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Defending the Objective List Theory of Well-Being

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1. Introduction

Well-being concerns what is good for or benefits individuals, what is in their self-interest and makes life go well for them.¹ In practice, people use this concept to evaluate their lives, make plans for their futures, and decide how to help others. Well-being also figures in most moral theories as something to be safeguarded and promoted.

The objective list theory holds that all instances of a plurality of basic objective goods directly (or non-instrumentally) benefit people. These can include goods such as loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, autonomy, achievement, and pleasure. The objective list theory has been frequently discussed in contemporary debates, but less often defended.² In this paper, I argue that it best coheres with people's considered judgments about well-being and can be defended against a number of objections.

The greatest strength of the objective list view is that it captures many of people's considered judgments. Many people aim at goals such as loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, and achievement and view these things as part of their well-being. Still, the objective list theory faces a number of objections. Some thinkers are skeptical of the

¹ See Parfit 1984, 493-502; Sumner 1996, 1-25; Darwall 2002, 1-72; Crisp 2008. In this paper, I focus solely on human well-being.

² The theory is discussed in Parfit 1984; Scanlon 1998; Hooker 1998; and defended in Griffin 1986; Griffin 1996; Griffin 2000; Arneson 1999; Moore 2000. Related views are presented in Ross 1930/2002; Finnis 1980; Brink 1989; Nussbaum 2000; Hurka 2011.

pluralistic structure of this theory, which holds that a plurality of basic goods combine to explain well-being. Other theorists doubt the possibility of objective goods that benefit people independently of their reactive attitudes toward them. Finally, some thinkers may worry that an objective list of goods will be arbitrary and that there is no principled way to compile such a list. In what follows, I describe the objective list theory's structure (sections 2-3), give a positive defense of the theory (section 4), and respond to these three objections (sections 5-7).

2. Enumerative and explanatory theories

Roger Crisp has distinguished two kinds of theories of well-being.³ Enumerative theories, he holds, pick out or enumerate the states of affairs that directly constitute well-being, but do not explain what makes these states of affairs good for people. Explanatory theories, in contrast, seek to explain *why* certain states of affairs, and not others, are good for people. These are sometimes called theories of the nature of well-being.

The distinction between enumerative and explanatory theories is familiar from debates in moral theory. Different theorists might hold that a certain instance of killing is wrong (an enumerative claim), but explain this in different ways. One might hold that it is wrong because it does not maximize welfare, while another might hold that it is wrong because it violates a person's rights. Similarly, different explanatory theories of well-being might agree that a certain state of affairs (such as a certain relationship) directly constitutes well-being. Yet, they might explain its value in different ways. One might appeal to the relationship's pleasantness, another to its being desired, and a third to the love and commitment it exemplifies.

³ Crisp 2006, 102-103.

The distinction between enumerative and explanatory theories is important since the objective list theory is sometimes viewed as a merely enumerative theory of well-being. L. W. Sumner, for example, dismisses the theory on the grounds that it picks out or lists sources of well-being, but does not explain what makes these things part of well-being.⁴ It is possible to defend a merely enumerative objective list theory of well-being. This would hold that all instances of a plurality of basic goods make life go well, but take no position on why this is the case. In this paper, though, I will defend the objective list theory as an explanatory theory of well-being, as a theory that explains why certain states of affairs, and not others, constitute well-being.⁵ In this way, I will present it as a rival to other explanatory theories of well-being, such as hedonism and informed desire-satisfaction theories. Hedonism holds that states of affairs benefit people because they involve pleasure or the absence of pain.⁶ Informed desire-satisfaction theories hold that states of affairs benefit people because they would be desired by people under certain ideal conditions, such as full information and procedural rationality.⁷

3. The explanatory objective list theory

Significantly, my description of the objective list theory in the introduction is itself incomplete. This description states that all instances of a plurality of basic objective goods directly benefit people, but it says nothing about *why* these goods benefit us. I described the objective list theory in this way since many accounts of this theory describe

⁴ Sumner 1996, 45. Mark Murphy voices the same concern in Murphy 2001, 95.

⁵ For a related response to Sumner's argument, see Arneson 1999, 118-119.

⁶ See Feldman 2004; Crisp 2006.

