

Chapter 2

Objective Explanations of Individual Well-Being

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Abstract Empirical research on questions pertaining to individual well-being is informed by the researchers' philosophical conception of the nature of well-being and, consequently, the adequacy of such research is partly determined by the plausibility of this conception. Philosophical theories of human well-being divide into subjective and objective. Subjective theories make our well-being dependent on our attitudes of favour and disfavour. Objective theories deny this dependency. This article discusses objective theories of individual well-being from the point of view of their explanatory power and argues that these theories are unable to provide an acceptable account of the prudential goodness of what they consider to be good for human beings. The article concludes by discussing some implications of its main argument to empirical research on questions pertaining to individual well-being.

Keywords Subjectivism • Objectivism • Happiness • Well-being • Prudential value • Explanation

Empirical research on questions pertaining to individual well-being is informed by the researchers' conception of the nature of well-being and, consequently, the adequacy of such research is partly determined by the plausibility of this conception. Questions pertaining to the nature of well-being are philosophical in character. In philosophy, these questions concerning individual well-being are seen as questions pertaining to the value that a life has for the person who is living it, to prudential value that is. However valuable a person's life may be in other terms, it has prudential value only if it is also good for the person who is living it.

In philosophical literature, theories of prudential value, or human well-being, are usually divided into subjective and objective (see, e.g., Arneson 1999; Bernstein 1998; Parfit 1984; Scanlon 1993; Sumner 1996; Thomson 1987). Subjective theories see our well-being as determined by our attitudes of favour and disfavour. Objective theories deny this kind of determination. On a subjective theory of well-being, it is easy

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to understand why attaining some purported prudential good makes a person better off: either that thing gives the agent pleasure or satisfies a desire she has (or both). Accepting the common subjectivist point of departure that the attitudes that should be taken to be relevant in determining what is prudentially good for a person should be sufficiently informed, the subjectivist can be taken to have a plausible sounding explanation for the prudential goodness of her prudential goods. But dissociating prudential goodness from the attitudes of the agent whose well-being is being assessed gives rise to the question: why would some purported prudential good be good for an (informed) agent? In this article I will argue that the objective theories of well-being cannot provide an acceptable explanation of the prudential goodness of what they claim to be good for human beings. I conclude by discussing some implications of my argument to empirical research on questions pertaining to individual well-being.

2.1 Subjective and Objective Theories of Well-Being and Happiness

As was said above, subjective theories of prudential value see our well-being as determined by our attitudes of favour and disfavour. Thus, when our task is to determine whether some particular thing or activity is good for an agent or not, the subjective theories of well-being advise us to consult the agent whose well-being is being assessed, to pay attention to her own preferences and attitudes of favour and disfavour. Objective theories, in their turn, maintain that an agent's well-being is not determined by her own desires and attitudes of favour and disfavour. Instead of concentrating on these kinds of subjective states, objective theories usually make well-being dependent on such objective issues as whether a thing or an activity satisfies human needs, realises the human nature, etc. Often objective theories provide a list of things and activities that they consider to be good for a person and, accordingly, these theories are called objective list theories of well-being. Usually the lists of objective prudential goods include such entries as moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty (see, e.g., Parfit 1984, p. 493 ff.), and these objective theories maintain that a life is good for the person who is living it only when it contains these particular elements. Importantly, an objective theory of well-being denies that there is a necessary connection between what an agent desires or has a pro-attitude towards and what is good for her, and maintains that something can be directly and immediately good for a person although that person does not regard it favourably. In addition to this desire or pro-attitude independence requirement, a theory of well-being must satisfy at least one of two further kinds of requirements in order to qualify as an objective theory of well-being.¹ On an objective theory of well-being, what is considered as prudentially good must either

¹ Otherwise we could determine the objective good of a particular agent on the basis of the irrational opinions of any other individual. It is thus clear that there must be something more to an objective theory of well-being than mere independence of the desires of the agent whose well-being is being assessed.

