

# Life satisfaction and its discontents

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## Abstract

While life satisfaction theories (LST) of well-being are barely discussed in philosophy, they are popular among social scientists and wider society. When philosophers have discussed LST, they are taken to be a distinct alternative to the three canonical accounts of well-being—hedonism, desire theories, the objective list. This essay makes three main claims. First, on closer inspection, LST are indistinguishable from a type of desire theory—the global desire theory. Second, the life satisfaction/global desire theories are the only subjectivist accounts of well-being in the sense that they maintain individuals decide what makes their lives go well for them; hedonism and other desire theories are subjectivist only in some alternative senses. Third, subjectivism is implausible, although for different reasons from those that are usually given. I examine what I take to be the two main current objections to LST and argue that they are unproblematic. I then raise two different, challenging objections. The first is novel. The second has been noted in passing, but its seriousness underestimated. I close by sketching some non-obvious difficulties that subjectivists will face if they attempt to show rival objectivist theories suffer even more counterintuitive implications. Although subjectivism has a strong intuitive pull, we should be ready to abandon it in favour of an objectivist theory—although it is not my purpose here to say which one.

## 1. Introduction

What is it that constitutes *well-being*: that which is ultimately good for us, or makes our lives go well? Philosophers, following Derek Parfit's influential classification, tend to hold that there are only three plausible theories of well-being, each of which admits of a number of varieties: *hedonism*, *desire theories*, and *objective list* theories.<sup>2</sup> On the first, well-being consists in happiness, a positive balance of pleasant over unpleasant experiences.<sup>3</sup> On the second, well-being consists in having one's desires or preferences met. On the third, well-being consists in several goods, which may include pleasure and met preferences but will also consist in other 'objective' items, such as knowledge, love, and friendship.

While they have not attracted as much attention, philosophers have also written about *life satisfaction theories* of well-being, which are taken to be a distinct, fourth alternative to the 'canonical' three views just mentioned. On life satisfaction theories (LST), well-being consists in life satisfaction, a judgement of how one's life is going overall. .<sup>4</sup>

That LST have not received more interest from philosophers is, perhaps, surprising.

First, there seems to be clear conceptual space for the view. Very plausibly, mental states play an important role in well-being. We can divide mental states into (at least) three natural kinds: affective/hedonic (involving pleasurable sensations), conative (involving desire), and cognitive (involving reasoning). However, while affective and conative mental states are at the core of two of the canonical three theories of well-being—hedonism and desire theories, respectively—there is not, on the face of it, a corresponding

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<sup>2</sup> Parfit (1984) Appendix I

<sup>3</sup> I'm understanding, happiness, the psychological state, in a familiarly Benthamite way. Alternative conceptions of happiness include the emotional state view (Haybron 2016), life satisfaction (Sumner 1996), and pro-attitudes (Feldman 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Haybron (2016), Sumner (1996), and Feldman (2010). Tiberius (2006) explicitly states life satisfaction is a theory of well-being omitted from Parfit's (1984) categorisation.

theory of well-being where cognitive states are central. Life satisfaction theories, which require a cognitive judgement of how well one's life is going, would seem to neatly fill that gap.

Second, the view that well-being consists in life satisfaction is popular in the social sciences and society more generally.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in the explosion of research in the last few decades in economics and psychology using measures of *subjective well-being*: individuals' ratings of the quality of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Subjective well-being is often taken to have three measurable components, which often go by more than one name: the affective/experiential/hedonic component, the evaluative/cognitive component, and the eudaimonic/purpose component.<sup>7</sup> Subjective well-being ('SWB') is standardly used as an umbrella term to refer to any or all of the components.

The most commonly used measure of SWB is life satisfaction, an evaluation. Life satisfaction is typically measured by asking individuals "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life, nowadays?" on a score of 0 ("not at all satisfied") to 10 ("completely satisfied"). SWB researchers often (unhelpfully) refer to life satisfaction as a measure of 'happiness', even though 'happiness' in ordinary use refers to affective states—the ones hedonists contend ultimately matter—and LST and hedonism are distinct and differently motivated theories, a point we touch on later.<sup>8</sup>

The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, to do some conceptual housekeeping: to outline what LST are, what motivates them, and how they relate to the other theories of well-being. That a plausible theory of well-being should have largely escaped detection by philosophers is unsettling. It prompts us to wonder if we really have stumbled across a new theory or just an old one in disguise. Second, to evaluate LST. This task is timely given the relative lack of scrutiny that LST have received so far, combined with the fact that measures of subjective well-being are now, arguably, teetering on the verge of becoming a respectable and practical means of determining how to allocate resources in private and public policy decisions.<sup>9</sup>

This essay makes three main claims. First, on closer inspection, LST are extensionally equivalent to a type of desire theory—specifically, what Parfit called the *global desire theory* (GDT)—and may be identical to it.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the life satisfaction/global desire theory is the only *subjectivist* account of well-being in the sense that it maintains that you decide what makes your life go well. While hedonism and other desire theories are sometimes described as 'subjectivist', I argue they are *objectivist*, as I stipulate the terms here, in the sense that you do not get to decide what makes your life go well—certain things are good or bad for you regardless of your judgements on the matter.

Third, subjectivism is implausible, although for different reasons than those usually given. I state what seem to be the two main extant issues for LST and argue that they are unproblematic. I then raise two different, challenging objections. The first is novel. The second has been noted in passing, but its seriousness seems to have been overlooked. I then highlight some non-obvious challenges subjectivists will face if they attempt to attack the rival objectivist theories for having even more counterintuitive implications. Although

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<sup>5</sup> A point noted by e.g. Tiberius (2006) and Haybron (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Dolan and White (2007), Diener *et al.* (1999)

<sup>7</sup> These components often have a specified temporal element, e.g. how happy you feel right now vs how happy you have been feeling recently.

<sup>8</sup> Helliwell (2019) p4, a leading social scientist who uses 'happiness' and 'subjective well-being' interchangeably, defends his (and others) imprecise usage with the following, surprisingly candid, explanation: "While 'subjective wellbeing' is more precise, it simply does not have the convening power of 'happiness'".