⁷ See Rawls 1971/1999c, 350-380; Railton 2003b, 47-55. Railton focuses his account on the good of a person, which is somewhat broader than well-being but ordinarily includes it.

it in similarly broad terms. They present it as a merely enumerative theory, or else leave its explanatory elements implicit.

Derek Parfit, for example, presents the objective list view as holding that “certain things are good or bad for people, whether or not these people would want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things.”⁸ This indicates that basic goods are not good for people because people desire them, but does not offer a positive explanation of why these goods benefit people. Strikingly, Thomas Scanlon affirms an enumerative objective list account of well-being, but questions whether there can be any explanatory theory of well-being.⁹ He assumes that such a theory would need to explain what is common to all of the basic objective goods (among other tasks), and doubts that this is possible.

In order to defend the objective list theory as an explanatory theory of well-being, we must revise my initial formulation and go beyond the accounts offered by some other theorists. This can be seen by a comparison with hedonism. Hedonism can be defended as a merely enumerative theory of well-being:

H_{enum} : Pleasure, and only pleasure, non-instrumentally benefits people.¹⁰

However, hedonism can also be defended as an explanatory theory:

H_{explan} : States of affairs non-instrumentally benefit people because, and only because, they are pleasant.¹¹

This makes clear that instances of pleasure benefit people because they are pleasant, and not for some other reason (for example, because they are desired).

In a similar way, we can revise my initial description of the objective list theory.

We begin with the enumerative claim:

⁸ Parfit 1984, 499.

⁹ Scanlon 1998, 123-126.

¹⁰ Here, I set aside the badness of pain.

¹¹ This theory is defended in Crisp 2006.

OL_{enum}: All instances of a plurality of basic objective goods, and only instances of these goods, non-instrumentally benefit people.

We can then transform this into an explanatory theory:

OL_{explan}: States of affairs non-instrumentally benefit people because, and only because, they instantiate the essential features of at least one of a plurality of basic objective goods.

The basic objective goods are things such as loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, autonomy, achievement, and pleasure. States of affairs constitute well-being according to this theory because they instantiate the essential features of these goods—because they involve reciprocal love, appropriately justified belief about meaningful truths, or the essential features of some other good.¹²

Significantly, OL_{explan} does not explain well-being by identifying some underlying feature that is common to all of the basic goods or by deriving these goods from some more fundamental principle. It does, however, explain the value of all particular states of well-being by appealing to the features of a more general set of goods. In this way, it explains *why* certain states of affairs, and not others, benefit people. It thus provides an explanatory account of well-being while remaining genuinely pluralistic (a point I return to in section 5).

Even OL_{explan} is not a complete explanatory theory of well-being. This is because it does not specify a full list of basic goods. OL_{explan} is, in effect, a formal schema which can be filled in with a number of different goods. A complete objective list theory would

¹² This approach is suggested by Andrew Moore, who notes that each basic good might serve as its own good-maker. See Moore 2000, 78.

need to accomplish this task and defend a determinate list of goods.¹³ For now, I set aside this issue to focus on the defense of OL_{explan}.

4. Objectivist judgments about well-being

This defense appeals to people's considered judgments about well-being. Nearly all theorists of well-being appeal to these judgments and follow something like John Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium.¹⁴ Using this method, theorists first examine people's considered judgments about well-being and look for a set of general principles that systematize them. They then work back and forth between these principles and people's judgments, revising some of these judgments to fit their theories while refining their theories to accommodate the strongest of people's considered judgments.

A key strength of the objective list theory is that it coheres with—and closely models—an important set of these considered judgments. These are people's objectivist judgments about well-being. Many people judge that certain states of affairs contribute to well-being on account of their objective features, and not because people hold positive reactive attitudes toward them. Loving relationships, for example, are judged to be good for people *because* they involve reciprocal love among. Similarly, meaningful knowledge is judged to be good for people *because* it involves appropriately justified beliefs about meaningful truths.

Many people value loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, autonomy, or achievement without thinking of these things as mere instances of desire-satisfaction or as mere means to other goods. Nor, upon reflection, are some people satisfied pursuing

¹³ For some proposed lists, see Ross 1930/2002, 134-141; Finnis 1980, 86-90; Parfit 1984, 499; Griffin 1986, 67-68; Scanlon 1998, 124-125; Nussbaum 2000, 78-80.

