Chapter One

Christian Theism and Subjective Well-Being

Christopher L. Holland

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I work toward a subjective theory of well-being that will be palatable not only to the philosophical community as a whole, but also to Christian philosophers and theologians. A theory of well-being is a theory of what is good *for* individuals, in other words, a theory of self-interest. Well-being is worth studying in its own right, but it also plays a pivotal role in normative ethics, theories of the good life, and philosophical discussions of the meaning of life.

Given that a theory of well-being is a theory of self-interest and that many Christians closely associate (and occasionally conflate) self-interest with selfishness, I suspect that some Christian readers will meet my project with suspicion. For some, it will be dead on arrival. After all, self-denial plays a critical role in Christian thought and ethics (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). A theory of Christian self-interest is taboo. A theory of Christian selfishness is anathema.

Thankfully, a theory of well-being, even a subjective theory of well-being, needn't be a theory of selfishness. It will, by definition, be a theory of self-interest, but this alone should not concern the Christian reader. As C. S. Lewis aptly points out in his sermon "The Weight of Glory":

> The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. ([1949] 2009, 25–26)

I follow Lewis on this point: whatever value self-denial has, it is derivative; joy—yours, mine, someone's—is the end of self-denial. For this, we need a theory of self-interest.

Philosophers often divide theories of well-being into objective theories—welfare eudaimonism and objective list—and subjective theories—welfare hedonism and desire satisfactionism. Eudaimonists identify well-being with nature fulfillment and objective list theorists with a set of independently plausible welfare goods; for example, health, friendship, knowledge, and pleasures. Hedonists identify well-being with pleasure, and desire satisfactionists identify well-being with getting what you want.[1] Contemporary theistic philosophers, generally, and Christian philosophers, in particular, prefer objective theories of well-being.[2] There are exceptions. Stewart Goetz (2012, 2016) and Kevin Kinghorn (2016) defend hedonic theories,[3] and Thomas Carson (2000) argues for a theistic version of desire satisfactionism.[4] Still, most Christian philosophers opt for either objective theories (e.g., Finnis [1980] 2011; Murphy 2001; Oderberg 2004; Hudson 2021) or hybrid theories that place objective constraints on the subjective aspects of well-being (e.g., Adams 1999; Lauinger 2014, 2021; Stump 2013, 2018, 2022a).

Purely objective theories of well-being are problematic, or so I will argue. Eudaimonism cannot account for the value of pleasure and the disvalue of suffering on its own. (I develop this objection in chap. 3) Objective list theories fare better on this point but lack theoretic unity. Items on the list are justified separately, with a distinct intuition for each item (see Haybron 2008, 36; Hudson 2021, 67). Moreover, both theory types risk alienating welfare subjects from their well-being. (I explore the issue of alienation in chap. 2.)

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[1] I cover the subjective-objective distinction for well-being in Section 3. Welfare eudaimonism and desire satisfactionism are sometimes referred to by other names in the literature. By eudaimonism, I mean any theory that identifies well-being with nature fulfillment. The most popular form of eudaimonism is perfectionism. Desire satisfactionism is occasionally referred to as preferentialism, or desire-fulfillment theories. One will also find desire satisfactionism classed under broader categories like goal-fulfillment theories and conative theories.

Additionally, many of these terms (e.g., eudaimonism, perfectionism, hedonism, and desire satisfactionism) have multiple meanings in the broader philosophical literature. This can easily lead to confusion. For example, one could endorse a eudaimonistic theory of well-being without endorsing a eudaimonistic ethic or endorse a desire theory of value without endorsing a desire theory of well-being (see Haybron 2008, ch. 3; forthcoming, ch. 2, sec. 4.1, and app.). The term hedonism is especially tricky. It can refer to a theory of action (motivational hedonism), an ethical theory (normative hedonism), or a theory of value (value hedonism) (see Weijers n.d.). For this dissertation, my readers may safely add the qualifier "about well-being" to any of the terms mentioned above.

[2] See, e.g., the correlation between theism and objective list theories reported by 2020 PhilPapers survey (Bourget and Chalmers 2023). An interactive online version of the report is available here: https://survey2020.philpeople.org/survey/results/5206. For a brief overview of historic Christian preference for objective theories, see Lauinger (2015).

