Recipes for a Good Life: Eudaimonism and the Contribution of Philosophy

Valerie Tiberius   **October 24, 2011**

The word *eudaimonia* was the word used by the Ancient Greek philosophers to describe, in the most general terms, the ultimate goal of life, that at which all human beings aim (Annas 1993). For the Ancients, there was no question about whether *eudaimonia* was the thing to aim at in life, but there was significant controversy about just what it consisted in. Is the best life for a human being a pleasant or satisfied life? A life in which we develop our capacities to their fullest? A morally virtuous life? This controversy has endured and it seems to have been inherited by psychology more or less intact.

Attempting to resolve the controversy for good may be a hopeless task. But each of us can aim to articulate our own positions and to understand their advantages and disadvantages. Toward this aim, notice that there are really three different questions we might ask. First, we might ask about the components or ingredients of a well-lived or eudaimon life. If a well-lived life is like a cake, then the question is: what goes in the batter? Second, we can ask for a theory that tells us what it is that makes something an ingredient of a well-lived life. In other words, we can ask for a recipe that explains why these ingredients are on the list.[1] The important question here, to my mind, is the question: what makes this ingredient good for a person. A good philosophical theory of well-being should answer this question. Third, we can ask what makes one theory (or recipe) better than another.

My primary aim in this chapter is to discuss the various theories philosophers have defended and to explain what implications these theories have for eudaimonist ingredients. My focus is, therefore, on the second of my three questions. So, we will start with a discussion of

---

[1] The analogy is a little bit strained because cooking recipes do not typically include explanations for the inclusion of ingredients, but they sometimes do (some recipes will tell you which ingredients are supposed to make the cake rise and which are just for flavoring, for instance, so that you can substitute for them if you need to).

theories, in section 1. In section 2 we turn to eudaimonist ingredients and consider how the various theories we've surveyed would be applied. In section 3 I discuss what difference it makes what theory you choose. Finally, in section 4 I will briefly discuss the remaining question – the question about what makes one theory better than another.

Before we get started, a note about terminology. I will use the word "well-being" to refer to the most general category of prudential value that is at the center of the above questions. (I also use "x is good for y" to mean that x contributes to y's well-being). For my purposes, it is important to have a general term that does not presuppose a particular theoretical framework, and this usage comports with the usage of many philosophers and psychologists. So, whether one thinks that a well-lived life is hedonistic or eudaimonistic, one is still (in my terns) talking about well-being. I will use the term "eudaimonic" in the way that I take psychologists to intend (at least insofar as psychologists are in agreement in their use of the term), that is, as describing ingredients of well-being that go beyond positive affect and life-satisfaction. I will make no particular assumption about what kind of theory supports claims that eudaimonic ingredients are part of well-being, because as we shall see, such claims can be supported in a variety of ways.

1: Theories of Well-Being

In this section I survey five different theories of well-being: hedonism, desire-fulfillment, life-satisfaction, nature fulfillment, and objective list theory.[2] These philosophical theories of well-being can usefully be distinguished into two camps: subjective theories and objective theories. Subjective theories hold that whether or not something counts as contributing to a person's well-being depends on that person's attitudes in some way. Objective theories reject this claim; they

_____

[2] Derek Parfit's (1984) oft cited taxonomy lists three types of theories: hedonism, desire satisfaction and objective list theories. This leaves out some important newer developments. See Haybron (2008).

say that whether or not something contributes to a person's well-being depends (at least in part) on something else. To put it another way, subjective theories explain why something gets on the list of well-being ingredients by appeal to the attitudes of the well-being subject, whereas objective theories explain what gets on the list by appeal to something beyond the attitudes of the well-being subject.

Discussing some examples will help illustrate this distinction. Let's start with hedonism, which is taken to be a subjective theory because pleasure is a subjective state.[3] According to hedonism, what is good for a person is pleasure and the absence of pain. Classical Utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham (1781) and John Stuart Mill (1979/1861) were hedonists. Both philosophers had what Dan Haybron (2008) and L. W. Sumner (1996) call an "internalist" view of pleasure, sometimes called the experience account because it identifies pleasure with a distinctive experience (Moore 2004). Though Bentham and Mill thought there were distinctions to be made among different kinds of pleasures, they also assumed that all pleasurable experiences had enough in common that they are commensurable (able to be measured on the same scale).

These assumptions about pleasure are debatable: what exactly do the pleasure of reading a great novel and the pleasure of eating chocolate have in common? Such worries have spurred revised theories of what pleasure is. The main rival to the experiential view of pleasure held by Bentham and (more controversially) Mill has been called an externalist or attitudinal theory of pleasure. This theory identifies pleasure with an attitude – "being pleased" – taken toward a state of affairs (Feldman 2004). On this view, what makes an experience or state of affairs

---

[3] Hedonism is actually tricky to classify, because of the fact that people can have different subjective attitudes toward pleasure. (For example, there are masochists who claim to desire pain). If you're impressed by this fact, you might think that hedonism counts as an objective list theory with only one item on the list. I leave this complication aside for purposes of our discussion.

pleasurable is that the person having the experience has a certain pro-attitude toward it: "a person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it" (Feldman 2004: 56). This solves the problem caused by the fact that different pleasant experiences do not seem to have any common distinctive element, because on this view what they have in common is not something intrinsic to the experience. Rather, pleasures have in common that they are all the object of the pro-attitude "being pleased by".