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the World Happiness Report and Global Happiness Policy Report series, e.g. Helliwell, Layard and Sachs (2017), Sachs *et al.* (2019).

<sup>10</sup> Parfit (1984), *op. cit.*

subjectivism has a strong intuitive pull, we should be ready to abandon it in favour of an objectivist theory—although it is not my purpose here to say which one.

Here's the plan of attack. Section two introduces LST and explains their subjectivist justification. Section three discusses whether hedonist and desire theories are subjectivist and whether they are distinct from LST. Sections four to six consider objections to subjectivism. Section four examines two supposedly troubling objections I claim are, in fact, unproblematic. Section five presses two serious objections—one novel and one underappreciated. Section six considers the challenge that subjectivists face in attacking rival objectivist views.

Before we proceed, two caveats.

First, we must separate the question of whether LST are the correct account of well-being from whether it is useful, in practice, to *measure* individual life satisfaction. Here, I am only concerned with the first question. If I am right that LST are implausible, what follows is that life satisfaction will not be the theoretically ideal measure of well-being; that is, the most accurate way to measure changes in well-being, whatever well-being is. I won't argue for it here but I am sympathetic to hedonism and therefore suspect that hedonic measures of SWB are closer to this ideal. To be clear, however, whether or not LST are implausible, it does not follow that efforts to measure life satisfaction have been or are in vain. Two factors combine to make *measuring* life satisfaction valuable regardless of one's views of what well-being ultimately is.<sup>11</sup>

One is that life satisfaction data are very cheap and easy to collect. Asking “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life, nowadays” (0 – 10) generally takes respondents 30 seconds or less to answer and is simple to attach to existing surveys.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, if researchers want to measure someone's happiness in detail, then much more intrusive methods are required. For instance, the Day Reconstruction Method asks participants to break their previous day into episodes, like scenes from a movie, and score each episode. It takes around 40 minutes to complete and is therefore often impractical.<sup>13</sup>

The other factor is that life satisfaction surveys allow individuals to judge how their lives are going *by their own standards*, whatever those standards are. There are two further reasons to think this factor matters.

First, on the grounds that, as a matter of democratic legitimacy or justice, we must respect people's views about what they believe makes their life go best, even if we sincerely believed disrespecting their views would be better for them overall.

Second, because it means life satisfaction scores will likely contain useful information about well-being and so may be a suitable proxy measure for it.<sup>14</sup> As Haybron (2016) notes “philosophical theories of well-being tend to agree in broad terms about which lives are better and worse for people, so a reliable indicator of well-being on one view might also be serviceable on another”.<sup>15</sup>

The second caveat is that this paper argues *against* LST—or, alternatively, against subjectivism, which I claim is the same view—instead of arguing *for* an alternative. To make an all-things-considered judgement of which theory of well-being is correct requires considering the merits and demerits of all the candidates alongside one another. If we reject LST on the grounds of their subjectivist roots, that still leaves it open which of the credible objectivist views is the most plausible. I do not attempt to evaluate those alternatives here. This is not just for reasons of space, but also because it is less urgent: while much has been said about

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<sup>11</sup> Haybron (2016b)

<sup>12</sup> ONS (2011)

<sup>13</sup> Kahneman *et al.* (2004)

<sup>14</sup> A ‘proxy’ is an indirect measure thought to correlate well with the item of ultimate interest and which can therefore be used if the latter is not itself measurable; e.g. economists have long used income as a proxy for well-being.

<sup>15</sup> Haybron (2016)

theories of well-being, standardly-categorised, not much has been said about the subjectivist theory in particular.

## 2. Life satisfaction theories and subjectivism

Roger Crisp points out that any adequate theory of well-being has two parts. First, the enumerative: which thing (or things) constitutes well-being? Second, the explanatory: what is it about that thing (or thing) that makes it good for us?<sup>16</sup>

Thus, hedonism, classically understood, combines *enumerative hedonism*—well-being consists in happiness, experiences that are overall enjoyable(/pleasurable)—with *explanatory hedonism*—it is the intrinsic pleasurable nature of these experiences that makes them good for us.

To highlight a contrast, Crisp notes that someone who held that well-being consists in enjoyable experiences, but that enjoyable experiences were good because they (say) fulfilled our nature, would be an enumerative hedonist but not an explanatory hedonist; they would instead be an explanatory perfectionist.

What are the two parts of LST? The enumerative is that well-being consists in a judgement of how one's life is going overall.<sup>17</sup> What is the explanatory part? In the philosophical literature, the only explanation on offer seems to be *subjectivism*, the view that you get to decide what makes your life go well.<sup>18</sup> Sumner, perhaps the leading proponent of life satisfaction theories, writes:

what we are seeking is an adequate subjective theory of welfare, one on which the subject's point of view on her life is authoritative for determining when that life is going well *for her*. (emphasis in original)<sup>19</sup>

We might alternatively call subjectivism *agent sovereignty*, the view Arneson defines as “that what is good for each person is entirely determined by that very person's evaluative perspective”.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, as I term it, *objectivism* is the position you do not get to decide what makes your life go well—certain things are good or bad for you regardless of your judgements on the matter. In the next section, I make a couple of comments on various ways ‘subjective’, ‘objective’ and their cognates have been used in the literature.

How does subjectivism get us to the view well-being consists in life satisfaction? If individuals are the authorities on what makes their lives go well, how well an individual's life goes is simply a matter of how well they judge it to be going. Hence, well-being consists in life satisfaction: the individual's judgement of how well their life is going overall (by the lights of their own reasons, whatever those are).

In the social science literature, a variety of reasons are given for the choice of life satisfaction as the theoretically preferred measure of well-being. As my aim here is not interdisciplinary exegesis, it should suffice to say these reasons generally fall into three categories. First, those that are in the spirit of subjectivism, even if different terminology is used.<sup>21</sup> Second, considerations that are plausibly important for settling on *a* measure of well-being, but leave it open which particular one should be used; for instance, we

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<sup>16</sup> Crisp (2008)

<sup>17</sup> Feldman (2008) points out there are many dimensions on which what he calls “whole life satisfaction” theories of happiness can vary. These are largely irrelevant to the plausibility of the view, with the exception of one dimension (‘actualism’ vs ‘hypotheticalism’), which is mentioned in section 5.2, so I do not discuss them here.