[3] Goetz (2015, 2018) argues that C.S. Lewis belongs in this camp as well.

[4] Carson's primary concern is to defend a desire satisfaction theory of value, not well-being. However, I agree with William Lauinger (2015, 90, 93n34) that Carson ultimately accepts both.

The most influential alienation worry is captured by the *resonance constraint*.[5] Here is Peter Railton's classic statement:

> What is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him. (1986, 9)

Subjective theories can avoid alienation, but they introduce other issues. Hedonism excludes important agency goods, such as achievement and autonomy. It also raises worries about pointless (Rawls [1971] 2005, 432–33) and base pleasures (Moore 1922, sec. 56), and ascribes a disturbingly high level of well-being to lotus eaters and experience-machine passengers (Nozick [1974] 2013, 1989). Desire satisfactionism makes sense of agency goods but raises similar worries about pointless and base desires. It also suffers from the problem of adaptive preferences—that is, external factors such as social or environmental conditioning (e.g., indoctrination or the school of hard knocks) can warp or impoverish a person's desires. Stock examples include the happy slave and the oppressed but contented housewife (see Sen 1987, 45–46; Sumner 1996, 161–71; Nussbaum 2000, 136–42).[6]

Some desire theorists avoid these concerns through idealization. My actual desires do not determine my well-being; instead, my well-being is determined by how well my actual desires and their satisfactions match the desires of a fully and vividly informed version of myself.[7] However, the differences between me and the idealized version of me lead right back to the alienation worry that drove philosophers to subjective theories in the first place. Significant for my project, desire satisfactionism fails to explain phenomenological goods in the right way. The goodness of pleasure and the badness of suffering are best explained by how they feel. (I defend this claim in chap. 3). Desire satisfactionism reverses the order: pleasure is good because it is desired, and suffering is bad because it frustrates our desires.

All of these issues are well-rehearsed in the well-being literature. In this dissertation, I draw on works by Dan Haybron, Eleonore Stump, and C.S. Lewis to explore a new hybrid option for Christian theists, a

[5] The residence constraint is a somewhat contentious issue in the philosophy of well-being. See, e.g., Rosati (1996); Fletcher (2013); van der Deijl (2023); Bruno-Niño (2023); Fortier (2025).

[6] These worries persist even when we limit the theory to second-order desires or values. For value-fulfillment theories, see Raibley (2010) and Tiberius (2018).

[7] I borrow the term "fully and vividly informed" from Lauinger (2011).

eudaimonic-hedonic hybrid. The theory is eudaimonic because self-fulfillment—an individualized take on eudaimonism—partially constitutes a person's well-being. It is hedonic because the felt quality of a person's life—what their life is like from the inside—also partially constitutes their well-being.

The goal of my dissertation is twofold: first, to contribute something worthwhile to the growing philosophical literature on human well-being; second, to do so in dialogue with the well-being theories of contemporary Christian philosophers. This makes my task part philosophy of well-being and part philosophical theology. *Qua* philosophy of well-being, the theory I develop will not depend on the truth of Christian theism. If, to Anselm's dismay, there are possible worlds with human persons but no God, then my theory will apply to those worlds, too. *Qua* philosophical theology, I will defend its consistency with Christian doctrinal claims—most notably, that human persons are best off in the new heaven and earth with God and the saints.[8] The remainder of this chapter serves as a primer on the philosophy of well-being to prepare for my eudaimonic-hedonic hybrid.

1. Good *for*: Well-Being and Prudential Value

A theory of human well-being is a theory about what is finally (or non-instrumentally) good *for* human persons. Synonyms for well-being include welfare, personal- or self-interest, quality of life, and flourishing.[9] Something adds to my well-being when it benefits me or makes me better off, and something subtracts from my well-being when it harms me or makes me worse off.