Hedonism of all forms as a theory of well-being has been attacked for leaving out something important. A well known way of putting this objection is Nozick's (1974: 42-45) "experience machine" thought experiment:

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

Nozick's answer is that *doing* and *knowing* (as opposed to just seeming to do and thinking that we know) can matter to us. There are things that matter to us, Nozick concludes, besides pleasure.

Objections such as Nozick's led philosophers interested in well-being to desire-fulfillment or preference satisfaction theories.[4] According to this type of theory, well-being consists in the attainment of the objects of your desires or preferences. Desire theories have some advantages and are popular in philosophy. First, desire theories can explain what goes wrong in the experience machine: there are things we want (contact with reality, for instance) that we cannot get in the machine. Second, a primary advantage is that desire theories make sense of the individual variability in the particular causes or components of well-being. The quickest survey of the people around us reveals that people are made happy by different things: Jimmy likes hiking in the mountains, Kelly likes swimming, and Lou likes to spend time with his kids. Desire theory explains how well-being can have so many different causes while at the same time providing a unifying explanation of the phenomena. Third, the explanation offered by this theory explains the special kind of value well-being is supposed to have. Well-being is good *for* a person; to increase a person's well-being you must benefit that person. This is not necessarily so of moral or aesthetic values, which do not belong to a particular person. Unlike moral value, the value of well-being is a subjective kind of value in at least some important sense and desire theories explain this by appeal to the fact that it is the subject's own desires that determine his or her well-being. It is because Jimmy wants to spend time in the mountains that hiking is good for him; if he wanted to swim instead, then hiking would not contribute to his well-being.

Simple preference satisfaction theories, or "present desire theories" – theories according to which having our actual preferences fulfilled is what is good for us – are favored by economists.[5] This theory of well-being facilitated the construction of economic models that aim to predict and explain behavior in markets. Choices about how to spend money (like all choices,

---

[4] Though not all philosophers have abandoned hedonism. For those who find the experience machine objection compelling, Feldman (2004: 112-3) offers a version of hedonism that centers on "truth-adjusted" pleasure.
[5] And some philosophers defend them. For a recent example see Mendola 2009.

according to this model) express preferences. On the assumption that preference satisfaction is good for us, then, market exchanges track well-being. Few philosophers accept a present desire theory. Such theories invite myriad counterexamples because of the fact that our desires can be (and often are) misinformed or irrational.[6]

Desire-fulfillment theories have not been abandoned, however, rather, they have been modified to accommodate the fact that our desires can be misdirected. The main form that this modification takes is to idealize the desires whose satisfaction constitutes well-being. In particular, desire-fulfillment theories tend to say that it is only the satisfaction of *informed* desires that constitutes well-being (Griffin 1986[7], Railton 1986). We can see the motivation for this modification with a simple example. Kiry desires French bread, but she is, unbeknownst to her, allergic to gluten. If she were fully informed about her allergy, she would not want French bread because French bread makes her sick. Informed desire theory (sometimes called "full information theory") will say that getting what she actually wants (bread) is not good for her. Instead, getting what she would want if she were fully informed (gluten-free bread) is good for her. This sort of example is meant to generalize. The thought is that although our actual desires often mislead us, the desires we would have if we really knew everything we needed to know about their objects would not lead us astray.

Informed desire theory does have its problems. Some critics have argued that the fully informed version of a person might be just as misdirected as her uninformed self, though in different ways (Rosati 1995, Velleman 1988). Most of the objections to informed desire theory have to do with the fact that adding the full information component removes the advantages that

---

[6] Psychologists who favor standard subjective well-being measures are likely to find present desire theory unsatisfactory for the simple reason that getting what we want can made us feel miserable. Fulfilling a desire in the sense of attaining the desired object does not necessarily lead to any experience of satisfaction.

[7] Griffin considers his view a hybrid of subjectivism and objectivism, because he thinks it is subjective attitudes together with the objective facts about what we desire that determine what is good for us.

desire theories were supposed to have. Desires theories promised to explain the special, subjective value that well-being has. But *informed* desires are not necessarily very closely connected to how people actually feel about things. If Jimmy doesn't want to swim but *would* if he were fully informed (perhaps about the damage to his joints caused by hiking), then swimming is good for him whether he wants to or not. Informed desire theory may be able to solve these problems by limiting the relevant amount or type of information. Or, there may be a different kind of idealized desire theory that preserves the advantages of informed desire theory without incurring these costs.

Life-satisfaction theory is another subjective theory that makes use of idealization. The main proponent of this theory in philosophy, L. W. Sumner, argues that well-being consists in authentic happiness. Happiness, according to Sumner, is life satisfaction, which is "a positive cognitive/affective response on the part of a subject to (some or all of) the conditions or circumstances of her life" (1996: 156). Authentic happiness is informed and autonomous life-satisfaction. Sumner's motivation for adding these conditions and for not identifying actual life-satisfaction with well-being stems from the problem of adaptive preferences, which he takes to be the most fundamental problem for subjective theories.[8] In a nutshell, the problem is that because subjective attitudes can adapt to oppressive circumstances, a subjective theory can have the implication that a person who has adapted to oppression is doing well or achieving well-being. Insofar as well-being is taken to be the target of social policy or the object of beneficent moral action, this implication is problematic. We just don't want to be stuck saying that what we should do for oppressed people is to help them adapt to their limited options and paltry share of resources.

---

[8] According to Sumner, Sen's criticism is "surely the main reason for questioning the adequacy of any subjective theory of welfare, whatever its constituent ingredients, and for favouring more objective accounts" (1986, p. 162).