(1) be regarded as good intersubjectively or (2) be good in a (stronger) realist sense.² Thus, if in addition to fulfilling the desire independence condition, a theory of well-being satisfies either the requirement of intersubjectivity or the requirement of realism (or both), then the theory qualifies as an objective theory of well-being.³

In addition to prudential value and well-being, in everyday common language as well as in philosophical literature there are several notions available for evaluating how well a life is going for the person who is living it, including happiness, welfare, contentment, satisfaction, flourishing, etc. None of these concepts have commonly accepted precise meanings and, partly as a consequence of this, the exact relationships between them remain unclear. However, since the notion of happiness is of central importance for the readers of this journal, I will now briefly discuss the relationship between the notions of prudential value and happiness. Most importantly, the notion of happiness concerns a person's own subjective experience and assessment of how well or badly she is faring.⁴ The nature of the relationship between prudential value or well-being and happiness depends on whether or not we accept that only things that enter an agent's experience can have an effect on her well-being. If we accept this experience requirement, then it is reasonable to accept that happiness is quite the same as prudential value, for then only things that enter an agent's experience can have an effect on her well-being. And it seems to me plausible that things that have an effect on how well a life is going for the person who is living it, i.e., on that person's well-being, will influence the person's happiness as understood in the present sense.⁵ I do think that the experience requirement should be accepted and thus that well-being is quite the same as happiness in the present sense, but I am not able to explicate my arguments to this effect here.⁶ So, those who accept the experience requirement may

² Here I thus understand 'realism' in the traditional way which maintains that something has real existence only if it exists independently of peoples' mental states. It may be that there is no stronger sense of objectivity than intersubjectivity in the evaluative sphere. Whether this is the case is a question I will not now go into.

³ It has been pointed out that not all objective theories are list theories, nor are all list theories necessarily objective theories. I will not now go into such questions as whether a list with only one entry is really a list or whether desire theories can sometimes properly be called list theories.

⁴ Although the precise meanings given to this concept differ from each other significantly, they seem to have this reference to the agent's subjective experiences and evaluations in common.

⁵ It is perhaps useful to point out that the reference to the subject's own experience and evaluation in the above definition of happiness does not imply that what enhances a person's happiness is necessarily determined by her attitudes and desires in the sense that subjective theories of well-being see prudential value as being determined. If objectivism about happiness is accepted, then what promotes a person's happiness is not determined by her desires and attitudes of favour and disfavour, but her own experience of how well she is faring would, of course, be subjective in the sense used in this definition of happiness. For an objective conception of happiness see, e.g., Kraut (1979).

⁶ I think that it would be counter-intuitive to maintain that things that do not enter an agent's experience could have an effect on that agent's well-being. However, it has been suggested to me that, e.g., a person's losing a substantial amount of money may have an effect on her well-being even if she is unaware of this loss and that a posthumous dishonour may have an effect on how well the dishonoured person's life went in prudential terms. I leave discussion on these points for another occasion.

assume that what I say below is directly relevant from the point of view of happiness, whereas those who reject the experience requirement must assume that I will be talking about well-being only.⁷

2.2 Explaining Prudential Goodness

When talking about prudential value, some philosophers simply put forward a list of things and activities they consider to be good for a person, irrespective of whether that person has any pro-attitude towards these things or not (see, e.g., Finnis 1980, 1983). This kind of account of individual well-being does fulfil the condition of desire independence, but it does not satisfy the requirement of intersubjectivity nor the requirement of realism, at least when the latter kind of requirements are interpreted as demanding that a theory must make the prudential goodness of its prudential goods objectively intelligible. According to this kind of interpretation of the requirements of intersubjectivity and realism—which I find plausible—an objective theory of well-being must provide an objective—in the sense understandable by all normal agents—explanation of what it is that makes its prudential goods prudentially good and how this something produces individual well-being.⁸ Since the kind of accounts of well-being that simply put forward a list of what their proponents consider to be prudentially good things and activities do not satisfy this kind of requirement of intersubjectivity or realism, they do not qualify as full-blown objective theories of prudential value.

2.2.1 *Are Prudential Goods Self-Evident?*

What the proponents of these kind of list accounts of human well-being would present as a reply to this criticism is, I think, that what they consider to be prudentially good things and activities are self-evidently good for individual

⁷ In the history of philosophy such prominent figures as Aristotle and J.S. Mill have equated, or at least have usually been interpreted as equating, happiness and well-being with each other. A modern equation of happiness with well-being is found, e.g., in Den Uyl and Machan (1983).