We often associate the phrase *good for* with instrumental goods rather than final goods. Exercise and medication are good for me but only instrumentally good for me. They are good for me because they *cause* further goods like health and *prevent* further bads like illness—they are means to ends rather than ends in themselves. The *locus classicus* for this distinction comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> Goods must be spoken of in two ways, and some must be good in themselves, the others by reason of these. Let us separate, then, things good in themselves from useful things. (Aristotle 2009, 1096b)

[8] Lauinger (2015, 90–91) identifies this as the one point of consensus among contemporary Christian well-being theorists.

[9] See Lin (2022a) for a similar list of synonyms and a discussion of their connotations. The term flourishing is most at home in a eudaimonistic framework; however, it is treated as synonymous with well-being by authors outside this tradition (e.g., Kinghorn 2016).

Instrumental goods, what Aristotle called useful things, are important, and they are the focus of empirical studies on well-being. Philosophical theories of well-being tend to focus on final goods, those goods at which the instrumental goods aim—what Aristotle called things good in themselves. Those things that are *finally* good for a person are also *basically* good for that person—that is, they provide the base or foundation for non-final, non-basic goods.[10]

Contemporary philosophers working on well-being typically call the various goods and bads linked to well-being *prudential goods* and *prudential bads* and assign them a specific type of value: *prudential value*. Prudential value differs from other kinds of value; most notably, it differs from moral value. A wealthy antebellum plantation owner who enjoys a rich home and social life yet cares little about the harsh working conditions of his slaves plausibly has a life high in prudential value but low in moral value (Haybron 2008, 159). Granted, there are welfare theorists who will resist this conclusion. For example, Stoic and Aristotelian eudaimonists typically consider virtue necessary for well-being (see Becker 2017; Badhwar 2014; Cashen 2023). Still, it is at least clear that we are dealing with different value concepts (see Kneer and Haybron 2023).

We can further approach the notion of prudential value from two angles: the first-personal and the third-personal. The first-person angle focuses on deliberation and ties prudential value to practical rationality. Something has prudential value for me when I have a self-interested reason to pursue or promote it, and prudential disvalue for me when I have a self-interested reason to avoid it.

The third-personal angle ties prudential value to sympathetic concern. Stephen Darwall's rational care analysis of well-being is a good example of this:

> When we care for a person, we desire his good for its own sake, not just as a means to other ends. But not for *its* sake only (that is, for his good's sake). Any desire for another's good that springs from concern for that person is also for *his* sake. The object of care is the individual person himself. …
> … We desire his good *for his sake*. (2002, 1)

He continues:

[10] The terms *final*, *basic*, and *intrinsic* value are often used interchangeably or treated as rough equivalents in the well-being literature. One way to tease out the difference is to build contrasting value pairs. For example, final value is best contrasted with instrumental value, basic value is best contrasted with derivative value, and intrinsic value is best contrasted with extrinsic value. See Korsgaard (1983) and Dorsey (2021, ch. 2) for a discussion of this issue.

> Caring for someone involves a whole complex of emotions, sensitivities, and dispositions to attend in ways that a simple desire that another be benefited need not. If someone about whom I care is miserable and suffering, I will be disposed to emotional responses, for example, to sadness on his behalf, that cannot be explained by the mere fact that an intrinsic desire for his welfare is not realized. Taken by itself, all that would explain would be dissatisfaction, disappointment, or frustration. (2)

So, in Darwall's view, something has prudential value for you when the people who care about you have reason to want it for you out of care or concern for you, and something has prudential disvalue for you when the people who care about you have reason *not* to want it for you out of care or concern for you.[11] Moreover, Darwall's notion of care links both well-being and prudential value to our sympathetic *emotions*. If I care about you and your well-being increases, I will respond with sympathetic joy; if your well-being declines, I will respond with sadness.[12]

Occasionally, I will use the terms *prudential value* and *well-being* interchangeably. For example, a life high in prudential value is a life high in well-being, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the two are distinct. States of affairs, facts, and events can be prudentially valuable, but they can't be well-off; they have no well-being. People and animals (perhaps plants) can be well-off. To simplify the discussion, I will consider well-being to be the total amount of final prudential value *for* a particular subject (Lin 2022a, secs. 2, 4).[13]

The relationship between prudential value and well-being is often stated mereologically. My well-being is constituted by finally prudentially valuable states, events, etc., and these states, events, etc. are my welfare constituents. With this in mind, a theory of human well-being attempts to explain what makes something a human welfare constituent.