¹⁴ See Rawls 1951/1999b; Rawls 1971/1999c, 17-19, 40-46; Scanlon 1993; Daniels 1996, 1-175.

these goods just because they satisfy their desires. Insofar as objective list views can accommodate these objectivist judgments, they are true to people's considered judgments about well-being. This counts in favor of the objective list theory.

Of course, goods such as love and knowledge are sometimes valued for reasons other than well-being.¹⁵ They might be valued as impersonal intrinsic goods, as perfective of human nature, or as elements of a moral or aesthetically pleasing life.¹⁶ Still, these goods are also valued as part of well-being, of what benefits people or is in their self-interest. People may pursue love and knowledge because this is morally good or because it is good from "the point of view of the universe,"¹⁷ but people more often pursue and value these things as part of their well-being—because they hold that these things benefit them. This can be seen in Thomas Nagel's case of the deceived husband whose wife has been unfaithful to him.¹⁸ This deception does not just affect the intrinsic, perfectionistic, or aesthetic value of the man's life, but is also bad for him. It lowers his well-being by depriving him of a loving relationship and of knowledge of his wife's feelings for him.

Hedonism and informed desire-satisfaction theories capture people's objectivist judgments about well-being in one way. In particular, they are generally constructed so as to include most instances of the basic goods I have mentioned as part of well-being. They affirm, for example, that almost all loving relationships and almost all forms of meaningful knowledge contribute to well-being. They explain this, though, by appealing to the pleasantness of these goods or to the fact that they would be desired under certain conditions. For this reason, they do not reflect many people's full views about why these

¹⁵ Thanks to ____ for suggesting this point. [Name omitted for blind review.]

¹⁶ Some of these forms of value are contrasted to well-being in Sumner 1996, 21-25.

¹⁷ See Sidgwick 1907/1981, 382 for "from the point of view... of the Universe."

¹⁸ Nagel 1979b, 4.

things constitute well-being. These theories do not allow that these things benefit people because of their objective features (because they involve reciprocal love, justified beliefs about meaningful truths, etc.). They accommodate people's enumerative judgments about well-being, but significantly revise many of people's explanatory judgments.

A major advantage of the objective list theory is that it coheres with people's explanatory objectivist judgments about well-being. The objective list theory derives support from these judgments and does not seek to debunk them or explain them away. It holds that loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, autonomy, and achievement are good for people because of what they involve, or because of their essential features. If this theory includes pleasure as a basic good (more on this in section 6), it can also affirm that pleasure benefits people because of its pleasantness.

5. Pluralism about well-being

I will now turn to address some objections to the objective list theory. First, some theorists reject this theory because it is a pluralistic account of well-being. Some of these thinkers suspect that the objective list view is not a genuine explanatory theory of well-being since it does not identify one, and only one, underlying feature on account of which states of affairs constitute well-being. This is similar to the Socratic argument that a list of examples is not a philosophical theory of some concept's nature.¹⁹ As applied to the objective list theory, though, this objection does not succeed.

The problem is that the phrase "nature of well-being" is equivocal. In its more general sense, the nature of well-being is that (whatever it is) on account of which states constitute well-being. Thus defined, it is the focus of explanatory theories of well-being.

¹⁹ See, for example, the discussion of piety in the *Euthyphro*. Plato 1997, 6d-e.

In a narrower sense, though, the phrase “nature of well-being” suggests that there must be some one essential feature on account of which states of affairs constitute well-being. If something has a *nature*, it might be thought, or if there is an explanatory theory of something, then all instances of it must share certain features. This motivates the rejection of the objective list theory.

However, this narrower use of the phrase “nature of well-being” is not legitimate: it directly begs the question against pluralistic theories. The reason for this is that there is no *a priori* or conceptual reason to assume that well-being has a monistic “nature” of this kind. Well-being is not necessarily a natural kind, but is an evaluative concept that is used to evaluate lives and to identify certain goals as worth pursuing. It thus remains an open question whether states of affairs constitute well-being on account of one or more than one feature. For this reason, the narrower sense of the phrase “nature of well-being” should not be used to reject pluralistic theories of well-being.

