



The philosophy of wellbeing

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HLLI conducts both theoretical and applied research in order to find the most effective ways to measure and increase global wellbeing. But, what is 'wellbeing'?

This short article summarises what philosophers do (and don't) mean by the term, then introduces the three main rival accounts of what wellbeing is and considers their theoretical strengths and weaknesses. It ends with a brief comment on what the different theories imply, in reality, the priorities are.

1. The concept

In philosophy, 'wellbeing' refers to what is [intrinsically \(or non-instrumentally\)](#) good for someone. Whereas instrumental goods like wealth are valuable only as a means to something else, wellbeing is what ultimately makes someone's life go well. Understanding what ultimately makes life go well is of obvious value: every plausible ethical view holds that wellbeing matters in principle and, in practice, we do put great effort into improving the wellbeing of ourselves and others.

2. Theories of wellbeing

Theories of wellbeing are generally divided into three families: hedonism, desire satisfaction views, and objective list views ([Parfit, 1984, p.493](#)). Even within each, there is scope for significant disagreement. For instance, it wouldn't make sense to refer to 'the objective list theory', as there are so many variants. In this short article, we will briefly introduce the 'classic' versions of each family, before considering their theoretical appeal and key objections.

Note that the question of what wellbeing consists in is separate from the questions of whether it is the only intrinsic good, and whether we ought always and only to maximise it—questions this article does not address ([Schroeder, 2016](#)).

2.1. Hedonism

Hedonism is the claim that wellbeing consists of an overall positive balance of pleasure over pain (both broadly construed). In other words, our lives go best when they have the greatest amount of happiness.

The positive case for hedonism is obvious: what is good for me is plausibly whatever feels good to me, and vice versa. What makes agony bad is, in the first instance, how it feels. Further, it seems strange to think that something I never experience can make a difference to my wellbeing—if I never feel its impact, how can it have affected me?

Some clarificatory points: hedonism claims that pleasure or happiness are valuable irrespective of whether we think they are valuable—if they were only valuable because we desired them, hedonism would amount to a kind of desire theory (which we come to next). Secondly, the word ‘hedonism’ means something different as a philosophical term than it does in ordinary usage, where it is associated with reckless or indulgent pleasure-seeking. Third, accepting hedonism does not entail that we should act only in pursuit of our own wellbeing—that view is called ‘egoism’. There is nothing irrational with accepting that what makes everyone’s lives go well is happiness, but that my happiness is not more morally valuable than yours.

Perhaps the most prominent objection to hedonism is the ‘experience machine’ ([Nozick, 1974, pp. 42-45](#)). You are offered the opportunity to spend the remainder of your life inside a virtual reality capable of simulating any experience, all of which are subjectively indistinguishable from the genuine article. Once plugged in, you could indulge in any number of pleasurable or happy experiences without ever wishing or even knowing you had left the real world. Would plugging in make your life go better? You might object to plugging in because you could not then fulfil your moral duty to help others. Note, however, that the question concerns what makes your life go well for you. To sidestep this moral objection, just imagine you were the last living person and therefore you have no moral duties to anyone else.

The hedonist is committed to saying that the experience machine would make your life go better. But most people react with aversion to the prospect of leaving behind the real world for a simulated existence, however pleasurable or happy. The main reason they give is that they desire to do many things in the actual world; the mere experience of (apparently) doing them is no substitute for in fact doing them. This suggests a second family of theories.

2.2. Desire satisfaction theories

Desire or preference satisfaction theories appeal instead to the fulfilment of a person’s desires as what makes their life go well. Importantly, it is not the feeling or experience of a desire being satisfied that is being said to matter but that a desire is in fact satisfied. You want to have climbed Everest, rather than merely believe that you have. If one only wanted to feel satisfied, the view would also be vulnerable to the experience machine objection (although Heathwood ([2006, 2015](#)) does argue for such a ‘hybrid’ view, where pleasure is understood as the subjective satisfaction of desire).

Different theories disagree over which desires count. The simplest ‘summative’ answer says that the more fulfilment of the more desires the better. Against this, Parfit ([1984, p.497](#)) suggests a case where someone is given the chance to become addicted to a readily available and inexpensive drug, which delivers no pleasure on being taken but promises intense pains of withdrawal. Becoming

addicted allows the person to fulfil many more desires than not becoming addicted but it does not seem addiction would make their life go better.