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[11] Eden Lin gives the following characterization of Darwall's view: "x is good for S $=_{df.}$ if anyone were to care (or have concern) for S, then they would have reason to want x out of care (or concern) for S" (2022a).

[12] Haybron (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 3) offers a third-person approach that retains Darwall's emphasis on sympathetic affect but omits his care requirement. On Haybron's account, a life is high in prudential value when it is *pro tanto* enviable and low in prudential value when it is *pro tanto* pitiable.

[13] Following Lin (2022a, sec. 4.5), "S's amount of well-being $=_{df.}$ the net amount of basic [final] prudential value accrued by S (i.e., the total amount of basic [final] prudential value accrued by S, minus the total amount of basic prudential disvalue accrued by S)."

2. Theories of Human Well-Being

The previous section was something of a crash course on the concept of well-being. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the four major well-being theory types. We can divide theories of well-being into four families: hedonism, desire satisfactionism, eudaimonism, and list theories.[14] Each theory offers a different account of final prudential value. In this section, I ignore hybrid theories, which complicate this landscape. The most common hybrids integrate two theories from different theory families with an eye to bridging the subjective-objective divide (see Section 3). I return to the topic of hybrid theories in Chapter 4. For now, let's turn to a preliminary description of the four families.

Hedonism

This family of theories identifies final prudential value with pleasure (i.e., pleasant experience) and the final prudential disvalue with pain (i.e., painful or unpleasant experience). Something is finally good for you if and only if, and because, it is an instance of pleasure. Something is finally bad for you if and only if, and because, it is an instance of pain. A person is doing well to the extent that their life is pleasant and poorly to the extent that their life is unpleasant.

Desire Satisfactionism

Also called preferentialism and desire-fulfillment theory, this family of theories identifies final prudential value with the satisfaction of our desires (or some other pro attitude) and final prudential disvalue with desire frustration (or some other con attitude). Something is finally good for you if and only if, and because, it is an instance of desire satisfaction. Something is finally bad for you if and only if, and because, it is an instance of desire frustration. A person is doing well to the extent that their desires are satisfied, and a person is doing poorly to the extent that they are frustrated.

Eudaimonism

Sometimes called *perfectionism*,[15] this family of theories identifies final prudential value with nature fulfillment and final prudential disvalue with nature frustration. Something is finally

[14] This taxonomy is based on Appendix I of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* ([1984] 1987). Parfit excludes eudaimonism, which would qualify as an object list theory on his account. He also discusses the possibility of a hedonic-objective-list hybrid, similar to theories proposed by Robert Adams (1999) and Shelly Kagan (2009).

[15] I prefer to treat perfectionism as a sub-species of eudaimonism (see Haybron 2008, chap. 8).

good for you if and only if, and because, it directly fulfills one's nature. Something is finally bad for you if and only if, and because, it directly frustrates your nature. A person is doing well to the extent that they are functioning well, and poorly when they are not.

List Theories

These theories begin with a list of intuitively plausible final goods. Lists vary from theory to theory, but some common items include knowledge, achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, and virtue. List theorists do not typically give a list of corresponding final bads, but some candidates include false belief, failure, unhappiness, pain, and vice.

A few notes on each theory type are in order.

Hedonism. There are multiple theories of pleasure and pain available to welfare hedonists. Some hedonists—for example, Roger Crisp (2006) and Ben Bramble (2016)—adopt a phenomenological theory of pleasure and pain. According to phenomenological theories, pleasure and pain are part of the felt quality of an experience—the parts that feel good or bad. Call the corresponding hedonism *phenomenological hedonism* or *felt-quality hedonism*. Other hedonists—for example, Fred Feldman (2002, 2004b) and Chris Heathwood (2006, 2007)—adopt an attitudinal theory of pleasure and pain. According to these theories, pleasure and pain are *attitudes* directed toward states of affairs. For example, I take pleasure in the fact that my team won, or I am pained that they lost. However, my use of the phrase "in the fact that" should not imply that attitudinal pleasures and pains are factive. For instance, a false report could lead me to take pleasure in the fact that my team won when, in reality, they lost. On these views, *sensory* pleasures and pains (a warm feeling on my skin, a twinge in my knee) are pleasant or unpleasant because of our attitude toward them (because we enjoy or disenjoy them[16]). Call the corresponding hedonism *attitudinal hedonism.*[17]