If well-being is stipulated to concern “how well [a life] is going for the individual whose life it is” (Sumner’s account),²⁰ then it is not surprising that its nature may turn out to be pluralistic. The same would occur if we introduced evaluative concepts to express how well a musical performance is going for the individual whose performance it is or how well a day at the amusement park is going for the individual whose day it is. Musical performances and days at amusement parks are things that can go well or poorly for people in a number of irreducibly different respects, and the same may be true for human life in general. If this is the case, then some pluralistic theory will provide the best account of well-being.

²⁰ Sumner 1996, 20, italics removed.

Moreover, the objective list theory of well-being *is* an explanatory theory of well-being in the sense distinguished by Roger Crisp. OL_{explan} does not merely enumerate states of well-being or use a list of basic goods to pick out well-being's extension. Rather, it offers an account of why certain states of affairs, and not others, constitute well-being. States of affairs benefit people, it holds, *because* they instantiate the essential features of at least one of a number of basic goods. In this way, OL_{explan} reveals the nature of well-being.

Because of its pluralistic structure, some thinkers might resist describing OL_{explan} as a philosophical *theory* of well-being. As I have noted, Thomas Scanlon affirms a list of basic goods, but expresses doubts about the possibility of a theory of well-being.²¹ In this regard, we can admit that the objective list theory leaves some questions unanswered. When confronted with a list of basic goods, we naturally wonder what, if anything, they share in common. If there is some underlying feature of these goods which explains their value, this would certainly be worth knowing. It would provide a further level of theoretical insight into well-being and help us identify the basic goods with greater certainty. Objective list theorists (and others) can remain on the lookout for this deeper explanation of well-being.²²

Still, we can admit that there may be no common feature of the basic goods and no deeper master theory of well-being. In the absence of such a theory, the objective list theory may provide our best explanation of well-being. As it stands, it explains the value of every instance of well-being by appealing to the features of some more general basic

²¹ Scanlon 1998, 123-126.

²² Two controversial theories of this kind are the nature-fulfillment theory defended by Mark Murphy, Richard Kraut, and others (Murphy 2001; Kraut 2007) and the enjoyment-of-the-excellent theory defended by Stephen Darwall (Darwall 2002). The term "nature-fulfillment" theory is used in Haybron 2008, 34-36.

good. And it ensures that each of these basic goods is strongly supported by people's considered judgments.

Other philosophical theories are also pluralistic. For example, substance dualism is a theory of human nature. Dualists seek to explain human nature by positing two substances which together account for all of the attributes and activities of human beings. Whatever the merits of this theory, it is not usually ruled out on conceptual grounds just because it uses two principles to explain human nature. There may, in fact, be two or more principles that combine to explain human nature. (Buddhist thinkers refer to the five *skandhas*, or psychophysical elements.²³) If this is the case, then some pluralistic theory of human nature will be correct.

A more common objection to substance dualism is that one of its two principles is not needed to account for the full range of human attributes and activities. Critics of the objective list theory are also free to advance this objection. They might hold that some of the basic goods are not needed to explain the full scope of well-being. This, however, would require a direct response to the objectivist judgments defended above.

6. Objectivism about well-being

A second objection to the objective list theory concerns its defense of objective goods. The objective list theory holds that all instances of the basic goods benefit people, whether or not people have positive reactive attitudes toward them. These include actual reactive attitudes, as well as hypothetical reactive attitudes that people might form under improved conditions, such as full information and procedural rationality. The objective list theory holds that the basic goods benefit people independently of their actual or

²³ See Siderits 2011.

hypothetical reactive attitudes toward them since they constitute well-being on account of their essential features. If meaningful knowledge is good for people *because* it involves justified belief about meaningful truths, then it contributes to well-being whenever these conditions are satisfied. This is true whether or not people desire it, choose it, approve of it, or take pleasure in it.

Some basic goods include positive reactive attitudes among their essential features. Loving relationships require that one person desire the good of another and take pleasure in that person's company. Still, loving relationships do not constitute well-being because people hold second-order positive reactive attitudes toward them. According to the objective list theory, loving relationships do not constitute well-being because people desire them, choose them, approve of them, or take in pleasure in them. Rather, they constitute well-being because they involve reciprocal love.