<sup>18</sup> This is the explanation given by Sumner (1996), Haybron (2016), and Tiberius (2006).

<sup>19</sup> Sumner (1996) p160. See also Hawkins (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Arneson (1999) p116. Note though, that Arneson mentions this is a principle for theories of well-being without specifically relating it to life satisfaction theories.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Clark *et al.* (2018) argue that life satisfaction is “democratic—it allows individuals to assess their lives on the basis of what *they* consider important to themselves”; Helliwell, Huang and Wang (2015) p19 give four reasons, the first being that “we attach fundamental importance to the evaluations that people make of their own lives”.

might agree that the measure must be “comprehensive—it refers to the whole of a person’s life” and that “it should have validity [i.e. succeeding in measuring what it is supposed to measure] and its causes should be widely studied”.<sup>22</sup> Third, that life satisfaction is to be preferred because it is a hedonic measure—a measure of pleasure and displeasure.<sup>23</sup> To be clear, this third reason is confused: if hedonic states are what ultimately matters, then hedonic measures of SWB are more theoretically ideal than evaluative measures.<sup>24</sup>

As such, we do not find, in the social sciences, a justification for life satisfaction theories besides subjectivism. I point this out because the objections I raise later ultimately result from the explanatory component of LST, i.e. subjectivism; thus, if we had some alternative, non-subjectivist explanation of why well-being consists in life satisfaction, these objections would miss their mark.

Why be a subjectivist? The view has a straightforward intuitive appeal and it seems unnecessary to motivate it at any length. After all, well-being refers to what makes someone’s life go well *for them*. Hence it seems odd, grating even, to think that something can make someone better off if they—the welfare subject whom we hope to benefit—do not think it makes their life go better.<sup>25</sup> As Railton writes:

It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any way to engage him.<sup>26</sup>

Here are two supporting cases. Consider the *Struggling Artist*, a person who judges that their life goes better if they keep living as a painter, rather than give up and become an accountant, even though their poverty and continued rejection makes their artistic life miserable.<sup>27</sup> Living as the artist, they suppose, they get to live their life in a way that they think is best for them. On the face of it, it is puzzling to claim it would be better for them to switch to accountancy even though they emphatically judge that it would be worse for them.

Consider also the *Reformed Hedonist*: in their dotage, someone reflects on their hard-partying student days. They accept that they were happy and having their desires met then, and that this indulgent stint didn’t have any adverse effects on their later life. What’s more, at that time, they were very satisfied with their life. Now that they are older and (so they suppose) wiser, they have taken a somewhat puritanical turn. As a result, they conclude that their life was going badly for them during their carousing youth and that, at the time, they were seriously mistaken about what made their life go well. The charm of subjectivism is that it allows the individual to later revise how *their* life has gone.

These should suffice to show subjectivism’s appeal.

### 3. Satisfaction, subjectivism, and distinguishing theories of well-being

I’ve just argued that the justification for LST is subjectivism. This may raise eyebrows. While we would expect that the objective list, as its name indicates, is an objectivist theory, aren’t hedonism and desire theories also subjectivist? In this section, I argue that hedonism and all but one version of the desire theory are objectivist. I then argue that the version of the desire theory that is subjectivist—the global desire theory—seems to be identical to the life satisfaction theory and comment on how this seems not to have been noticed. Objective list theories are not discussed here.

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<sup>22</sup> Quotations from Clark *et al.* (2018)

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Dolan and White (2007) p72 claim the importance of both life satisfaction and affective measures of SWB (and not just the latter) is “generally grounded in hedonistic philosophies”.

<sup>24</sup> This confusion may be a product of the fact that life satisfaction is often called a ‘measure of happiness’.

<sup>25</sup> If readers do not feel the pull of subjectivism, that only makes the objective of the essay—which is to argue that life satisfactionism is implausible—easier to achieve.

<sup>26</sup> Railton (1986) p9

<sup>27</sup> Case adapted from Haybron (2016).

We should clarify a few terms. I am using the word ‘subjectivism’ in a specific way, namely, to refer to the view that you decide what makes your life go well. Other authors have taken a ‘subjectivist’ theory of well-being to be on which, roughly speaking, an individual’s “pro-attitudes”, such as a liking, wanting, preferring, and endorsing, play some important role (to be further specified) role in what makes their life go well.<sup>28</sup> For contrast, call this *pro-attitudism*.<sup>29</sup>

Both senses can be contrasted with the term ‘subjective’ in ordinary English—relating to feelings and personal opinions rather than facts. Hedonism, desire theories, and life satisfaction theories are all somehow subjective in both this sense and in the pro-attitudist sense.

This ordinary language use of ‘subjective’ can also be distinguished from particular philosophical uses of the term where ‘subjective’ might mean (as I define them) subjectivism, pro-attitudist, or, to add to the confusion, a *mental state* account of well-being—one where well-being consists entirely in mental states (as opposed to mind-independent facts).<sup>30</sup> The differences between these terms will be illustrated shortly.

Why is hedonism an objectivist theory? As Haybron notes, the hedonist denies that what makes your life go well is up to you—to the hedonist, happiness makes your life go well whatever *your* views on the importance of happiness.<sup>31</sup> This was the point of *Struggling Artist*: the hedonist holds it would be better for the person to become an accountant *because* that would make them happier. LST deny that this would make the person’s life go better *even though* they would be happier, as this person would not judge their life as going better overall, despite their greater happiness.