Desire satisfactionism. Desire satisfaction theories of well-being employ a technical sense of the terms *desire*, *satisfy*, and *frustrate*. Desires are factive, intentional states that take states of affairs as their objects. A

[16] I borrow the admittedly awkward term *disenjoy* from Feldman: "Enjoyment has its opposite number. We might call this 'disenjoyment' but it is easier to call it attitudinal pain. Just as we say that someone takes pleasure in some things, we can say that he 'takes pain' in others. To take pain in something is to disenjoy it. If we represent amounts of enjoyment with numbers, then we can introduce a simplifying assumption: to disenjoy something to some extent, n, is to enjoy it to some negative extent, $-n$" (2002).

[17] For more on the phenomenological and attitudinal theories of pleasure, see Feldman (2004a); Kahane (2009); Bramble (2011); Heathwood (2019); Heathwood (2007); Lin (2020); Pallies and Dietz (2023); Fortier (forthcoming).

desire is satisfied when the desired state of affairs obtains and frustrated when it does not. Eden Lin (2022b, sec. 3) provides a helpful example. Suppose I desire that there is life on Mars, and there is. Then my desire is satisfied—even if I never come to believe that the planet is inhabited. It is important to separate this from the experiential sense of satisfaction—a cool glass of water slakes my thirst. An *unrestricted* version of the theory treats satisfaction as the sole criterion for prudential value. However, most desire theorists endorse a *restricted* view. For example, they might add that my desire must be about my life or that I must believe that my desire has been satisfied.[18]

Eudaimonism. The idea of nature fulfillment can be further expressed in terms of capacity fulfillment, goal fulfillment, or both (Haybron, forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.3; see also Haybron 2023, 110–12). Capacity-fulfillment eudaimonism assigns basic prudential value to "realizing one's potential, or developing and exercising one's capacities" (ch. 3, sec. 4.3). Goal-fulfillment eudaimonism assigns basic prudential value to succeeding at one's goals. Here, the term *goal* should be understood in a broad sense of the word and include, among other goal-related concepts, fulfilling one's innate desires and natural inclinations. It is also worth noting that most eudaimonist focus on species-level (or kind-level) nature fulfillment. Call this *subject-transcendent eudaimonism.* Another option, less explored in current literature, is individual nature fulfillment. Call this *subject-dependent eudaimonism.*[19] I suspect that subject-transcendent eudaimonism is the preferred theory for most Christian philosophers. This is certainly true of the Catholic natural law tradition.

List Theories. There are two significant divisions for list theories. First, a list theory can be brute or principled. If the list items are justified individually and intuitively, call this a *brute list.* If the list items are unified under a single principle, call this a *principled list.* For example, eudaimonists who generate a list of goods from their account of human nature are also list theorists.[20] Second, a list theory can be subjective or objective. If at least one list item is good for welfare subjects, regardless of how they feel about it, call this an *objective list*; otherwise, call this a *subjective list.*[21]

[18] Call the first constraint *success* (see Parfit [1984] 1987, 494) and the second *awareness* (see Heathwood 2021, 72).

[19] On the varieties of eudaimonism, see Haybron (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4).

[20] See Haybron (2008, 36, 287n23; forthcoming, ch. 6, sec. 5.2) for the distinction between brute and principled lists.

[21] Some theorists (e.g., Fletcher 2013, 2015) allow for one-item lists. Hedonism, then, is a list theory—a very short list theory. This leads to a third division among list theories—a list can be monistic or pluralistic. Pace Fletcher, I will assume that a list involves two or more items.

3. Subjectivism and Objectivism about Well-being

In the introduction to this chapter, I divided the major theories of well-being into objective theories—eudaimonism and objective list—and subjective theories—hedonism and desire satisfactionism—and then noted that Christian philosophers prefer objective theories. I address the second point in the next section. In this section, I note three ways to draw the subjective-objective distinction. My opening paragraph assumed that subjective theories are mind-dependent theories. I'll begin with this criterion and then explore two others.