Sumner's solution to the problem of adaptation is that happiness must be authentic to count as well-being. Because well-being has a special relationship to the subject, life satisfaction only counts as well-being if it expresses an evaluation of one's life that is truly one's own (Sumner 1996: 167). According to Sumner, this means that our life satisfaction (i.e., happiness) only counts as well-being if the assessment of our conditions of life is informed and autonomous. Given this elaboration of the theory, we can see how the problem of adaptation is solved: A person who is satisfied with her life but would not be if she had more information, or if her satisfaction were not warped by oppression does not count as achieving well-being. Tiberius and colleagues have developed the life satisfaction theory in a somewhat different way, by arguing that for life satisfaction to count as well-being it must be a response to how well the person is doing in life given her values (Tiberius & Plakias 2010; Tiberius & Hall 2010). According to the "value-based life satisfaction theory" your life goes well for you if you achieve what you value and you feel good about your life because of that.

Values do seem important to well-being. Very recently, a few philosophers have been developing a subjective theory of well-being according to which well-being is the fulfillment not of our desires or preferences but of our values (Raibley 2010 and Tiberius unpublished (a)). Values, on this view, are stable patterns of affective dispositions that we take to guide our choices and our assessments of how our lives are going. In short, the Value Fulfillment Theory says that living well is a matter of achieving what you care about in a deep and abiding way. This theory might be attractive to psychologists who favor the methodology of distilling components of well-being from trustworthy historical sources. This is the methodology used by Carol Ryff (this volume) to arrive at the six key components of eudaimonic well-being. One way we could think about this methodology is that the expert sources provide us with evidence

of what human beings consistently care about when they are being reflective about it. Eudaimonist psychologists, in particular, may find a theory that emphasizes values attractive because of their own emphasis on the importance of aligning one's action with one's values (Huta, this volume).

We can see that both desire theories and life satisfaction theories in philosophy tend to add idealizing conditions that constrain which subjective states actually count as well-being. One explanation for this is that the theories aim to be intuitive and the idealizing conditions are added to deal with counterexamples. It is not intuitively compelling to think that bread is good for someone with a gluten allergy, for example. But there is a deeper explanation for this move in philosophy. The deeper explanation has to do with two background assumptions: (1) that well-being is a *normative* notion and (2) that there is a gap between psychological facts and normative claims. In philosophy, to say that a claim (or judgment, or property) is normative is to say that it grounds good reasons for action; "normative" in philosophy is akin to "prescriptive". Well-being, then, is normative in the sense that when we make claims about something contributing to a person's well-being we are claiming that there is some reason to secure or promote whatever it is. Claims about well-being are normative in the sense that they have an inherent tie to *what we ought to do*.[9]

Counterexamples to subjective theories rely on the reason-giving quality of well-being to work. It isn't plausible to think that bread is good for Kiry because it isn't plausible to think that we ought to give her some gluteny bread or that she ought to go and buy some for herself. The idealizing conditions that subjective theories have adopted create distance between the

---

[9] Notice that this tie need not be direct: the fact that something contributes to a person's well-being doesn't mean that we should force the person to have whatever it is against their will! Instead, we might think that what we ought to do is to create opportunities for people to choose things that are good for them on their own (the option favored by Linley, this volume).

psychological state (desire or life satisfaction) and normative conclusions about what we ought to do. This distance – the gap between 'is' and 'ought' – may make psychologists think that philosophers' idealized subjective theories are not for them. I don't think this is the right conclusion to draw. Empirical evidence about people's actual psychological states is certainly relevant to what their psychological states would be under ideal conditions. Moreover, idealized subjective theories provide a way for psychologists who want to insist that their work is not value-laden to think about how psychological research is nevertheless relevant to normative questions about policy and moral action.

That said, idealized subjective theories are not the only way to go. Indeed, if the goal is to explain the normativity of well-being, one might think that a better solution (better than monkeying around with subjective theories) would be to adopt an objective theory of well-being. Let's turn to these theories now.

The simplest kind of objective theory is an objective list theory. An objective list theory puts forth a list of objective values that are good for people to achieve (Arneson 2003, 2007; Brink, 1989; Gert, 1998).

According to one proponent:

> According to the objective list account, a life goes well (for the person whose life it is) to the extent that the individual attains items that occur as entries on a list of objectively intrinsically valuable things. If one gets some item on the list, one's life thereby goes better, independently of one's subjective attitudes or opinions toward getting that thing (Arneson 2007: 20).

Items on the list tend to be intuitively compelling things such as deep relationships, achievement and understanding. According to objective list theory, these things have objective value and contribute to a person's life going well independently of whether she wants them or finds them satisfying.

Objective list theories account for the normativity of well-being by appeal to the value of the items on the list. It therefore has an easy answer to the question of how claims about well-being ground prescriptive or reason-giving conclusions: it is the objective value of the items on the list that secure these conclusions. Some people are sure to find this answer disappointing, however, because it seems to put off the question (or move it to another domain) rather than really answering it. Without a good argument for the objective value of the items on the list, the objective list theory's solution to the problem of accounting for the value of well-being is empty. To return to the cake baking analogy, without an accompanying value theory, objective theories are mere lists of ingredients, not recipes that explain the presence of the ingredients on the list.

There is another variety of objective theory that provides a more substantial answer: nature fulfillment theories. According to this type of theory, the explanation for how something gets on the list of well-being ingredients has to do with its being essential to our nature. There are two types of nature fulfillment theory. One takes the relevant sense of nature to be relative to our species: it is fulfilling our human nature that is good for us on this view. The other takes it to be our individual nature the fulfillment of which is good for us.