Why aren’t all desire theories subjectivist? After all, aren’t my desires, well, mine? The issue here is with unwanted desires. Some desire theories will count it as good for you to have your desires met *even* if you deny that fulfilling those desires would make your life go better. Parfit illustrates this with his famous case of *Addiction*:

I shall inject you with an addictive drug. From now on, you will wake each morning with an extremely strong desire to have another injection of this drug. Having this desire will be in itself neither pleasant nor painful, but if the desire is not fulfilled within an hour it will then become very painful. This is no cause for concern, since I shall give you ample supplies of this drug. Every morning, you will be able at once to fulfil this desire. The injection, and its after-effects, would also be neither pleasant nor painful. You will spend the rest of your days as you do now.<sup>32</sup>

Parfit points out that on a *summative* desire theory—on which all your desires count and how your life goes overall is the product of the extent to which each desire is fulfilled and intensity of each desire—your life goes better in *Addiction*.<sup>33</sup> But it is hard to believe one’s life would go better in the *Addiction* case.

Parfit draws a distinction between *local* and *global* desires where a desire is “global if it is about some part of one’s life considered as a whole, or is about one’s whole life”. A *global* desire theory (GDT), counts only global desires. On this theory, we can say being addicted is worse for us; when we think about how our lives go overall, we do not want to become addicted.

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<sup>28</sup> Heathwood (2015) uses ‘subjectivist’ loosely in this sense, where pro-attitudes play an important role.

<sup>29</sup> *Pro-attitude objectivism* would be the view where, roughly, pro-attitudes play no important role in making life go well.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Sumner (1996) uses ‘subjective’ where I use ‘subjectivism’; Brink (1989) uses ‘subjective’ roughly to mean a mental state theory.

<sup>31</sup> Haybron (2016)

<sup>32</sup> Parfit (1984), Appendix I

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*

A *local* desire theory, where only local desire counts is, in fact, objectivist—it will claim that I am better off in *Addiction* even if I strenuously protest that it's my life and I don't think that I'm better off.

On the other hand, it doesn't seem possible to understand the GDT as objectivist. It holds the only desires that matter are the ones I have about my life as a whole. But what I desire for myself overall is something that I get to decide, hence I get to decide what makes my life go well. Recall, this is how we defined subjectivism.

The summative desire theory is then a subjectivist-objectivist hybrid: it holds that some things contribute to my well-being which I do think make my life, as a whole, go better (the global desires) and some things that I do not think relevant to my life as a whole (the local desires).

In fact, LST and GDT seem to be the same view of well-being albeit with different names. On the former, well-being consists in the evaluation of how my life goes overall. On the latter, well-being consists in the satisfaction of my desires about how my life goes overall. But what other way can I evaluate how my life is going overall except by comparing how it actually goes to how I desire it goes overall?

While this result is perhaps surprising, on reflection it would be odd if there were more than one subjectivist theory: subjectivists agree that well-being consists in the same type of good for everyone; namely, whatever each individual decides their well-being consists in. Given LST and GDT are subjectivist, that means they agree on what well-being is. In Crisp's terminology, they thus have the same explanatory and enumerative parts. In contrast, we can have as many conceptually distinguishable objectivist theories as we want: we just need to specify which good or goods make life go well, whatever those in possession of such goods think of the matter.

The natural concern here is that the suggestion that LST and GDT are the same view is in error. After all, philosophers who have discussed LST take them to be an alternative to desire theories, of which the global desire theory is a type. What might the distinction be?

Haybron supposes the distinction is that LST are mental state theories whilst desire theories are non-mental state theories: life satisfaction is a state of mind, and desire satisfaction is a state of the world.<sup>34</sup> To illustrate the difference between mental and non-mental state theories, suppose you want there to be cheese on the moon. If someone put cheese on the moon but didn't tell you, your desire would be satisfied—the world would go the way you wanted it to—but you would not be more satisfied. As Haybron puts it: “Crudely, we might say that [desire] satisfaction involves actually getting what you want, while life satisfaction involves thinking you're getting what you want.”<sup>35</sup>

This is, in fact, too crude: both desire and life satisfaction theories admit of mental state and non-mental state flavours. For instance, Chris Heathwood has argued that the most plausible version of the desire satisfaction theory is *subjective desire satisfaction*, where well-being consists in believing one is getting what one wants—this is a mental state theory.<sup>36</sup> Sumner, on the other hand, opts for a non-mental state life satisfaction theory; he insists there is an information constraint on well-being: someone who is satisfied with life only because they are incorrectly informed is not doing well.<sup>37</sup> We say more about Sumner's theory in a further section.

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<sup>34</sup> Haybron (2016)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p365

<sup>36</sup> Heathwood (2006)

<sup>37</sup> Sumner (1996) ch. 6. Someone might insist that LST and GDT are both subjectivist, but one is the mental state and the other the non-mental version. This seems heavy-handed, not least because it's unclear which one would be which. The distinction seems unprincipled because, as I say shortly, both views take the same mental state to be of primary importance.

Sumner opts for LST, having previously argued against desire theories, from which it follows that he takes them to be distinct. However, it's not clear what he takes the distinction to be. Sumner makes no mention of a global desire theory, so perhaps he never seriously considered that type of desire theory.<sup>38</sup> Valerie Tiberius not only argues life satisfaction is distinct from Parfit's standard three theories, but even states "there is no direct counterpart of preference or desire theories in the psychology literature".<sup>39</sup> She does not offer a distinction between life satisfaction and the other theories of well-being either.

As a final throw of the dice, someone could suggest that the distinction is that the two views take different mental states as central: cognitive ones for LST, conative ones for GDT.<sup>40</sup>

On closer examination, this purported distinction falls apart. To see this, note that a familiar distinction among desires is "between what a person "truly desires" or finds truly appealing, and what a person wants in the thinner, merely behavioral sense that he is simply disposed to try to get."<sup>41</sup>

We can understand local desires as these behavioural wantings and global desires as what we truly want. Working out what we truly want seems to be an unavoidably cognitive task: we examine our basic urges and then evaluate, according to some standard, whether fulfilling that urge would make our lives go better overall. Hence, our desires about how we want our lives to go overall are some sort of hybrid cognitive-conative mental state, which elides the proposed difference.

That life satisfaction and global desire theories turn out to be the same account of well-being is, I aver, a pleasant surprise. It was puzzling that, in general, philosophers thought there were only three plausible accounts of well-being while social scientists and some philosophers had quietly landed on a credible, fourth view. We now see this was a case of mistaken identity. Along the way, we realised that we can have subjectivist and objectivist (and hybrid) desire theories. From here on in, as life satisfaction and global desire theories seem to be one and the same, and the only subjectivist view, we can use the terms interchangeably.