Mind dependence. Subjective theories treat your well-being as a function of your mental states (e.g., Kinghorn 2016, 4, 59, 82). Hedonism and desire satisfactionism are subjective theories. Hedonism only ascribes final prudential value to mental states, and desire satisfactionism makes the final prudential value of putative goods depend on your mental states. List theories are objective when they include at least one non-mental state item—for example, achievement or friendship—and subjective when they do not. Eudaimonistic theories are typically objective but can fall on either side of the divide. For instance, Richard Kraut (2018, 44) has proposed a eudaimonic theory in which "all components of well-being have a phenomenological aspect."[22]

Attitude dependence. Subjective theories treat your well-being as a function of your pro and con attitudes (e.g., Sumner 1996; Fletcher 2015; Haybron 2016, sec. 12.2.1; Heathwood 2021; Sobel and Wall 2025). When using this approach, desire satisfaction and attitudinal hedonism are the paradigmatic subjective theories. Contrary to what some might expect, phenomenological hedonism and Kraut's experiential eudaimonism are objective theories (because they base prudential value judgments on the felt quality of the subject's experiences rather than their attitudes). Most list theories and eudaimonisms are also objective since they typically appeal to at least one attitude-independent standard.

Subject dependence. Subjective theories treat your well-being as a function of your *individual makeup*. A theory is *subject-dependent* if "what's good for you must depend entirely on the particularities of what you are *like*, however idiosyncratic or atypical: it must depend wholly on what your wants, likes, values, hedonic or emotional propensities, or physical makeup are like" (Haybron, forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.4).[23]

[22] "The conception of well-being I advance and defend here might be called 'experiential developmentalism' or 'experiential eudaimonism,' because it combines experientialism with Aristotelian ideas about the value of developing our natural powers" (Kraut 2018, 45).

[23] Alternatively, "the constituents of an agent's well-being are ultimately determined wholly by the particulars of the individual's make-up *qua* individual (vs. *qua* group or class member)" (Haybron 2008, 156–57). Haybron (2008) originally employed the terms

Objective theories, on the other hand, are *subject-transcendent*: they maintain that at least one thing is good for you, regardless of what you, individually, are like.

Therefore, a theory of well-being can merit the subjective label in at least three distinct ways, and the classification of individual theories will vary based on the criteria. However, we can also order these criteria according to their scope.

1. Subject dependence: Does your well-being depend on your individual makeup?
2. Mind dependence: If so, does your well-being depend on your mental states?
3. Attitude dependence: If so, does your well-being depend on your attitudes?

The scope of subjectivism narrows with each question, and with each requirement, fewer theories count as subjective (see Figure 1).[24]