⁸ Usually objective list theories of well-being provide a list of things which they consider to be prudentially good for all persons. There could however be objective theories which provided different lists for different individuals. The latter kind of theories qualify as objective theories of well-being if what they claim to be good for a particular individual is objectively recognisable as such. I thus presuppose that there are no objective or real values that are recognisable for one person only. An objective list theorist committed to the existence of these kind of prudential values could only come up with one objective list theory of well-being that is applicable to one person only.

human beings and thus no explanations of the sort I here require are needed. Finnis (1980, Chap. 3, see also 1983, Chap. 2), e.g., maintains that knowledge is good for one irrespective of desires and whether it is pleasurable to have it or not. Finnis (1980, p. 72) writes:

It is obvious that a man who is well-informed, etc., simply *is* better off (other things being equal) than a man who is muddled, deluded, and ignorant, that the state of the one is better than the state of the other, not simply in this particular case or that, but in all cases, as such, universally and *whether I like it or not*. Knowledge is better than ignorance.⁹ (emphasis in original)

The problem with this kind of conception is that it is not at all obvious that knowledge is good prudentially. There is a plausible criticism of the view that knowledge has intrinsic prudential value. Would I, the proponents of this criticism ask, be better off if I knew exactly how many grains of sand lie on my local beach (other things being equal) (see, e.g., Nozick 1989, p. 116; Goldsworthy 1992, p. 12)? That is, there is much knowledge that seems clearly to be worthless. Finnis (1980, p. 62) accepts that not all knowledge is of equal value. But why not? If knowledge is prudentially valuable, period, why should one item of knowledge be of more value than another (in this sense)? If the value of knowledge were instrumental or had something to do with the desire for it or the pleasures it could give, it would be understandable that some items of knowledge could be held to be more valuable than others. But with an intrinsic value¹⁰ of knowledge, this nonequality claim is hard to accept. Thus, someone who holds that knowledge has intrinsic prudential value is committed to the view that all knowledge is of equal value. And this view is implausible. It therefore seems that there is no sufficient

⁹ However, at the end of his discussion on knowledge and its prudential value he presents an argument, according to which it would be self-refuting to deny that knowledge is in itself necessarily good for us. If it is self-evident that some proposition is true, then it is not necessary to provide an argument to show it to be true. Thus, the fact that Finnis provides an argument for his claim that knowledge is a prudential good suggests that he does not after all believe this claim to be self-evidently true. I do not consider this to be a problem, for I think it is not self-evident that knowledge has intrinsic prudential value. But for a view which holds there to be self-evidently prudentially valuable things, this kind of lack of self-evidence is a problem. Finnis' argument proceeds as follows: "... one who makes such an assertion (that knowledge is not a prudential good), intending it as a serious contribution to rational discussion, is implicitly committed to the proposition that he believes his assertion is worth making, and worth making *qua* true; he thus is committed to the proposition that he believes that truth is a good worth pursuing or knowing. But the sense of his original assertion was precisely that truth is not a good worth pursuing or knowing. Thus he is implicitly committed to formally contradictory beliefs." (Finnis 1980, pp. 74–75) The argument Finnis presents here is implausible. One who makes the kind of assertion Finnis talks about does not logically commit herself to the proposition that all knowledge is intrinsically good, but only to the instrumental goodness of this particular assertion. See also Goldsworthy (1992, pp. 13–14).

¹⁰ By the intrinsic value of an entity I understand the value that that entity has independently of its value as an instrument in attaining some other value or its consequences.

reason to hold that to have knowledge is, as such, of prudential value. Knowledge is of course not the only thing that could be said to be obviously prudentially valuable irrespective of whether it satisfies desires or brings pleasure. In addition to knowledge, Finnis' list of the 'basic forms of human good'—which seems representative of its kind—contains the following entries: life, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, and 'religion' (Finnis 1980, Chap. 4). Rather than examining all these things, I will merely state that it is equally implausible to hold that any, or all, of them are self-evidently intrinsically prudentially valuable as such as it is to hold that knowledge as such is intrinsically prudentially valuable.

2.2.2 *Backgrounding Self-Evidence*

Those objectivists who are not content with simply stating that some things are (self-evidently) prudentially valuable usually have a background story the purpose of which is to make the reader sufficiently perceptive—or what is considered as such—for the issues discussed, and the claims to self-evidence are then expressed against a background story of this kind.¹¹ Instead of going into the different kinds of background stories found in discussions on different kinds of value,¹² I will consider simply one, that of Foot (1995). I have chosen to discuss Foot's view here because it appears to be a novel kind of defence of the objective account. However, I will argue that ultimately it succumbs to a problem that, to my knowledge at least, haunts all present accounts of this kind. For this reason, it is also representative of many other objective views.