For the interested reader still concerned the two views are different, I invite them to consider, as a further test, whether any of the objections we discuss later only applies to one of (the descriptions of) the views.

#### 4. Subjectivism and its discontents

With our conceptual house in order, the next task is to evaluate the life satisfaction/global desire satisfaction/subjectivist view. In the next section, I discuss two challenging objections to subjectivism. Before we get there, this section notes the main extant objections raised to the view usually described as LST and (briefly) argues they are unproblematic. I do this because, if we already had decisive reason to reject the view, it would be unnecessary to identify further reasons to do so.

According to Dan Haybron, in the current literature, there are two main problems for life satisfaction theories. First, evaluating one's life involves a global judgement of how well one's life measures up to one's standards. Yet:

it is doubtful that most individuals have well-defined notions of what matters to them and how to add it all up in a single judgment: life is full of apples and oranges, and it is likely to be substantially arbitrary, even from the agent's own perspective, how to add up all the good and bad things in her

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<sup>38</sup> One would expect to find it in Sumner (1996) ch. 5, which is on desire theories.

<sup>39</sup> Tiberius (2006) p495

<sup>40</sup> I am grateful to Matthew Jernberg for this suggestion.

<sup>41</sup> Heathwood (2015) p142

life. [...] [T]here's no reason to expect people to know how to make such a judgment. As a result, any judgment about the overall quality of one's life is bound to be substantially arbitrary.<sup>42</sup>

Specifically, then, the concern here is that it's unclear which principled procedure individuals should use to judge their lives. However, if we accept subjectivism, this concern is moot: because individuals are the authorities on how their lives are going, they can evaluate their lives however they want—that's the point. This objection fails to account for the motivation for the view.

Haybron claims the second major issue is that:

life satisfaction embodies a judgment, not about how well one's life is going, but about whether one's life is good *enough*: is it satisfactory? It is doubtful that most people have very clear ideas about how good their lives must be to count as satisfactory, or that anyone should care very much if they did. In short, life satisfaction is a gauge, not of the goodness of a life, but of the good-enoughness of a life. *A person might reasonably be satisfied with what even he regards as a life that's going badly*—things could be worse, he might think, so why complain? (emphasis in original)<sup>43</sup>

This objection relies heavily on the ordinary meaning of the word 'satisfied' as referring to reaching a sub-maximal level of some property. The usage here is analogous to the difference between *satisficing* and *maximising consequentialism*: according to the former, we are required to bring about some level of good but doing more good than that is supererogatory; according to the latter, we are required to do the most good. However, understanding 'satisfied' as being about 'good-enoughness' in this way is not essential to LST. We can simply say, as we did earlier, that on LST, well-being consists in judging how your life is *going overall* rather than—as the objection requires—whether it is good *enough*.

If these were the most serious issues for LST, we should think the view in pretty good shape.

## 5. Subjectivism's surprises

The next two subsections each raise a very serious problem for subjectivism.

### 5.1 Automaximisation

Suppose you want your life to go maximally well—you want your well-being to be as high as possible. On subjectivism, individuals are the authorities on how their lives are going. Therefore, if you decide that your life is going maximally well then, *hey presto*, it is.

Call this the *automaximisation* objection. I take it to be a straightforward *reductio* against subjectivism. It seems wholly implausible that the mere fact I have decided to judge my life as going excellently does, in fact, make my life go excellently.<sup>44</sup> As far as I know, this issue has not been raised before as a problem for either of what were labelled 'life satisfaction' or 'global desire theories'.

I don't expect those drawn to subjectivism to give up so easily. I consider two moves such a person might make.

The first move is to suppose it can't be the case that subjectivism really does entail auto-maximisation. "Surely", one might say, "you can't simply cheat like that. Individuals are the authorities on how their lives

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<sup>42</sup> Haybron (2016) p366

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, this same thinking applies at all levels of well-being; it does not seem my life goes terribly because and to the extent that I decide it is going terribly.

are going, but there must still be *some rules* about how to assess one's life." Indeed, Tiberius supposes that a sophisticated version of the theory will have some restrictions and that Sumner's is such a version.<sup>45</sup>

The difficulty for the subjectivist is how to make this move without accidentally abandoning their own position. After all, if individuals are the authorities on how their lives are going, how could there be any restrictions on how they can assess their lives? I see two ways that the subjectivist can defensibly insist on *some* restrictions, but neither will blunt the force of the objection.

It does not seem problematic to insist on *formal* (/logical) constraints, even if it would be incoherent to insist on *substantive* constraints—rules about which goods, e.g. happiness or success, individuals use to determine their overall evaluation of life. For instance, one might insist individuals cannot judge their lives as going well because they believe something is both true and not true. It seems reasonable to claim that, even if individuals are sovereign over how *their* lives are going, it does not follow they are also sovereign, in some relevant sense, over the rules of logic.

Equally, it is not obviously incoherent to insist on what Sumner calls the *authenticity* constraint. Sumner argues that, for a subject's life to go well, not only does that subject need to endorse the conditions of her life but:

it requires that a subject's endorsement of the conditions of her life, or her experience of them as satisfying or fulfilling, be authentic. The conditions for authenticity, in turn, are twofold: information and autonomy.<sup>46</sup>

For our purposes, we do not need a deep understanding of the information and autonomy conditions. The following should suffice. Regarding information, the idea is that if subjects are satisfied with their lives, but they would not be if they had some further information, then their lives are not, in fact, going well for them after all. Thus, the person who lives "in ignorant bliss with a faithless partner" but would be very dissatisfied if they knew of their partner's philandering, is not living a high well-being life.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding autonomy, Sumner's view is that the person's endorsement of her life must be truly her own, in the sense that she formed that endorsement in what he calls the "normal" way, that is, without being manipulated.

We might grant the authenticity constraint is consistent with subjectivism—it is perhaps a *procedural* constraint (how the judgment is made) rather than a substantive constraint (what the judgement is), and perhaps it is only the latter that is incompatible with subjectivism.