The human nature fulfillment theory has its roots in Aristotle. The idea here is that what is good for anything is to function well as the kind of thing that it is. A good knife is a knife that cuts well, a good lioness is one that hunts well and feeds her young, and so on. Along these lines, just as what is good for a lion is to be excellent in the respects that are typical of lions, so

too what is good for a person is to excel in the ways that are typical of human beings. Martha

Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach is a sophisticated development of this basic

Aristotelian theory (see also Kraut 2007).[10] According to Nussbaum, flourishing is to be

understood in terms of "human functional capabilities" such as bodily health, practical reason

and affiliation.[11] A flourishing person is one who develops these capabilities well.

Aristotelian theories of well-being explain what gets on the list of well-being ingredients

by appeal to how these items contribute to our functioning where 'function' is understood as

something we properly attribute to kinds of things (such as a species). The normativity of the

theory comes from an assumption about the inherent normativity of human nature. The thought

is that there is something obviously good about being an exemplary, well functioning member of

one's kind.

One source of concern about such views is that there is no claim about the function of a

species that is both empirically respectable and normatively significant. For example, one could

argue that in-group bias is a part of human nature, but surely the fact that our species has evolved

with a bias that expresses itself in racism and other forms of prejudice does not mean that it is

good for us to be racist. Aristotelians have a response to this challenge: they tend to argue that

the project of understanding human nature is not an empirical project but an ethical one

(Hursthouse 1999). But there is another worry about reliance on our human (species) nature,

which has to do with individual variability and the thought that well-being has to be good *for* the

person whose well-being it is. If not everyone has the same capacities, why should functioning

---

[10] Nussbaum does not take her theory to be a theory of well-being, because she associates the term "well-being" with preference satisfaction theories in economics. But in the terms we are using here, where "well-being" and "flourishing" are synonymous, Nussbaum's theory does count as a theory of well-being.

[11] The full list: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum 2000, 78-80).

well as a member of the species be good for everyone? Why should it matter to me if my species is a social one, if I'm not?

This sort of worry about reliance on human nature and species has given rise to a new development in nature fulfillment theories. Recently, Daniel Haybron has been developing a nature fulfillment theory that does not rely on claims about our nature *qua* members of the human species.[12] Instead, Haybron's (2008) theory of well-being takes it to consist (at least in part) in the fulfillment of our nature as individuals, particularly in the fulfillment of our "emotional nature", which varies from person to person. Like Sumner, Haybron identifies well-being with *authentic* happiness, but he disagrees with Sumner about what happiness is. Haybron argues for an emotional-state theory of happiness according to which "to be happy is roughly for one's emotional condition to be broadly positive with only minor negatives, embodying a stance of psychic affirmation" (2008: 182). Because our emotional dispositions are central to who we are, happiness is a kind of self-fulfillment. Happy people function well with respect to their individual characteristics and tendencies as opposed to their membership in a species. Of course, human beings have a lot in common and are likely to share many characteristics at least at a general level of description. Haybron's view can accommodate this fact; the important point is that on his view the order of explanation is different than it is for the Aristotelian. Haybron's individual nature fulfillment theory explains the presence of an item on the list of well-being ingredients by its contribution to our happiness, where what contributes to our happiness is determined by our emotional nature. The normativity of his theory of well-being comes from the intuitive value of happiness and the authenticity constraints on the kind of

---

[12] See also LeBar (2004) for a view that is somewhere in between the species fulfillment and individual nature fulfillment theories. The stress LeBar puts on practical reasoning about the shape that one's life should take leaves a lot of room for individual variability, even though LeBar considers himself an Aristotelian and agrees with the Aristotelians that there are some generally human functions that must be included in a theory of well-being.

happiness that can count as well-being. Haybron, following Sumner, thinks that happiness must

be informed and autonomous to count as well-being. He adds that happiness should also be

"rich": "the authenticity of one's happiness increases, other things being equal, to the extent that

it is grounded in richer, more complex ways of living. For such ways of living more fully

express one's nature" (2008: 186).

In sum, there are various subjective theories of well-being in philosophy, which will

explain why some well-being ingredient is good for a person by reference to that person's

attitudes toward it. There are also objective theories that explain why something is good for a

person by reference to something other than the subject's attitudes, for example, by reference to

an objectively valuable human nature. Looking at the papers in this volume, from the point of

view of a philosopher, it seems to me that many psychologists – regardless of which well-being

ingredients they are concerned with – have a subjective theory in the background.[13] That is, they

presuppose that the explanation for why the things they study (whatever they are) are *good* for

people is ultimately that people want them, like them, value them, or think they're important. I

think theories like this are on the right track. In my view we have to explain that value of

ingredients of well-being by appeal to the attitudes of the very people whose well-being we're

talking about, otherwise we won't succeed in explaining why some ingredient is good for *that*

person. But I think it is worth acknowledging that this is a background theory of well-being and

it is one that, historically, was very controversial. No one in the Ancient world thought that what

things are good for you would be determined by your own subjective attitudes. Our subjective

feelings can help us discover what's objectively good for us (in the way that thirst can indicate

---

[13] I think this can be seen in the papers by Ryff and Sheldon in particular. There are some psychologists whose work is better interpreted as assuming an objective theory according to which well-being is conceived as optimal functioning, which is thought to be objectively good independently (or prior to) the approving attitudes of subjects. This seems to me the view of Vallerand, this volume.

that you need water), but our feelings are not, according to the Ancients, the foundation of value. In the Modern period, Hobbes had the view that wanting something makes it good, but he was rather lonely in his support of this kind of subjectivism. Subjectivism is so much the default now that we don't even see it as a view in need of any justification – it's like water to us fishes. Nevertheless, it *is* a view and it is of primary concern to philosophers working in this area whether it is the right view.