Foot accepts that moral judgements are practical and action-guiding, but argues that subjectivists are mistaken when they infer from this claim the corollary that moral judgements cannot be purely factual and objective. Foot's argument proceeds, roughly, as follows. Acting morally is part of practical rationality. This can be shown by considering the nature of moral virtues. It is in the concept of a moral virtue that in so far as someone possesses it his actions are good, i.e., he acts well. What distinguishes the morally virtuous persons from others is that for the virtuous, certain considerations count as reasons

¹¹ It could be maintained that to hold that we are able to see the self-evidence of something only after we have been given reasons and arguments for it is nonsensical. For if seeing or understanding something is impossible without these reasons and arguments, then this something is not self-evident. I will now ignore this problem.

¹² Some of them are found in discussions on moral value without explicit claims concerning whether they are purported to apply to other kinds of value as well or not. However, it seems that many of these background stories could *mutatis mutandis* be used in discussions on prudential value, if they are not purported to apply to the case of prudential value to begin with.

for action and as reasons with a certain weight. These considerations have to do with human excellences and human defects. Human defects and excellences are determined by what human beings are and by what they do. What determines our nature and doings are the facts of human life—e.g., that we are social animals that depend on each other—which are such that it is rational for us to be moral (Foot 1995, p. 3 ff.).

However, as Foot herself acknowledges, accepting a view like hers does not necessarily persuade one to reject the subjectivist points of departure, for it is possible to require that the fact that an agent has a reason for action is itself dependent on his desires and attitudes. Foot considers the following example. A person throws away his supply of cigarettes. He does so because he wants to give up smoking, and he wants to give up smoking because he wants a healthy old age. The series goes on—A for the sake of B—but, it is assumed, it cannot go on forever. And must it not, Foot imagines her critic asking, end with something that the agent ‘simply wants’, i.e., with some conative element in his psychological state (Foot 1995, pp. 12–13)?

Obviously, Foot’s answer to this question is ‘No’. In her view, we must ask what gives the agent this goal. Does he find himself trembling at the thought of cancer at 50? Is he in a state of anxiety at the thought of how much he smokes? Perhaps, Foot replies, but nothing of this kind has to be part of the story. She continues by posing the following questions: Why could it not simply be that the agent recognises that there is a reason for him, as for anyone else, to look after his future so far as the circumstances allow? Why should not this be where the series of questions ‘why?’ comes to an end? Why should we not take the recognition of a reason for acting as bringing the series to a close? Recognition of a reason, Foot says, gives the rational person a goal, and this recognition is based on facts and concepts, not on some prior attitude, feeling, or goal. The only fact about the individual’s state of mind that is required for the explanatory force of the proposition about the requirement of rationality is, Foot concludes, that he does not ‘for some bizarre reason’ deny its truth (Foot 1995, pp. 12–13).

2.2.3 Problems with Backgrounding

The problem with this kind of argument for objectivism is that it simply begs the central question. Instead of providing good reasons to believe that evaluative judgements could be purely factual, it simply states that they are. All arguments of the form in which the objectivist or realist describes some evaluatively salient situation in purely factual or descriptive terms and then asks—rhetorically—whether that description determines some particular kind of evaluative judgement concerning that situation or not are, I think, doomed to failure for the following reason. Either the description does not determine the evaluative judgement the objectivist

or realist is after, or the description is not after all purely descriptive or factual as it is claimed to be.^{13, 14}

It could be objected that the most important part of the realist or objectivist argument consists of the background story—which in Foot's case is that concerning the relationship between morality and practical rationality—and putting forward the evaluatively salient cases with the intentions of establishing realism are simply ways of demonstrating the point of that story. But the problem is that these evaluatively salient cases do not necessarily determine a particular evaluative judgement even if the background story is given the attention it deserves. Assuming that the objectivist's examples are well chosen, the fact that they do not succeed in what they are purported to do simply throws doubt on the background story, or more doubt, if it is found problematic to begin with. To my knowledge at least, there is no plausible background story which would force one to accept that a description of some evaluatively salient situation as such determines some particular evaluative judgement concerning that situation.

It might be claimed that the subjectivist stance is equally question-begging when it does not accept that an evaluative judgement can be determined by a description in the way the realists maintain. Why, the realist could ask, does not the subjectivist accept the obvious? The subjectivist's answer to this kind of criticism is of course that what the realist claims to be obvious is not really obvious.

¹³ I have here assumed that the realist does not hold values to be recognisable from some epistemically privileged value-laden point of view only. However, what I will say below applies to these views as well.