However, neither the formal nor procedural constraints block automaximisation. What if I'm the sort of person who has authentically decided that I would like to have maximum well-being? If subjectivism is true, it seems I just need to pick *a reason* to conclude that my life is going as well as it could. Perhaps I need to be correctly informed about that reason and abide by the rules of logic, but that leaves what I can pick wide open. I might decide my life is going maximally well because I've achieved some laudable, noble, and challenging goal, such as getting a philosophy degree. But I could even pick an apparently perverse reason; I might decide I am maximally satisfied with my life because two is a prime number or Paris is the capital of France. I do not see how the subjectivist can deny this strategy without insisting on the type of substantive constraints that are anathema to the view.

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<sup>45</sup> Tiberius (2006)

<sup>46</sup> Sumner (1996) p139.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p160.

The second move is to claim that, whether or not automaximisation is a problem in theory, it is not a problem in practice because individuals will not choose to automaximise.

This move can be dealt with easily. We are interested in which theory of well-being is theoretically adequate. Thus it is sufficient to raise theoretical problems.<sup>48</sup>

In any case, not only should individuals automaximise if they want to have maximum well-being, some will. As a case in point, even though I do not find subjectivism plausible, I have decided to judge that my life is going maximally well; this seems a sensible precautionary step to take regarding one's well-being, given the trivial costs; I commend it to the reader.<sup>49</sup>

Automaximisation raises a serious practical problem—or, perhaps, opportunity—for the subjectivist. The standard way empirical life satisfaction researchers proceed is by trying to work out what the socio-economic determinants of high life satisfaction are—how income, health, relationships, etc. contribute to life satisfaction. The next step is to consider what can be done, typically by governments, so that people have more of the things that lead to satisfying lives. But, in light of automaximisation, this approach suddenly looks to be the long way around: rather than trying to (say) make people richer so that they will be more satisfied, subjectivists should be excited about the alternative possibility of simply going around and encouraging people to evaluate their lives as going maximally well in their current circumstances.<sup>50</sup>

At this point, classically-minded readers might hear echoes of Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma.<sup>51</sup> Roughly, the dilemma is this: are things good because the Gods love them, or do the Gods love them because they are good?

If the Gods love things because they are good, then it is not the case that the Gods determine what is good; rather goodness is prior to, and separate from, the wills of the Gods. Hence the Gods are (disappointingly) non-omnipotent. However, if the goodness of something is caused by the act of the Gods loving it, then what constitutes goodness is an entirely arbitrary matter open to the capricious whims of the Gods. Intuitively, pain, suffering, murder, and the rest are simply bad regardless of what the Gods happening to be thinking at this moment.<sup>52</sup>

There is an analogous dilemma for subjectivists: is my life going well because I judge it so, or do I judge my life as going well because it is?

The automaximisation objection derives its force from the intuition that how well my life goes cannot merely be a matter of how I judge my life. The alternative path in the dilemma is much more plausible: I judge my life as going well because it is going well. What this requires is that I have some pre-existing idea of what constitutes my well-being that I apply to my life to assess how my life is going. To take this path rejects subjectivism about theories of well-being in favour of objectivism.

## 5.2 Too few subjects

On subjectivism, individuals decide what makes their lives go well. Many sentient entities seem incapable of making these sorts of judgements, such as non-human animals or humans with cognitive disabilities. Such evaluations require complicated cognitive machinery that these beings conspicuously lack; to make an overall evaluation, one must decide which standard(s) you're going to use to evaluate your life and then,

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<sup>48</sup> While this objection might seem facile to philosophers, in conversations with social scientists, I've often had it put to me that a moral theory only needs to get the 'right answer' in practice (e.g. utilitarianism is true unless and until you face a real opportunity to kill one and save five, but true otherwise)

<sup>49</sup> C.f. 'Pascal's Wager'

<sup>50</sup> Note Amartya Sen's (1987) 'adaptive preferences' objection to this sort of approach.

<sup>51</sup> Fowler (1914) 10a

<sup>52</sup> Or, at least, *pro tanto* bad

taking all the various bits and pieces of your life in aggregate, make a judgement. We might, for instance, believe that dogs can feel pleasure and pain, have beliefs and desires, likes and dislikes, but nevertheless doubt they are capable of deciding how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole. If well-being consists in overall judgments of life, then such entities are not *welfare subjects*; that is, they cannot have well-being at all and there is no sense in which we can make things go better or worse for them.

What follows from this? Suppose you are feeling bored and decide you're going to set your pet dog, Fido, on fire. Fido will, presumably, be in excruciating pain. Subjectivists will hold you have not reduced Fido's well-being, however, because Fido is incapable of having well-being. This is an unacceptable implication of the view.

Intuitively, sentience is the 'bar' for being a welfare subject. Subjectivism sets the bar too high, requiring not only sentience but also an ability to carry out particular, advanced mental functions. Hence, this is the *too few subjects* objection: subjectivism implies there are far fewer welfare subjects than seems believable.

Interestingly, a problem along these lines has been noted before: Katarina de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer (writing together) and Chris Heathwood point it out for global desire theories, as does Sumner for life satisfaction theories. But these authors note it in passing without seeming to appreciate its force.<sup>53</sup>

For instance, de Lazari-Radek and Singer suppose GDT "gives us no way of saying what is good for beings who lack the intellectual capacity to envisage their existence over extended periods of time."<sup>54</sup> This frames the situation as one where the subjectivist accepts dogs have welfare but that we just need them to fill out their theory a bit more and tell us how welfare works for dogs. This seems too charitable to the subjectivist. On subjectivism, as individuals determine what makes their life go well, it seems nothing makes life go well without that determination, and dogs (and others) are not beings capable of making them. Asking how much welfare Fido has is analogous to asking how much money Fido has in his bank account—the question is puzzling when Fido doesn't have a bank account and can't even open one himself; Fido's welfare is not zero on subjectivism, but undefined.

How can the subjectivist respond? I consider five moves.