This question about which general theory best explains why some things are good for us at the most basic level may not be a question that is of much interest to psychologists. Psychologists can take for granted that some things are good for us (positive affect or optimal functioning, for instance) and explain the value of other items by reference to these uncontroversial goods. If there is to be hope that our two fields can benefit each other in the search for a deeper understanding of well-being and flourishing, it is important to acknowledge that there are times when we are actually trying to answer different questions. To be sure, it isn't that philosophers do not care about the more practical questions about the actual composition of a good life. But there has been a tendency, especially in contemporary philosophy, to focus on the abstract and theoretical questions about the general nature or formal structure of well-being. Interestingly, which theory you accept might not make that much difference to your substantive position on the composition of a good, flourishing life. Or so I shall argue in the next section.

2. Ingredients

We have considered five different theories of well-being that offer five different explanations for why something counts as an ingredient of well-being. We can now ask whether these different theoretical explanations will tend to give rise to different lists or whether they will turn out to

provide different explanations for similar lists of ingredients. I will argue that the latter view is closer to the truth: by and large, different theoretical frameworks will end up providing different recipes for the same dish. Before we get to a more detailed discussion of this point, though, it will be useful to say a few words about the candidate ingredients.

Psychologists who study *subjective* well-being, not surprisingly, tend to take the ingredients of well-being to be subjective, psychological states such as life satisfaction or positive affect. In the psychological literature, this position is often described as *hedonistic*[14] and it is contrasted with the eudaimonist position. Eudaimonist psychologists may also include subjective psychological states on their list of well-being ingredients, but these states are not the same as the ones on the hedonists' lists. Eudaimonist lists include such states as feelings of personal expressiveness (Waterman 1993; Waterman and Schwartz, this volume), self-acceptance (Ryff, this volume), sense of meaning (Steger et al, this volume), "interest, absorption and engagement" (Vittersø, this volume). Moreover, many eudaimonists in psychology put things on the list that are not obviously subjective psychological states such as integrated functioning toward the satisfaction of basic human needs (Ryan and Deci, this volume), or objectively realizing one's potential (Linley, this volume).

I take it that the reason the second group of psychologists have adopted the eudaimonist label has to do with a perceived affinity to the Ancient Greek tradition. There are some affinities. First, the Ancients tended to think of well-being as including the kinds of things that eudaimonists in psychology are interested in and they tended not to think that the kinds of good feelings highlighted by hedonism in psychology have much to do with well-being. There were hedonists in the ancient world, the Epicureans, but the kind of pleasure they favored was more

---

[14] This terminology is a little misleading for philosophers, because in philosophy hedonism is just one example of a subjective theory.

like the kinds of things that eudaimonist psychologists measure (Annas 1993). *Ataraxia* is a kind of tranquility or contentment that is probably quite different from what Daniel Kahneman takes objective happiness to be (Kahneman 2000). Second, the Ancients' reasons for thinking that well-being was constituted by this or that had to do with what they took to count as fulfilling one's nature as a human being, as discussed in the previous section. Eudaimonists in psychology who explain the inclusion of ingredients on their lists by reference to human needs or human nature are relying on a similar sort of theory (e.g., Ryan and Deci 2000; Vallerand, this volume). So, eudaimonism in psychology has affinities to the views of the Ancients both in terms of the items on the list and the theoretical explanation for the inclusion of these items.

Indeed it is not difficult to see how the objectivist theories we have surveyed will provide a foundation for the kinds of well-being ingredients eudaimonist psychologists study. For example, lists in psychology that include close personal relationships, autonomy and mastery or competence, comport well with Nussbaums's list of basic human functionings that includes affiliation, practical reason and control over one's environment. The individual nature fulfillment theory is also likely to emphasize items that eudaimonists in psychology find to be important, particularly items that have to do with deep emotional responses such as feelings of personal expressiveness or emotional harmony.

Does this mean that eudaimonists in psychology must be philosophical eudaimonists as well? I don't think so. Consider the informed desire theory. What does this theory tell us about the ingredients on the list of contributors to well-being? In other words, what would an informed desire theorist in philosophy advise a psychologist to study? The answer obviously depends on what it is that people want for its own sake when informed about their options. If the only thing that people wanted for its own sake were pleasure, then eudaimonists in psychology would be on

the wrong track. But the whole point of desire theories was to correct the problem for hedonism that pleasure is not the only thing we want for its own sake! Recall Nozick's experience machine example: He thought we wanted knowledge, interactions with real people, and contact with reality in addition to pleasure. Desire theory, then, lends itself to pluralism about the list of well-being ingredients.

To take this point a little further, consider James Griffin's way of understanding informed desire theory. He points out that according to informed desire theory, well-being (which he here calls "utility")

> is not to be seen as the single over-arching value, in fact not as a substantive value at all, but instead as a formal analysis of what it is for something to be prudentially valuable to some person. Therefore, utility [well-being] will be related to substantive values such as pleasure or accomplishment or autonomy, not by being the dominant value that subsumes them, but by providing a way of understanding the notion '(prudentially) valuable' and hence the notions 'more valuable' and 'less valuable' (1986: 32).