Pleasure can also be affirmed as an objective good. Pleasure is an objective good if pleasant experiences benefit people because of their essential features as pleasures (how they feel), and not because people desire them, approve them, choose them, or take second-order pleasure in them.²⁴ If this is the case, then the value of pleasure is independent of people's positive reactive attitudes to it, and thus objective.

Objectivism about well-being seems implausible to some thinkers. How, they ask, can states of affairs benefit people if people do not hold actual, or even hypothetical, positive reactive attitudes toward them? Some theorists raise this objection on conceptual grounds. They hold a form of motivational internalism about well-being, according to which each state of well-being must be capable of motivating the person for whom it is

²⁴ For some related accounts, see Crisp 2006, 103-111; Parfit 2011, 52-56.

good under at least some circumstances.²⁵ I suggest, though, that this is not an *a priori* truth about well-being. If well-being concerns what is good for or benefits people, then it is conceptually possible that some states of affairs benefit people even if people cannot be motivated to pursue them. These states might be judged good by people after they occur, by others who care for them, or by disinterested theorists of well-being.

In light of this possibility, defenders of the second objection might admit the conceptual possibility of states of well-being toward which people hold no positive reactive attitudes, but insist that there are no states of this kind. Here, they could appeal to people's considered judgments about well-being to support their view. I suggest, though, that these judgments actually support the objective list theory.

To begin, we can examine our judgments about loving relationships. As I have mentioned, all loving relationships involve certain kinds of pleasure and desire. At times, though, those involved in these relationships may not hold second-order positive reactive attitudes toward them. So, how do we deal with these cases? We can imagine two friends in the midst of a frustrating disagreement. Insofar as they are trying to understand each other and reach a common goal, and feel some affection and concern for each other, they remain engaged in a loving relationship. Yet, at any given moment, they may not hold any positive reactive attitude toward their interaction—or toward their friendship.²⁶ (Even with full information, they may not desire or take pleasure in it.) Still, many would say that their active cooperation contributes to their well-being insofar as it manifests their reciprocal love. If their disagreement were otherwise similar, but not motivated by love, this would be worse for them. These observers would say that these moments are not just

²⁵ See, for example, Railton 1986/2003b, 9.

²⁶ Richard Arneson describes a similar case in Arneson 1999, 140-141.

a means to later times when their relationship will *really* benefit them, but are themselves among the times at which the lives of these friends go well because they love each other. Judgments of this kind suggest that loving relationships can constitute well-being even when people do not hold positive reactive attitudes toward them.

The same holds for some other goods, such as meaningful knowledge. Doctors sometimes tell their patients the truth about their medical conditions, even when there are no decisions to be made and their patients do not want to know their prognosis. Similarly, scientists and historians pursue and publicize truths about the world, even when these are unpleasant and unsettling.²⁷ In these cases, there is some reason to withhold the truth, since it is unpleasant and people may not want to know it. Still, many people recognize a countervailing reason to promote knowledge in these cases, insofar as this gives others meaningful knowledge about themselves and the world around them. This sense can be partly explained by the moral value of facing the truth or by the impersonal intrinsic value of knowledge (if it has this). Yet, some of the reasons we have to share unwelcome knowledge with others seem to arise from considerations of well-being. Many people judge that others benefit by knowing important truths about their lives and are worse off by remaining ignorant.

A final, less-realistic scenario also supports this claim. Imagine that there are times when some people are conscious but experience no reactive attitudes. These people do not desire or take pleasure in things around them and are not motivated to choose or approve of anything. These moments might result from some unusual sickness or

²⁷ Michael Slote discusses this phenomenon in Slote 2001, 158-159.

medication, or from some other cause.²⁸ (We can assume, for the sake of argument, that even full information would not rouse these people from their stupor.) If states of well-being must involve occurrent reactive attitudes, then all people in such circumstances would be equally well-off, since they would all entirely lack well-being. But this is not the only possible conclusion. Although all people in these circumstances would be very poorly off, it seems possible that some people would be a little better off than others on account of the objective goods that are present in their lives. These would be the people who are supported by loved ones and who know the circumstances of their lives or other meaningful truths about the world. This suggests that these things can contribute to well-being, whether or not people hold positive reactive attitudes toward them.