¹⁴ It could be objected that there are straightforward cases of deriving value judgements from facts or purely descriptive statements. For example, from the fact that a shopkeeper has provided me with some goods (which cost money and which I have asked for, etc.), it follows that I owe the shopkeeper some money. And from the fact that I owe the shopkeeper money, follows the value judgement that I ought to give the shopkeeper money. Cases like this, it has been claimed, demonstrate that we can derive judgements of value from purely factual statements. Hare has provided a plausible criticism of this kind of arguments that make use of what have been called 'institutional facts'. Without now going more deeply in this issue, I will just quote a passage of Hare's criticism. Hare writes: "Talking about 'institutional facts', though it can be illuminating, can also be a peculiarly insidious way of committing the 'naturalistic fallacy'.... There are moral and other principles, accepted by most of us, such that, if they were not generally accepted, certain institutions like property and promising could not exist. And if the institutions do exist, we are in a position to affirm certain 'institutional facts' (for example, that a certain piece of land is my property), on the ground that certain 'brute facts' are the case (for example, that my ancestors have occupied it from the time immemorial). But from the 'institutional facts', certain obviously prescriptive conclusions can be drawn (for example, that nobody ought to deprive me of the land). Thus it looks as if there could be a straight deduction, in two steps, from brute facts to prescriptive conclusions via institutional facts. But the deduction is a fraud. For the brute fact is a ground for the prescriptive conclusion only if the prescriptive principle which is the constitutive rule of the institution be accepted; and this prescriptive principle is not a tautology. For someone (a communist for example) who does not accept this non-tautologous prescriptive principle, the deduction collapses like a house of cards—though this does not prevent him from continuing to use the word 'property' (with his tongue in his cheek)." Hare (1964).

I find this answer convincing. I accept that the conclusion of a logically valid argument cannot say anything that is not either explicitly or implicitly included in its premises.¹⁵ And if a description of a state of affairs logically implies an evaluative judgement, then that description cannot be evaluatively neutral in the way the realist claims it to be. Thus, I take it that a realist should not see the relation between the description of the evaluatively salient case, and the evaluative judgement she sees that case as determining, as one of logical entailment. For this reason, the realist needs something to fill in the gap between the description and the evaluative judgement. And this filler is usually something like Griffin's (1996) sensitivity to something in the world,¹⁶ a sensitivity that is 'complex in its workings and fairly rich in its connections'. In other words, what the realists put forward to fill in the gap between description and evaluation is usually something quite obscure and mysterious,¹⁷ if indeed they offer anything to fill this gap at all. Consequently, I take it that the subjectivist does not beg the question when she refuses to accept an evaluative judgement which the objectivist or realist claims to be determined by a description. The burden of proof in showing that some particular evaluative judgement follows from a description of an evaluatively salient state of affairs is thus on the realist's side.¹⁸

¹⁵ For a discussion on this principle in connection with questions pertaining to values see, e.g., Brink (1989).

¹⁶ For a good discussion on the kind of sensitivity realists usually talk about, see Norman (1997).

¹⁷ A possible way for a realist to answer this kind of criticism is to claim that her filler is not that mysterious after all since similar fillers are presupposed by our knowledge about many other things, such as inertia, identity, necessity and possibility in general, causation, etc. (see Mackie 1977). In order to evaluate this reply, we would have to examine the presuppositions of knowledge about inertia, identity, etc. and find out whether they are in this respect relevantly similar to the case of evaluative knowledge. This cannot be done here. And further, even if it were the case—which need not be—that similar fillers were presupposed in other areas as well as in the evaluative sphere, we do not have to conclude from this that we have evaluative knowledge. Perhaps the more reasonable conclusion to draw is that, contrary to what we may have believed, we do not have knowledge in these other areas.

¹⁸ These kinds of arguments for objective views and against subjective ones are of course not the only ways in which the objectivist can argue for her stance (and against the subjectivist). In a recent article, Ronald Dworkin attacks in an original way views that deny the possibility of objectivity and truth for evaluative judgements. Since subjective theories of well-being hold judgements of prudential value to be subjective and—at least in the sense I have defined them—not capable of being true in the sense in which factual judgements are, I take it that Dworkin is also attacking subjective theories of well-being. Dworkin sees the subjectivists as purporting to establish the view that first-order substantial moral judgements such as 'Abortion is wrong', 'It is not right to torture babies for fun', etc., are neither objective nor capable of being true from points of departure that are neutral and austere. According to Dworkin, subjectivists claim neutrality about the substance of ordinary positive moral convictions, since they take no sides in questions such as whether terrorism is immoral or not. By subjectivist austerity Dworkin means that she purports to rely on nonmoral—and presumably also nonprudential in the realm of prudential value—arguments to defeat the objectivist stance. The main point of Dworkin's lengthy argument can be, I think, recapitulated as follows. Consider the following sentences:

2.3 Possible Objections Considered

Before concluding this article, I will consider some possible objections to the kind of position I have adopted above.