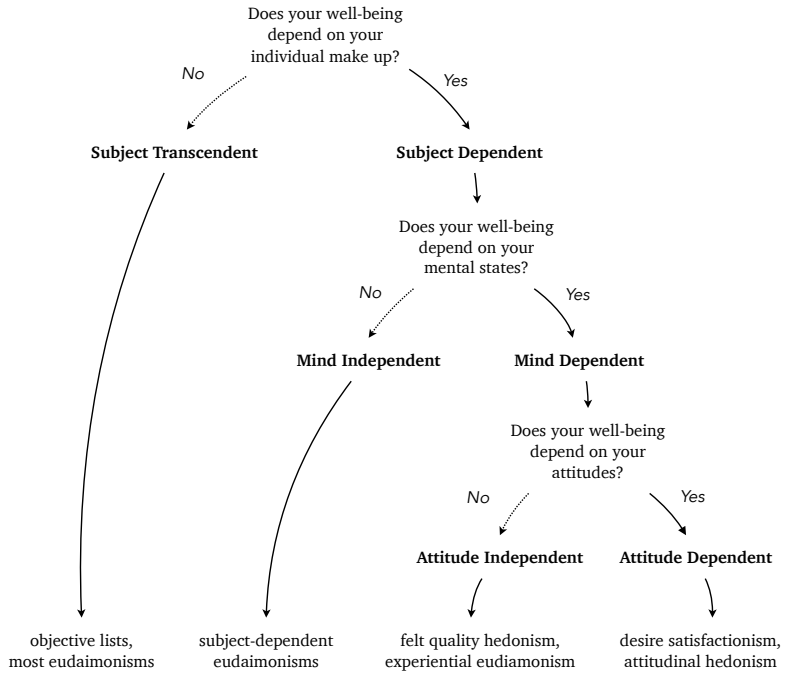

FIGURE 1: SUBJECTIVE-OBJECTIVE CRITERIA

well-being internalism (now subject dependence) and well-being externalism (now subject transcending). Later, Hall and Tiberius (2015) suggested the subject dependent-transcendent, which Haybron adopted (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.4). Initially, Haybron considered subject dependence "a weaker cousin of subjectivism" (2008, 156). Since then, he has come to equate the dependence-transcendence distinction with the subjective-objective distinction (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.4).

[24] Phenomenological accounts may cause problems for this schema. For example, if pleasure is good for you regardless of your individual makeup, then phenomenological hedonism will be a mind-dependent, subject-transcendent theory. For my schema to work, we must assume that your phenomenology depends on your individual makeup.

With this in mind, I will identify subjective well-being theories with subject-dependent well-being theories and treat mind-dependent and attitude-dependent theories as species of the subjective theory genus. However, I will also refer to subject-dependent, mind-dependent, and attitude-dependent theories for readers who prefer to equate subjectivity with different criteria.

Although Christian philosophers generally prefer objective theories (see Section 4), one point in favor of subjective theories is that they better explain what Wayne Sumner calls the *subject-relativity* of well-being: that all prudential value is value *for* a particular subject (see Sumner 1996, 20, 42).[25] Employing the attitude-dependent criterion for subjectivity, L. W. Sumner argues that:

> What is crucial on [an attitude-dependent account of well-being] is that you are the proprietor or manager of a set of attitudes, both positive and negative, toward the conditions of your life. It is these attitudes which constitute the standpoint from which these conditions can be assessed as good or bad for you. It follows on this sort of account that a welfare subject in the merely grammatical sense—an individual with a distinct welfare—must also be a subject in a more robust sense—the locus of a reasonably unified and continuous mental life. Prudential value is therefore perspectival because it literally takes the point of view of the subject. Welfare is subject-relative because it is subjective. (1996, 42–43)

While Sumner's argument employs an attitude-dependent criterion for subjectivity, we can easily work out parallel arguments based on a subject's mental states or nature. Because objective theories use attitude-independent, mind-independent, and subject-independent criteria to establish prudential value, they lack an alternative explanation for the subject-relativity of well-being.

[25] Sumner states the point as follows: "Since an account of the nature of welfare is descriptively adequate only if it is faithful to our ordinary concept of, any serious contender must at least preserve the subject-relativity which is definitive of prudential evaluation. If it cannot manage this much then, though it might be a plausible rendering of some other dimension of value, it is not a theory about welfare at all" (20). In the following chapter, he adds: "What distinguishes welfare from all other modes of value is its reference to the proprietor of the life in question: although your life may be going well in many respects, it is prudentially valuable only if it is going well *for you*. This subject-relativity is an essential feature of our ordinary concept of welfare. … Among the modes of value which can belong to individual lives, welfare stands out by virtue of incorporating an internal reference to its bearer" (42).

4. Christian Aversion to Subjectivism

Most Christian philosophers are averse to welfare subjectivism. I could just as easily describe this as a penchant for welfare objectivism—that is, a penchant for subject-transcendent accounts of well-being. Nevertheless, conversations with other Christian philosophers have given me a clear sense not only that objective theories are preferred but that subjective theories are frowned upon. I believe this to be a misguided, but understandable, position. Individual reasons for this aversion will vary, but I'd like to offer a few possibilities.

First, I began this chapter by noting that some Christians are averse not only to subjective theories of well-being, but to placing any positive emphasis at all on the very concept of well-being. In some cases, I suspect that aversion stems from either the conflation of selfishness and self-interest or an undue emphasis on self-denial. The first is easily addressed by distinguishing selfishness from self-interest; the second by noting that self-denial is not an end in itself but a practice that serves someone's interest—be it my own or someone else's.