Though he defines well-being in terms of informed desire satisfaction, Griffin (1986: 67-8) argues that the main ingredients of well-being are accomplishment, understanding, enjoyment, deep personal relations, and what he calls the "components of human existence" (autonomy, the capabilities that enable one to act, a minimal level of material goods, freedom from pain and anxiety, and basic liberties). Notice how similar many of the items on his list are to the things that eudaimonist psychologists are interested in studying.

Life satisfaction theories are also likely to provide a foundation for a pluralist view about the ingredients of well-being, since there are many causes of life satisfaction. Indeed, as psychologists have demonstrated, many eudaimonist ingredients (such as mastery, positive

relationships, autonomy) are causes of life satisfaction (Sheldon, this volume). Importantly, because the versions of life satisfaction theory favored by philosophers include idealizing conditions, these causes are not easily be replaced or eliminated. We can contrast this with classical hedonism according to which pleasure caused by taking a drug would be just as good as pleasure caused in some other way. Let me explain why this isn't so for life satisfaction theories. If it is only *authentic* life satisfaction that counts, then insofar as a person's satisfaction with one's life would be undermined if she knew that it was caused by a delusion about her relationships and accomplishments, then her satisfaction would not count as making her well off. Similarly, if it is value-based life satisfaction that counts, then insofar as a person's satisfaction is caused by a false sense of how her life is going according to these values, then her satisfaction does not make her well off.

We have just seen that so called subjective theories can provide a justification for lists of well-being ingredients that go beyond the subjective components measured by hedonists in psychology. Similarly, nature fulfillment theories (often called eudaimonist theories in philosophy) could be used to justify lists that include only hedonistic ingredients. If pleasure and life satisfaction are what best fulfill our nature, then these are what would count as well-being according to the theory that philosophical eudaimonists tend to favor. Nature fulfillment theories do not tend to have this kind of substantive view about what fulfills our nature (though they do typically include hedonistic ingredients like pleasure on their lists). The point here is that neither the ingredients favored by hedonistic psychologists nor the ingredients favored by eudaimonist psychologists get any automatic privilege. Any list needs to be justified by some theory and theories of different kinds do not necessarily favor one list over the other. Having made this point, it shouldn't be concluded that which theory you accept makes no difference to what's on

your list of ingredients. Theories do make a difference (more on this in the next section), but not

the kind of difference we might have anticipated: it is not the case that subjective philosophical

theories support hedonistic research in psychology and objective philosophical theories support

eudaimonist research in psychology. Things are more complicated than this.

One theory we have only briefly mentioned so far is hedonism. Classical hedonism lends

itself to the interpretation that there is only one item on the list of well-being ingredients and that

is pleasure. Interpreted this way, philosophical hedonism does favor hedonistic psychology,

though even here some philosophers (Epicurus and Mill, for example) might argue that what

psychologists measure is not the right kind of pleasure. Still, even philosophical hedonism

would accept the importance of studying typical causes of pleasure under normal circumstances

and it would seem likely that some eudaimonist ingredients would at least get on this list of

"causes of well-being".

3. Why theory matters

While it is true that all the going philosophical theories are likely to include some of

psychologists' eudaimonist values on the list of ingredients, these theories will not all generate

exactly the same lists. Even if there is substantial agreement on many items, some theories will

make certain ingredients more central than others. An objective list theory might hold that

knowledge or understanding is as valuable as deep personal relationships, whereas a life

satisfaction theory, which is more tied to subjective experience, would likely place greater value

on relationships (as a cause of life satisfaction). Indeed, some theories will take certain values to

be built into the very concept of well-being. For example, autonomy is built into Sumner's

authentic happiness theory and Haybron's individual nature fulfillment theory as a precondition for our subjective experiences to count as well-being.

It could also be argued that some of the theories we have discussed have a more satisfying answer than others to the charge of elitism that has been leveled at eudaimonists in psychology:

> The search for something 'better' than SWB or a better form of happiness connotes a potential elitism, that the Good Life is an experience reserved for individuals who have attained some transcendence from everyday life (Kashdan et al., 2008, p. 227).[15]

Subjective theories and individual nature fulfillment theory have an obvious way to respond to such a charge, because these theories make the subject central to well-being, though in different ways. For example, on the assumption that people would desire meaning in their lives if they were informed, an informed desire theory will hold that meaning is good for people because it is what they ideally want. On this view, it isn't that meaning has some objective value that psychologists are imposing on people; rather, the value of meaning is grounded in people's desires.

But I do not think that the *differences* between these philosophical theories is what should be of most interest to psychologists. What is important is something that almost all of these theories have in common: namely, a space between psychological fact and normative conclusion. This is important for two reasons.

First, there are many items on the eudaimonist list that can be interpreted subjectively or objectively.[16] For instance "purpose" can either mean a subjective sense of purpose or actually having purpose. Similarly for competence, mastery, and meaning. The theories of well-being in

---

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

[16] Linley, this volume, notes that *eudaimonia* itself can be seen in these two ways.

philosophy – even most so called subjective theories – suggest that while the subjective senses of these things matter, the objective attainment of them does too. The gap between psychological fact and conclusions about (normative) well-being allows for the conceptual possibility that well-being isn't guaranteed by our feeling like we are doing well. Granted, it may be impossible to measure *meaning* as opposed to a sense of meaning, but it is surely worth keeping in mind what people actually care about, what we actually want, or what's actually good for us even if we can only measure it indirectly. After all, it may not be impossible to measure something closer to what really matters, or to measure something in addition to "a sense of meaning" that complements the subjective measures.

