positive affect, or mental health. Since value commitments do involve emotional engagement, and since most people do find these things to be important, a life consumed by serious depression is very unlikely to be found satisfying when attention is on values.

The possibility of a gap between well-being and subjective experience created by idealization may make some readers concerned about the empirical tractability of VBLS. At this point, therefore, it will be instructive to return to the empirical issue of measurement. One might think that the way we have altered life-satisfaction accounts makes them, once again, insufficiently empirically grounded. We do not think this is so, although we can only gesture here at how psychologists might use this conception of well-being to inform their research. First of all, VBLS implies that life satisfaction as measured by the SWLS and value-based life satisfaction occupy different spots on one continuum and, therefore, the former may be a starting point for ascertaining the latter. Indeed, standard life-satisfaction research is still useful, and life-satisfaction scales are still an important measure for VBLS. After all, as Schimmack and his colleagues have argued, people do make JOLS on the basis of chronically accessible information that tends to include domains that subjects find important, and important domains are, in our view, just values with a low degree of idealization. Life-satisfaction questionnaires might be reworded to guide people to think more explicitly about how their lives are going according to their own values. Ulrich Schimmack has done something like this already. In the introduction to the SWLS on his website, he says:

The Satisfaction With Life Scale is a short and reliable measure of life-satisfaction. Life-satisfaction is the cognitive component of subjective well-being (happiness). It allows people to consider the aspects that are most important to them and to evaluate how satisfied they are with them. Please think of the aspects that are most central to your life while answering the questions.<sup>34</sup>

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Second, VBLS provides a natural justification for using alternative, non-self-report measures. If self-reports are imperfect indicators of the degree to which people's lives are actually going well according to their own values and standards, at least under certain conditions, then we should use other methods to assess this. Such methods might include objective measures of values that are widespread and likely to meet standards of information and emotional appropriateness such as friendship, family relationships, health, and good work.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.erin.utoronto.ca/~w3psyuli/survey/swls/swls.htm>, last accessed January 8, 2009.

To sum up, according to the VBLS theory of well-being, well-being is satisfaction with one's overall conditions of life evaluated on the basis of standards provided by one's values. A person's actual attitudes of life satisfaction count as well-being unless they are defeated because they are influenced by irrelevant factors that have nothing to do with what the person cares about, or because the person is misinformed about the objects of her care, or because what the person says she cares about fits poorly with her affective nature. For those of us making judgments about our own or other people's well-being, there is a legitimate question about how certain we must be that these standards are met, and the answer to this question depends on the practical context.

We think that the VBLS theory meets the demand of normative adequacy. First, people to whom the theory is supposed to apply will indeed have some motivation to care about what the theory recommends because they are motivated by their own values. Second, according to VBLS there are standards of justification for judgments about well-being and so it is possible to "get it wrong." The theory also meets the demands for empirical adequacy because it does not insist that judgments of well-being must always be about highly idealized states that we cannot investigate. Further, because VBLS recommends thinking of real and idealized psychological states as on a continuum of idealization, it makes room for the relevance of one to the other.

#### 4. Conclusion

The hedonistic and eudaimonistic research programs in positive psychology offer much to interest moral philosophers. However, as far as the underlying philosophical conceptions of well-being are concerned, there is something particularly compelling about the life-satisfaction view because of the connection it affords between well-being and subjective experience. Hedonism, while an attractive view for scientists because it makes few evaluative assumptions, may not provide the best account of the significance of well-being to choices people make about public policy and about our own lives. Eudaimonism, on the other hand, assumes too much and loses the presumed connection between well-being and subjective experience. The life-satisfaction view as articulated by psychologists excels at accommodating this connection, but risks having no explanation of the normative significance of well-being. The VBLS theory is to be preferred because it provides an explanation of the normative importance of well-being without sacrificing the relationship to subjective experience.

Our theory makes some empirical assumptions. It assumes that value-based judgments of life satisfaction are relatively stable over time and not too distant

from the experience of real people. It also assumes that people have standards of justification to which they hold their values and that they are concerned to have better values rather than worse. These are empirical matters that matter philosophically. There are certainly many questions to be answered before we can fully evaluate the viability of the VBLS account. Positive psychology is a relatively young field and the work we have drawn on is still in its early stages. For now, we hope at least to have shown one way in which philosophical inquiry about the nature of the human good can benefit from attention to the empirical literature and conversation with positive psychologists. Given the problems raised for research programs in positive psychology, and given the inevitability of making normative assumptions in this area, we hope to have shown that psychologists will also benefit from the exchange.<sup>35</sup>

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