2.3.1 Does Being Independent of an Individual's Desires and Belonging to a List Make a Thing Good?

In discussing the claim that the kind of objective accounts which simply provide a list of what their proponents consider to be prudentially good things do not qualify as objective theories of well-being, Arneson draws attention to the fact that what the subjectivists consider as prudentially good may change with changes in the subjective attitudes considered as relevant from the point of view of determining prudential value whereas the objective goods remain what they are even if people's attitudes change. He then writes as follows (Arneson 1999, p. 119):

... the objective-list theory is not merely the provision of a list of putative goods. It is also a claim that what it is to be intrinsically valuable for a person, to make that person's life go better for herself, is to be an item that belongs on such a list.

Arneson presupposes that all versions of the objective list theory of well-being are such as not to provide reasons for their objective goods being prudentially

Footnote 18 (continued)

1. Abortion is wrong.
2. What 1. says is true.
3. What 1. and 2. say is really and objectively so.

According to Dworkin, there is no plausible interpretation of either 2. or 3. that would not make them restatements or clarifications of 1. And thus neutrality and austerity is not compatible with denying such statements as 2. and 3. (see Dworkin 1996, pp. 87–139). As a criticism of subjectivism as I have defined it, Dworkin's argument is clearly a nonstarter. A subjectivist need not purport to be either austere or neutral, at least in Dworkin's sense of these terms. Subjectivists hold that the grounds for evaluative judgements are different from what objectivists think them to be. But a subjectivist need not accept that everything goes in prudential and moral life and that no rational answer can be given to prudential or moral questions. According to subjectivists, what is good for a person is determined—in one way or another—by this person's attitudes, and when the requirements of a subjective theory are obeyed in this determination, it is rational according to that theory. As the case of Hare's theory shows, an anti-realist—or prescriptivist to use Hare's own term—need not accept that rationality has no place in morality (see, e.g., Hare 1981).

Even if Hare did not succeed in showing moral rationality to have a morally neutral basis in moral language this would not of course mean that anti-realists could not show morality to be rational. Thus, although Dworkin is directing his criticism against all views that deny the possibility of truth and objectivity in evaluative contexts, it does not succeed in refuting subjective theories of well-being, for subjectivists need not accept the points of departure Dworkin claims they accept. And it is of course not clear that Dworkin's argument succeeds even if subjectivists did accept neutrality and/or austerity.

good. And he also maintains that, in order to qualify as an objective theory of well-being, it is sufficient that an account keeps its goods independent of possibly changing subjective attitudes and such that they belong to a list of putative prudential goods. This is confusing.

First, there are objective list theories of well-being that give grounds for holding their goods to be prudentially good. Perfectionism, e.g., maintains that exemplifying the human virtues is good because it realises the human essence. Second, it is clearly question-begging to maintain that a view qualifies as a theory of objective prudential value simply by keeping its goods independent of individual desires and gathering them into a list. Being independent of subjective attitudes and belonging to a list does nothing to explain why a particular alleged objective prudential good would really be prudentially good. Thus, what Arneson writes presents no real threat to what I have argued above.

2.3.2 Can a Coherentist Theory of Evaluative Justification Save Prudential Objectivism?

Kitcher acknowledges that explaining the prudential goodness of their goods is a problem for objective theories of well-being. In order to avoid this problem, he maintains, objectivism must pick out some property whose ascription can be made in a value-free fashion, seeing this as the criterion of human well-being. Kitcher (1999, pp. 59–60) calls this the Reductivist Challenge. He proposes that objectivists can avoid answering this challenge by adopting a coherence theory of justification. Kitcher (1999, p. 82) writes:

The Reductivist Challenge can be generated from a very simple foundationalist theory of moral justification; it can be avoided by adopting a very simple coherentist theory of moral justification.

Since Kitcher's Reductivist Challenge is, at least, very similar to the problem that I claimed to undermine the present forms of objectivism, I will briefly consider Kitcher's proposition concerning how objectivists could avoid this problem.