Second, if you accept that the philosophical theories of well-being we have surveyed explain the sense in which well-being is normative (that is, they explain why the well-being ingredients are *good* for us), then you have to acknowledge that conclusions about what we ought to do when we help people or construct policy do not follow automatically from empirical facts (about our psychological states, for instance). The case needs to be made for *why* increasing life satisfaction as measured by the SWLS, for example, is a good thing, why "objective happiness" as measured in palm pilot studies[17] is worth promoting, or why feelings of personal expressiveness might be worth sacrificing something else that is easier to obtain. Sometimes the case is not difficult to make – positive affect is a good thing no matter what kind of theory you adopt and so promoting it when there is little cost is not terribly controversial. But any policy has *some* costs, and the mere idea of government policy designed to promote well-being has been known to provoke controversy.

---

[17] Palm pilot studies are one example of a moment-based approach to measuring experience. They provide real-time measures of experience by beeping subjects at random intervals and asking them to report their current hedonic state. See Kahneman 2000 for a discussion of the general approach.

Finally, there is a general point here in favor of eudaimonist psychological research. Hedonistic psychologists, it seems to me, tend to see their position as the default, deviation from which requires justification. Studying life satisfaction or positive affect is relatively uncontroversial and obvious, while studying eudaimonic ingredients like the ones mentioned above is theoretically suspect. But from the point of view of a philosopher, this is an inaccurate picture. Life satisfaction and positive affect are no more obviously ingredients of well-being than are competence, relationships and feelings of personal expressiveness.[18] Any ingredient stands in need of some defense, some explanation for its status on the list. In fact, philosophers who take well-being to be normative – that is, to be the kind of thing that informs our moral behavior and gives rise to reasons for action – are likely to think that purely subjective feelings are the *more* controversial items on the list of well-being ingredients.

4. What makes a better theory?

Insofar as there is a division of labor between psychologists and philosophers on the topic of well-being, psychologists have focused on empirical investigations identifying predictors of well-being outcomes, whereas it is philosophers' job to develop normative theories (theories that aim to explain not just what well-being is but also how it is valuable). Still, psychologists may be interested to know what kinds of arguments we use to decide between competing normative theories. In this last section of the paper I address this topic very briefly.[19]

Most philosophers working in this area take there to be two basic criteria for an adequate theory of well-being. Sumner (1996) has referred to these as *the criterion of descriptive adequacy* and *the criterion of normative adequacy*. Though different philosophers may interpret

---

[18] For a persuasive argument against life satisfaction and life satisfaction measures, in particular, see Haybron 2011.
[19] For more, see Tiberius forthcoming. For a discussion that complicates this neat division of labor see Tiberius unpublished (b).

these criteria as demanding somewhat different things, the current consensus is that both are

important. The former is typically taken to require that the theory fit our ordinary experiences

and uses of the concept. Sometimes it has been taken to require, further, that the theory makes

happiness something amenable to empirical investigation and measurement (Griffin 1986;

Tiberius and Plakias 2010). The criterion of normative adequacy requires that a theory of

happiness should justify claims about the value of happiness and explain why we have good

reason to pursue it; it may also require that the resulting theory is adequate to playing a particular

role in moral theory.[20]

To construct a theory that meets the above two criteria, moral philosophers tend to

employ the method of reflective equilibrium (Daniels 1979).[21] According to this method, we

construct normative theories by bringing into equilibrium ordinary judgments about particular

cases (e.g., "Mary lived well, even though she didn't get everything she wanted"), putative

normative principles (e.g., well-being is that which is to be promoted by benevolent action), and

background theories (e.g., psychological theories about hedonic adaptation). We may not be

able to save all of our intuitive judgments, and some of our principles may need to be modified

or thrown out altogether, but the goal is to construct a theory that explains and systematizes as

much of this large body of information as possible within the relevant theoretical constraints.[22]

This methodology has obvious similarities to the scientific method: empirical theories are based

on and aim to explain our observations, but sometimes a theory is well confirmed enough that a

conflicting observation must be explained away and discounted. Similarly, when we use

---

[20] For Utilitarians, according to whom happiness is the central notion in moral theory, normative adequacy will
mean that the theory of happiness should make happiness something that is up to this important job (Griffin 1986).
[21] My focus is on the method that predominates in contemporary analytic philosophy. Different methods are used in
other philosophical traditions, some of which are discussed in other entries in this volume.
[22] I would argue that theoretical constraints are included in the forgoing list of things that must be brought into
equilibrium. For example, they might be theoretical principles (simplicity, consistency) that are supported by
background theories of what counts as a good theory.

reflective equilibrium to defend a normative theory such as a theory of well-being we aim to systematize our intuitions, but there can be many reasons to discount intuitions when not all of them can be saved.

Philosophers often use thought experiments to probe intuitions about concepts. This is certainly true in the well-being literature where thought experiments are often used to strengthen intuitions on one side of the debate between objective and subjective theories. For example, Richard Kraut (1979) has argued that if we think about the perspective of a parent and what she wants for her child, we will be dissatisfied with subjective theories:

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

This passage pumps the intuition that well-being (our word for what Kraut is here calling "happiness") is more than satisfaction and pleasure.[23] Subjectivists, of course, have their own arguments for rejecting objective theories. Sumner's (1996) argument on the basis of how the concept of well-being is distinguished from other normative concepts has been very influential.

---

[23] Interestingly, Feldman uses a similar thought experiment that he calls "the crib test" to illustrate the difference between prudential value and value *for the world*, and he takes hedonism to be the right account of the first kind of value (2004: 136).