The first is to insist that all sentient creatures can make overall assessments of their lives.

This is not credible. To make progress, let's try to be a bit more precise about where the line is. Plausibly, self-awareness is a necessary condition for being able to make an overall evaluation of one's life—if a creature lacks a sense of itself, it cannot have a view on how its life is going. As a first pass, being able to recognise oneself in a mirror seems a good test of self-awareness. Yet very few animals have passed the 'mirror self-recognition' test. Those that have passed include great apes, dolphins, and elephants.<sup>55</sup> Those that have failed include several species of primates, giant pandas, and sea lions.<sup>56</sup> Hence, assessed this way, subjectivism would deny that even many of the most seemingly cognitively advanced sentient creatures are welfare subjects.

We can press this point with a spectrum argument. Humans, let's agree, can make overall evaluations of their lives. But, if we go back in our evolutionary history, our ancestors were primates who presumably lacked self-awareness as assessed by the mirror self-recognition test. Suppose, generously, that self-awareness is necessary and sufficient to make life satisfaction judgements. What must then be the case is that in our chains of ancestors, there would have to be a first individual who had self-awareness—and is therefore a welfare subject—but whose parents have only *slightly* less sophisticated cognitive machinery. The result is

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<sup>53</sup> de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2016) p221, Heathwood (2015) p142, and Sumner (1996) ch. 6

<sup>54</sup> de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2016), *Ibid*

<sup>55</sup> See Pachniewska (2015).

<sup>56</sup> Ma *et al.* (2015), Delfour and Marten (2001)

that the parents entirely lack self-awareness and are, therefore, not welfare subjects. Pressing the implications of this once again, what follows from subjectivism is that incinerating the self-aware primate would be bad for it but doing the same to its parents could not be bad for them.

Second, one might propose, to get around this issue, different theories of well-being for different types of being, for instance that well-being consists in happiness for those entities who cannot evaluate their lives, and that welfare consists life satisfaction for those that can. Roughly then, “happiness for animals, life satisfaction for humans”.<sup>57</sup>

However, this falls victim to exactly the same spectrum argument: humans will have one ape-like ancestor whose well-being consists in happiness, but whose child’s well-being consists in life satisfaction. This is problematic because a major moral distinction emerges on the basis of apparently trivial differences in the non-evaluative facts.

A further issue here would be providing a non-*ad hoc* explanation of why welfare consists in different things for different beings: if happiness is good for those who can’t evaluate their lives, why isn’t it good for everyone?

A third move is to propose a variant of view we’ve been discussing. Specifically, the variant is that well-being consists in happiness *and* life satisfaction for entities that can evaluate their lives but *only* happiness for those that can’t; roughly: “happiness for animals, happiness *and* life satisfaction for humans”.

This does not seem to be an improvement. There is still the awkward spectrum issue that one of our ancestors suddenly gets a dual account of well-being their parents lacked. Further, this raises new problems about how to weigh happiness and life satisfaction off against each other so as to know how well life is going overall for an entity.

The fourth move requires some set up. Fred Feldman distinguishes between actualist and hypotheticalist life satisfaction theories: on the former, you actually have to assess your life to determine how satisfied you are with it, on the latter, your life satisfaction is determined by what you would conclude if you thought about.<sup>58</sup> I suppose the subjectivist needs to opt for the latter, because, on the basis of what we’ve said, the former implies beings who do not actually judge their lives would lack welfare, which seems very counterintuitive.<sup>59</sup> If we move to a hypotheticalist version, we might then suppose how well (say) Fido’s life goes depends of how satisfied he would be with his life *were he able to judge it*.

The problem with this move is that Fido cannot judge his life as he is. For him to be able to judge his life, it would require changing him into a very different sort of being, at which point this cognitively enhanced pooch would not be Fido assessing Fido’s life, but some other entity evaluating its own life. This is analogous to the scenario where humans ask if, from our own perspective, we would like to live as some animal. This is a different question from asking whether the animal, from its perspective, enjoys its own life.

A further problem, if we accept the suggestion that things which can’t, in fact, evaluate their lives can nevertheless be welfare subjects is that it is too permissive. It would lead to an opposite problem of having too *many* subjects. For instance, if Mountain Everest could judge its existence, in the relevant sense of

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<sup>57</sup> I am grateful to Caspar Kaiser and Patrick Kaczmarek for each making this inventive suggestion.

<sup>58</sup> Feldman (2008)

<sup>59</sup> Feldman’s objection to the hypotheticalist account of life satisfaction is the case of a ‘happy-go-lucky’ character who never stops to reflect on his life and would be dissatisfied if he did so. Feldman supposes this person’s life is going well even though, if they did stop to judge, they would think otherwise. Although this is counter intuitive, it seems less so than the actualist version on which happy-go-lucky has no welfare.

‘count’, then presumably it would have some views on what was good or bad for it, and so would count as a welfare subject too.

Fifth and finally, subjectivists could bite the bullet and accept many sentient entities are simply not capable of having well-being after all. They might point out that hedonists also have to draw the line somewhere about which animals can feel pleasure—maybe insects can, maybe they can’t—and, similarly, working out where the line is on life satisfactionism is an important further empirical project.

For the reasons given above, this response is unsatisfactory—it is hard to believe entities like dogs or pandas don’t have welfare at all.

## 6. Subjectivism’s shoot-out

We’ve now raised two serious objections to subjectivism. If this were a Western, we’d be at the final scene where our protagonist is pinned down in a saloon by its assailants behind an up-turned table and counting the rounds left in its revolver. Custom dictates our hero must now mount a daring and sudden attack on their opponents. If the subjectivist can show that the alternative theories of well-being face objections that are even worse, we would not need to reject the view. Can the subjectivist shoot their way out?

Let’s first clarify who the subjectivist needs to attack. At the start of this essay we thought we had four distinct theories of well-being. It turned out life satisfaction theories of well-being are just a type of desire theory. So now we are back to there being three theories of well-being with the additional realisation that subjectivism is a variant of one theory. The challenge, then, for the subjectivist (sub)theory of well-being—the life satisfaction/global desire theory—is to show how each of hedonism, non-global desire theories, and the objective list theories are less plausible than it.