A more plausible desire theory must therefore find a way of limiting the kinds of desires that count. One such strategy appeals to those desires a person would have if they were better or fully informed about the relevant facts. Another strategy privileges higher-order over first-order desires (a ‘higher-order desire’ is a desire about what one desires). On ‘global’ desire theories, a desire counts just in case it is “about some part of one’s life considered as a whole, or is about one’s whole life” ([Parfit, 1984](#)). Such a theory can explain that addiction is bad for someone because they desire not to have an addicted life.

Perhaps surprisingly, the philosophical literature has paid relatively little attention to life satisfaction—an overall judgement about how well one’s life is going. Yet, measures of life satisfaction are popular, indeed increasingly so, in both the social sciences and in policymaking ([Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2018](#)). While life satisfaction theories of wellbeing are usually understood as distinct from desire theories ([Haybron, 2016](#)), life satisfaction might instead be taken as an aggregate of one’s global desires: I am satisfied with my life to the extent that it achieves my overall desires about it.

Plant ([2020](#)) argues that life satisfaction/global desire theories are vulnerable to ‘automaximisation’. These theories hold that the only desires that matter are ones individuals choose for themselves, therefore individuals can make their lives go best by choosing to only have desires that are trivially easy to fulfil—such as desiring to have (or not have) hair. Another issue for such views is that they seem to offer no way of ascribing wellbeing to beings that lack desires about how their lives go overall, such as dogs, who we tend to think do have wellbeing.

Whatever form they take, desire theories treat the fulfilment of (certain) desires as what ultimately makes someone’s life go well. A general objection to this is that the objects of desire (friendships, success, happiness) are not valuable because they are desired; rather they are desired because they are valuable—and so desire theories have got the explanation the wrong way around.

2.3. Objective list theories

All objective list theories claim there can be things that make a person’s life go better which are neither pleasurable to nor desired by them. Classic items for this list include success, friendship, knowledge, virtuous behaviour, and health. Such items are ‘objective’ in the sense of being concerned with facts beyond both a person’s conscious experience and/or their desires. Facts about my physical health, for instance, can be true or false regardless of whether I value my health, enjoy my health, or believe I am healthy. Defenders of objective list theories might object to the previous

two monistic theories on the grounds that they are naively simplistic in holding that wellbeing can be reduced to a single element: life is far more complicated than that ([Fletcher, 2013](#)).

Yet, pluralism—the view that more than one thing makes up wellbeing—faces its own challenges. Do the items have a characteristic feature in common? If they do, why not replace the list with that single feature? If autonomy, wisdom, and pleasure are each intrinsically good because we desire them, is it not more straightforward to say that desire fulfilment is what matters? Yet, if they have no common characteristic, then in virtue of what are these items, and no others, on the list?

One option is to point towards the common characteristic of perfectibility —either of our species’ nature, or of achievements in “art, science, and culture” ([Rawls, 1971, p.325](#)). For instance, [Foot \(2003\)](#) argues that what is good for me is what makes me a more perfect human being—much as what is good for a cactus is what makes for a flourishing cactus.

Another approach is to appeal to the method(s) that generate the list. Foremost among these methods is ‘reflective judgement’ or ‘refined intuition’ ([Rawls 1971](#)) — the [process](#) of iteratively updating our beliefs to achieve coherence between our various attitudes towards particular cases and general principles. Defenders of this approach would be right to point out that neither hedonism nor desire theories claim to use any further methods: they just happen to end up with a single component of wellbeing while objective list theories end up with many.

3. Practical implications

Do advocates of different theories disagree about how we can use our resources most effectively to improve people’s lives? The good news is that uncertainty about these theoretical questions does not seem to preclude reaching some understanding of how to improve wellbeing in practice. This is because philosophical theories of wellbeing often converge on which things lead to wellbeing: the person who is happy, successful, wise, and loved will have a high wellbeing life on all plausible theories. Determining the extent of practical disagreement between these theories is a further, empirical challenge. To answer it, we first need to determine valid measures for each theory being considered and then investigate the extent to which they differ in the world as it is.

Our current understanding of the extent to which different theories of wellbeing generate different priorities is far from complete. The area where we perhaps know most is about the practical differences between hedonism and the ‘global’ desire theory. These theories correspond to well-established measures in the social sciences: momentary affect (happiness) and life satisfaction, respectively. While the two measures tend to agree on what is good or bad for people, some changes

affect one measure more than the other. For instance, a high income has a larger impact on life satisfaction than on affect ([Kahneman & Deaton, 2010](#); [Jebb et al., 2018](#)).

Because these questions influence what projects should be prioritised, further work is clearly required: both theoretical work pointing us toward the most plausible account of wellbeing and empirical research investigating how each account differs in practice. At the Happier Lives Institute, we conduct both kinds of research in order to find the most effective ways to measure and increase global wellbeing.