The judgments that support the above arguments are controversial and might be contested by opponents of the objective list theory. I can note, though, that these are distinct from the judgments that I first used to defend this theory. This means that I am not double-counting the exact same intuitions in different parts of my discussion. In my original argument (section 4), I noted that people judge certain things, such as loving relationships and meaningful knowledge, to be good and worth pursuing in everyday life on account of what they involve, or on account of their essential features. Now, I have examined much less common cases in which people do not hold any positive reactive attitudes toward loving relationships and meaningful knowledge. In these cases, I suggest, many people still judge these things to be good and worth pursuing as part of well-being on account of their essential features. Loving relationships are still judged to be good for people because they involve reciprocal love and meaningful knowledge is

²⁸ This argument is inspired by Crisp's discussion of an anhedonic life at Crisp 2006, 122-123. My version of this argument, though, does not support Crisp's position.

still judged to be good because it involves appropriately justified belief about meaningful truths. This highlights the strength and resilience of these objectivist judgments.

7. The list of basic goods

A further challenge for objective list theorists is to identify a complete list of basic goods. As I have noted, OL_{explan} is itself neutral on this question and can be affirmed by thinkers who defend different lists of basic goods. Still, a complete objective list theory will need to include a full list of goods. Moreover, this point can be used to advance a further objection against the objective list theory. Since this theory does not identify any underlying feature common to all list items, it might be argued, it has no principled method for identifying list items. Thus, we should reject it and adopt some monistic account of well-being.

In fact, a fairly determinate list of basic goods can be identified by examining people's considered judgments about well-being. I have already argued that the objective list theory is supported by people's everyday judgments about the value of goods such as loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, autonomy, achievement, and pleasure. In completing a list of basic goods, theorists can return to people's considered judgments and look for other goods that are valued on account of their essential features. In doing this, thinkers can examine people's explicit judgments about well-being as well as those which are implicit in people's pursuit of their own and others' well-being.²⁹

Some thinkers may fear that the list of basic goods will be unduly colored by the cultural biases of contemporary theorists. In this regard, we can note that any account of the basic goods will be conditioned by a particular cultural standpoint. When we discuss

²⁹ See Finnis 1980, 86-90 for an application of this latter approach.

goods such as “loving relationships” and “pleasure,” we present universal values in the concepts of our own culture, concepts that are not fully shared by all people. Still, this should not deter us from investigating the basic goods. As we look for goods, we can note that different cultures pursue and value similar goods in different ways and look for the overlap that exists among these accounts. We can note, for example, how the modern concept of loving relationships overlaps with Aristotle’s account of *philia* (friendship), Confucius’ account of *ren* (compassion), and—as MacIntyre informs us—the Lakota concept of *wancantognaka* (generosity toward family and tribe members).³⁰ As theorists conduct this investigation, they often find that similar goods are valued across many cultures.³¹

Arguably, this method reveals an underlying consensus about a core group of basic goods, such as the goods I have mentioned above. In this regard, it is worth noting that objective list theorists have shown a significant degree of agreement about the basic goods³² and that even opponents of this theory seem to pursue many of these goods as part of their well-being. The method I recommend will not end all debates about well-being, and may reveal certain less-obvious goods that are “close calls.” When this occurs, we can hope that continued reflection will bring greater clarity and consensus. Even if we do not know everything about well-being, we can remain confident in the strongest and most central of people’s considered judgments about well-being. As I have argued, these include the judgments that a number of basic goods make life go well on account of their essential features.

³⁰ Aristotle 1999, 1155a5-1163b25; He 2007, esp. 295-296; Riegel 2011; MacIntyre 1999, 120-121; Soldier 1995.

³¹ See Nussbaum 1993.

³² See the lists cited in note 14.

8. Conclusion

While these objectivist judgments can still be challenged in a number of ways, I believe that they are sufficient to vindicate the objective list theory. I have argued above that there is no conceptual reason to reject pluralistic theories of well-being and that some states of affairs constitute well-being even though people do not hold positive reactive attitudes toward them. Once these claims are accepted, I believe that the objective list theory can emerge as the best explanatory theory of well-being.

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