Kitcher thus poses his answer to the Reductivist Challenge in terms of foundationalism, the view that evaluative judgements are justified when they are self-evident or follow logically from self-evident evaluative judgements, and coherentism which considers an evaluative judgement to be justified when it coheres with other evaluative judgements and plausible factual knowledge. He then argues as if an objectivist committed to a foundationalist theory of evaluative justification could, when she realises that she is threatened by the Reductivist Challenge, simply switch into a different kind of theory of evaluative justification, i.e., coherentism, avoid this problem, and then go on as if nothing had happened. This is implausible. Objectivists may indeed commit themselves to a coherentist theory of prudential justification when, e.g., they accept the claim that some objectively existing value is graspable only from a privileged epistemic point of view

that necessarily involves some prudentially evaluative components as parts of it.¹⁹ But switching from foundationalism to coherentism is not an answer to the Reductivist Challenge. The Reductivist Challenge cannot be answered by ignoring it. And those who accept the kind of coherentist stance described above commit themselves to the existence of some mysterious kind of sensitivity needed in order to recognise objective values, which is itself problematic in a way similar to that in which the Reductivist Challenge is problematic for foundationalist objectivism. Thus, to offer adopting coherentism as an objectivist answer to the Reductive Challenge is not plausible.

2.3.3 Are Metaprudential Arguments Irrelevant to Theories of Well-Being?

It could be claimed that what I have said above is not problematic for the objective theories of well-being, because theories of well-being are normative theories whereas the questions I have raised belong to the metaprudential sphere.²⁰ Since, this objection would proceed, the metaprudential sphere deals with questions pertaining to the nature of judgements about what benefits or harms individuals and the nature of the property of being beneficial and the property of being harmful, etc., the issues it addresses are independent of the questions with which theories of well-being are concerned. And, consequently, we need not worry about the problems confronted by realism when we are discussing the objective theories of well-being.

¹⁹ Roughly, in the moral and prudential spheres, such theories as foundationalism and coherentism purport to provide answers to problems of moral and prudential epistemology: most importantly, perhaps, to the question concerning the epistemic status of moral and prudential judgements. But the epistemic status of moral and prudential judgements is clearly dependent on the mode of existence of the referents of these judgements. We cannot decide that we know some evaluative judgement to be true or justified in some particular way without adopting a view concerning the existence of what that judgement is about (see also Hare 1985, p. 95). It might be claimed that subjectivists can adopt coherentism as readily as objectivists, and that for this reason the move proposed by Kitcher is a legitimate one for an objectivist to make. However, if subjectivists can be coherentists or foundationalists, they cannot be this in the same sense as objectivists, for the former deny the possibility of evaluative knowledge and justification in the sense the latter try to establish it. When anti-realists or subjectivists present theories of evaluative knowledge these theories and their aims look quite dissimilar compared to those put forward by objectivists (see, e.g., Hare 1996).

²⁰ I here assume the common distinction between such normative and practical questions as what things and activities are good and what should be done to attain these goods, etc. and the metaquestions pertaining to the nature of the property of good, the logical character of normative discourse, etc. The branch of moral philosophy that deals with these kind of metaquestions as they arise in connection with moral values is called metaethics. In connection with prudential value, I will call these metaquestions metaprudential problems.

The question of whether normative theories are in this way independent of the issues arising in the metaprudential and metaethical spheres divides philosophers quite sharply. On the one hand, there are those who consider these kind of meta-level questions to be of crucial importance from the point of view of normative issues (see, e.g., Hare 1952, 1963, 1981) and, on the other hand, there are those who take these two domains to be, at least largely, independent of each other (see, e.g., Blackburn 1993; Hooker 1991; Hurka 1993). I find the latter view implausible. It seems to me obvious that the evaluative question about what has, or is conducive to, individual welfare is not independent from metaprudential questions pertaining to the nature of judgements about what benefits or harms individuals or to the nature of the property of being beneficial and harmful. However, since what I find obvious is not obvious to everybody, I will try to come up with some reasons to back up my position on this issue.

Consider first the case in which people disagree over the prudential goodness of some particular thing or activity. When we want to know what to make of a disagreement of this kind, we run into the question of whether it is possible for two mutually incompatible evaluative judgements to apply to the same thing or activity at the same time. And this clearly raises questions belonging to the metaprudential sphere. Second, some of the most important problems relating to the objectivity of theories of well-being and to the questions arising in connection with realism have to do with desires and their role in constituting well-being and value. I take it that the notion of desire used in the metaprudential sphere is similar to that from which the objective theorists see well-being as independent. Further, I assume that the notion of desire used in both of these domains is at least very reminiscent of, if not the same as, what we mean by desire in everyday language. If theories of well-being were not metaprudentially neutral, then the different theories of well-being could use, at least, two notions of desire that were different from each other in a metaprudentially relevant respect. First, there could be the kind of desires from which preference hedonism and the desire theories would talk about. The objects of these desires would be determined by the agents having them, and these desires would then determine what is prudentially valuable. I will call this kind of desires 'value-determining' desires. Second, there could be the kind of desires the objects of which were determined by realistically existing values. I will call this kind of desires 'value-determined' desires.