It is outside the aim and scope of this essay to reach an all things considered judgement on which theory of well-being is correct. Here, I restrict myself to a few comments on why subjectivists might find it harder to attack their rivals than they expected.

Suppose the subjectivist starts by pointing out that hedonism suffers from a devastating objection, the *experience machine*.<sup>60</sup> The experience machine is a virtual reality device built by top scientists which we can plug into and will simulate whatever experiences we need to make us maximally happy. According to hedonism, plugging into the experience machine would make someone’s life go maximally well. Many people think life in the experience machine is not a high well-being life and so conclude hedonism must be false.

Let’s leave aside whether hedonists can defuse the experience machine objection.<sup>61</sup> What’s relevant here is that the experience machine is best understood not as objection to hedonism only, but to *any* mental state theory of well-being: after all, the experience machine, by stipulation, can generate whichever mental states we want it to, including those that would cause someone to judge they are maximally satisfied with their life. Hence, if the subjectivist opts for a mental state version of their theory, they are pushed to plug into the experience machine too. This result might be a surprise: in conversation, I’ve often had it put to me by advocates of LST that a reason to hold the view is that it, unlike hedonism, avoids the experience machine objection.

Thus, if the subjectivist wants to attack hedonism while accepting a mental state account, they need to do so on the grounds that the particular objectivist good which hedonists contend makes life go well, namely

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<sup>60</sup> Nozick (1974)

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Crisp (2006).

happiness, does not, on reflection, make life go well. This seems hard to pull off: happiness has the most obvious claim to being what makes life go well.

Of course, the subjectivist can say that happiness still matters for our well-being because and to the extent that our happiness affects our overall satisfaction with life. But seems to be the wrong sort of explanation: it is odd to claim pain and suffering are instrumentally bad for us, bad for us *only* because they make us evaluate our lives less positively. Intuitively, they are simply bad—intrinsically bad—and not bad for some further reason.

The tempting move for the subjectivist, and the one Sumner takes, is to move to a non-mental state version of the theory. Sumner achieves this via the previously discussed information condition of the authenticity constraint, on which subjects do not just have to be satisfied with the conditions of their lives, they need the information they used to make such judgements to be correct.<sup>62</sup> Hence, Sumner can contend the experience machine will not cause maximal well-being because individuals inside the machine only *think* their lives are going well on the basis of false information.

In its rivalry with hedonism, this move would seem to help the global desire theory somewhat. However, it is not a totally costless move, as non-mental state theories face objections of their own, such as Parfit's *Stranger on a Train*:<sup>63</sup>

You meet a stranger on a train who tells you he is battling cancer and is on the way to receive treatment. You form the desire that he gets better and decide you will be more satisfied with your life as a whole if he does. You never see him again and he later dies of cancer.

On a non-mental state global desire theory your life goes worse because he dies, even though you never find out about it. Many find this result implausible specifically because it's puzzling to think that something can make your life go better or worse if it has no impact on your mental states. All this said, if one is going to be a subjectivist, it seems the more plausible version of the view is a non-mental state one.

Now we can ask how plausible the (non-mental state) global desire theory is compared to alternative (non-mental state) desire theories. In fact, we've already discussed this. A reason we were drawn towards a global desire theory and away from a summative desire theory was to avoid the counterintuitive result that your life goes better in Parfit's *Addiction* case. However, we now recognise that while the global desire theory dodges *Addiction*, it faces objections which seem much worse—namely automaximisation and too few subjects. Summative desire theories don't suffer from these objections due to their inclusion of local desires: your local desire, e.g. to go on holiday to Tahiti, isn't met simply by you deciding you've met it, and animals will have local desires. Hence, if one is going to be a desire theorist, it's not at all clear one should opt for the global version over the summative version after all.

How does subjectivism stack up against the objective list, a view we've said almost nothing about? Two points of clarification. First, as others have noted, 'list' is an unhelpful descriptor if it's supposed to differentiate the objective list from the other two main theories of well-being: all theories of well-being are a list of what constitutes well-being; some, e.g. hedonism, are merely single-item lists.<sup>64</sup> Second, it is unclear what 'objective' means. This could be in contrast to mental state theories, subjectivist theories, or pro-attitudist theories. Seeing as we're interested in rivals to subjectivism, and we've already discussed the two main (only?) pro-attitude theories—hedonism and desire satisfaction—we are specifically concerned with those theories where well-being does not consist solely in happiness or satisfied desires. Candidates for

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<sup>62</sup> Sumner (1996) p139

<sup>63</sup> See Parfit (1984) p494

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Arneson (1999)

this list, which could be a single or a multi-item list, might include friendship, knowledge, love, and autonomy.

Because there are any number of candidates, and combinations of candidates, for this list, this might seem to make the task of the subjectivist insurmountable. I will just make two further general comments.

First, if the list is multi-item, one avenue the subjectivist could always pursue is to push for explanations both of why those, and only those items, made the list and how those different goods can be made traded-off against each to determine what maximises well-being.

Second, despite the criticisms raised against subjectivism here, it is clearly more plausible than *some* possible objectivist theories. To push the point, subjectivism has far more appeal than, to use a deliberately silly example, *hattism*, the view that well-being consists in the number of hats someone owns. Hence, the subjectivist only needs to take on the *credible* alternative objectivist goods we've not discussed here, such as, (say) knowledge. Discussing how subjectivism compares in a head-to-head against the more plausible objectivist good is outside the scope of this essay; I leave such matters to the interested reader to pursue.

## 7. Conclusion

In philosophy, life satisfaction theories of well-being have been treated as an alternative to the three canonical theories of well-being, although an alternative whose distinctness was not clear. I argued life satisfaction theories were a type of desire theory, the global desire theory, in disguise. I then argued against the plausibility of the life/global desire satisfaction theory on grounds of its subjectivism, which I showed suffers two acute problems that have been either unrecognised or underappreciated. While I did not argue for an alternative, objectivist theory of well-being, I indicated why and how subjectivists will struggle to take on their rivals, even if they come out with all guns blazing.

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