This dialectic process has encouraged the development of philosophical theories of well-being into more and more sophisticated forms. In my view, theories become better and more sophisticated as they incorporate insights from other theories. Idealized subjective theories have more in common with objective theories than simple subjective theories do, and Haybron's individual fulfillment theory has more in common with subjective theories than a simple objective list theory does. This is progress. The best philosophical theories are likely to have significant overlap in terms of the lists of well-being ingredients they legitimize. But it is worth having *some* theory in mind so as to keep in mind the ultimate goal of well-being research – that is, something *good* for us! – and the distance between this valuable goal and what we can study empirically.

5. Conclusion

The five major theories of well-being in philosophy – hedonism, desire fulfillment, life satisfaction, nature fulfillment and objective list – do not neatly track the division in psychology between hedonistic and eudaimonistic research programs. Rather, we have seen that any of these theories (with the possible exception of hedonism) could be used to argue for a list of well-being ingredients that includes both hedonistic and eudaimonistic elements. Further, I hope to have shown that there is good reason to take seriously philosophical theories that explain the normative dimension of well-being. Though I have not argued for the point explicitly, I also hope that my discussion has indicated some of the value in collaborative efforts between philosophers and psychologists. This might be one area in which having many cooks does not spoil – and may well enrich – the broth.

References

Annas, J. 1993. *The Morality of Happiness*. (New York: Oxford University Press).

Arneson, R. 2007. "Desire Formation and Human Good," Royal Institute of Philosophy, supp. vol. 59, *Preferences and Well-Being,* Olsaretti, S. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 9-32.

Bentham, J. 1781. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Accessible online at http://www.utilitarianism.com/jeremy-bentham/index.html.

Brink, D. 1989. *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Diener, E., & Suh, E. 2000. *Culture and subjective well-being*. (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press).

Feldman, F. 2004. *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Gert, B. 1998. *Morality: Its nature and justification*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Griffin, J. 1986. *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Haybron, D. 2011. "Taking the satisfaction (and the life) out of life satisfaction" *Philosophical Explorations*. 14(3): 249-262.

Haybron, D. 2008. *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Hursthouse, R. 1999. *On Virtue Ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Huta, V. "How Eudaimonia versus Hedonia Relate to Personal Well-being", this volume.

Kahneman, D. 2000. "Experienced Utility and Objective Happiness: A Moment-Based

    Approach." In *Choices, Values, and Frames*. Kahneman and Tversky, (eds).

    Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (673-692).

Kashdan, T.B., Biswas-Diener, R., & King, L.A. 2008. Reconsidering happiness: The costs of

    distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 3*(4),

    219–233.

Kraut, R. 2007. *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard

    University Press).

LeBar, M. 2004. "Good For You" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly.* 85: 195–217

Linley, P. A. "Human Strengths and Well-being: Finding the Best Within Us at the Intersection

    of Eudaimonic Philosophy, Humanistic Psychology and Positive Psychology", this

    volume.

Mendola, J. 2009. "Real Desire and Well-Being". *Nous-Supplement: Philosophical Issues*, 19:

    148-165.

Mill, J. S. 1979/1861. *Utilitarianism*. Sher, G. (ed). (Indianapolis: Hackettt Publishing

    Company).

Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, state and utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

Nussbaum, M. 2000. *Women and human development: The capabilities approach.* (Cambridge:

    Cambridge University Press).

Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Raibley, J. 2010. "Well-Being and the Priority of Values." *Social theory and practice* 36 (4):

    593–620.

Railton, P. 1986. Moral realism. *The Philosophical Review*, 95(2), 163–207.

Rosati, C. 1995. Persons, perspectives, and full information accounts of the good. *Ethics*, *105*(2), 296–325.

Ryan, R. and Deci, E. "What Humans Need: Flourishing as Understood within Aristotelian Philosophy and as Studied within Self-Determination Theory", this volume.

Ryan, R. and Deci, E. 2000. The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*. 11, 227-268.

Ryff, C. "Eudaimonic Well-Being and Health: Mapping Consequences of Self-Realization", this volume.

Sheldon, K. "Individual Daimon, Universal Needs, and Subjective Well-Being: Happiness as the natural consequence of a life well lived", this volume.

Steger, M., Shin, J., Shim, Y. and Fitch-Martin, A. "Is Meaning in Life a Flagship Indicator of Well-Being?", this volume.

Sumner, L. 1996. *Welfare, happiness and ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Tiberius, V. Forthcoming. "Philosophical Methods in Happiness Research," forthcoming, *Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, edited by Martin Seligman (section editor James Pawelski).

Tiberius, V. Unpublished ms (a) "Right in the Middle: Normativity and Idealized Subjective Theories of Well-Being"

Tiberius, V. Unpublished ms (b). "Well-being, Wisdom, and Thick Theorizing: on the division of labor between moral philosophy and positive psychology".

Tiberius, V. forthcoming. "Philosophical Methods in Happiness Research," *Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, edited by Martin Seligman (section editor James Pawelski).

Tiberius, V., & Plakias, A. 2010. "Well-being". In *A handbook of moral psychology*. (Oxford: University Press).

Tiberius, V. and Hall, A. 2010. "Normative theory and psychological research: Hedonism, eudaimonism and why it matters" *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. 5(3), 212-225.

Vallerand, R. "Passion and Optimal Functioning in Society: An Eudaimonic Perspective", this volume.

Velleman, J. D. 1988. Brandt's definition of good. *The Philosophical Review*, *97*(3), 353–71.

Waterman, A. S. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (Eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64*, 678–691.

Waterman, A. and Schwartz, S. "Eudaimonic Identity Theory", this volume.