Consider now the common definition of an objective theory of well-being. According to this definition, something can be prudentially good for an agent whether that agent desires it or not. The desires talked about in this connection cannot be of the value-determining kind, for prudential value cannot be independent of this kind of desires. Thus, the desires the objective theorist talks about must be of the value-determined kind, which means that at least the objective theories of well-being are not metaprudentially neutral. It could be objected to this that if what is prudentially valuable necessarily gives rise to desires, then it does not make sense to define an objective theory of well-being to say that something can be prudentially good for an agent whether that agent desires it or not, for an agent necessarily desires what is prudentially valuable. Thus, the common definition of

an objective theory of well-being would be nonsensical if it were put in terms of value-determined desires.

However, even though prudential value would necessarily give rise to desires, the common definition of an objective theory of well-being would be reasonable because of the possibility of confusions and irrationality. Indeed, it seems that the main motivation behind the acceptance of objective theories of well-being has to do with fears that the agents themselves could be illogical, confused, etc. in their own assessments of what is good for them. So, even though prudential value necessarily gave rise to desires, it would still be reasonable to define an objective theory of well-being in the usual way.

The above argument concerning value-determined and value-determining desires presupposes that values are necessarily connected to motivation, i.e., the view that philosophers call motivational internalism is true. However, since motivational internalism has not been shown to be true or acceptable, the view that there is no necessary connection between prudential values and motivational desires, motivational externalism that is, remains a viable option. But assuming that motivational externalism instead of motivational internalism is true, or acceptable, is of no help for those who hold the metaprudential sphere to be independent from normative questions. For even externalist objectivism takes a stand concerning the acceptability of notions of desire which are different from each other in a metaprudentially relevant respect. That externalist objectivism in fact rejects both value-determining and value-determined desires could perhaps be taken to speak for its metaprudential neutrality. However, that a view is incompatible with either value-determined or value-determining desires is sufficient to make it metaprudentially substantive. That it is incompatible with both of these kind of desires does not change this fact. I take it that metaprudential issues are not independent of normative questions and thus that my criticisms of objectivism and realism are not irrelevant from the point of view of objective theories of well-being.

2.4 Conclusion

Objective theories of individual well-being separate what is good for a person from that person's attitudes of favour. In this article, I argued that this separation makes it difficult for an objectivist to explain the prudential goodness of her prudential goods. In explaining why what they take to be good for a person would actually be good for that person the objectivists resort to unacceptable claims of self-evidence and/or to some mysterious faculty that they take to be necessary for grasping prudential goodness. This problem makes current objective theories of individual well-being unappealing.

This result is theoretical in character but, as it concerns the nature of prudential value, it is also relevant from the point of view of empirical research concentrating on issues pertaining to individual well-being. In recent social indicators research approaches making use of subjective appraisals of well-being have come under

attack for two general reasons. First, it has been maintained that subjective appraisals of well-being can be objectively wrong, and that trained experts are more able to determine what makes a life good for the person who is living it than the person herself. Second, it has been argued that since subjective appraisals of well-being are imprecise, unstable, and incomparable with each other, studies making use of them do not produce the kind of exact data that would be of use to policy makers.

In the light of the above argument, the first kind of criticism of the subjective approach to empirical questions pertaining to well-being is without sufficient grounds. It is, of course, true that when individuals evaluate whether or not something is good for them they must have as much of the relevant information concerning that thing or activity at hand as possible and be 'cool, calm, and collected'. But since the objective theories, in their current incarnations at least, do not qualify as plausible theories of individual well-being, subjective theories provide a better basis for empirical research on well-being than they do.

The second criticism of the subjective approach to empirical research on well-being does not concern studies adopting a subjective theory of well-being exclusively, since subjective satisfaction with objectively defined constituents of well-being can be, and has been, examined also. However, in the light of the above argument, to the extent that this criticism is justified, it provides reason for further development of the methods used to study subjective well-being rather than for adopting an objectivist approach to empirical research on well-being. Importantly, this involves clarifying the meanings of the concepts and terms used in these studies so that they can produce as precise data as possible. The above argument may also be taken as a modest step towards reaching that goal. Further work on these issues must however be left for another occasion.

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