Second, Christian philosophers, along with other theists, typically prefer universal, non-relative standards. For instance, on the 2020 PhilPapers Survey, theists were more likely than atheists to accept the objectivity of well-being, the meaning of life, and aesthetic value (Bourget and Chalmers 2023). Of course, one can ground an objective moral theory (e.g., utilitarianism) on a subjective theory of well-being (e.g., hedonism). Nevertheless, we see an underlying penchant for objective standards.

Third, many philosophers do not distinguish theories of the good life from theories of well-being (see Haybron, forthcoming, ch. 1, sec. 2, and ch. 3). Now, let's suppose that a good life is the same thing as living a life high in well-being. Since most Christian philosophers believe that there are objective moral components to living a good life (e.g., moral virtue), it will follow that well-being has an objective moral component and that a good life is also a virtuous life. From here, it is a short distance to disqualifying welfare goods that subjectivists allow (e.g., base and immoral pleasures or desires).

Fourth, most Christians include the corruption of human nature in their model of original sin. On this account, the Fall damaged more than divine-human relations; it damaged human nature. Human beings were created in the image of God, but humanity's fall corrupted this image. Beyond forgiveness, salvation requires restoring the divine image (e.g., Calvin 1845, sec. 1.15.4; Wesley 1984–1987, sermons 44, 45, and 141). Since this restoration will benefit any human person, Christian philosophers have a reason to prefer subject-transcendent views. This also

establishes a close connection between human nature and well-being, giving a reason to prefer eudaimonism.[26]

Fifth, many Christian philosophers, especially Thomists,[27] embrace the convertibility of goodness and being and its corollary, the privation theory of evil. According to this view, being is objective, and goodness is a mode of being. Prudential goodness (i.e., prudential value), as a mode or species of goodness, will also be objective. Being, and so goodness too, comes in degrees, and something is good to the extent that it is "complete, whole, and free from defect."[28] The Thomistic understanding of goodness supplies a metaphysical foundation for what Sumner calls *perfectionist value*. "To say that something has [perfectionist value] is to say that it is a good instance or specimen of its kind, or that it exemplifies the excellences characteristic of its particular nature" (1996, 22). For Sumner, perfectionist value and prudential value are metaphysically distinct, but a Thomist can reject this distinction (e.g., Murphy 2001, 76–80). The result is an objective, subject-transcendent form of eudaimonism.

Sixth, and finally, on Christian doctrine, human well-being and human purpose coincide. Here are two influential statements of this teaching:

> God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, sec. 1.1)

> What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever. (Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 1)

Moreover, the Christian Fall narrative is understandably read as a departure from this purpose. Alignment with this purpose leaves human persons better off, and departure from it leaves them worse off. The best thing a human person can hope for is to join God and the saints in the new heaven and new earth. This is what I *should* want for myself, and it

[26] Admittedly, the corruption model of original sin also creates difficulty for Christian eudaimonists. If we identify human nature with humanity's post-fall state, a eudaimonistic account of well-being loses much, perhaps all, of its appeal. On the other hand, if we identify human nature with humanity's pre-fall state (and the *imago Dei*), eudaimonism retains its appeal. In item four above, I've identified human nature with the pre-fall state.

[27] Stump (2007, 62; 2022b) calls the convertibility of goodness and being Aquinas's "central metaethical thesis." For the historical roots of this doctrine, see MacDonald (1991).

[28] I borrow this phrase from Stump (2007, 63). Here is some additional context: "On Aquinas's views, each thing aims above all at being as complete, whole, and free from defect as it can be. The state of its being complete and whole, however, just is that thing's being fully actual, whether or not the desirer recognizes it as such. Therefore, full actualization is equivalent to final goodness, aimed at or desired by every thing."

is what I *should* want for the people I care about; it is the highest prudential good—the *summum bonum*.

I don't take these six items to comprise a comprehensive account of Christian aversion to subjective theories of well-being, nor am I interested in providing one. Nevertheless, the theory of well-being I propose in this dissertation is subjective—a person's well-being depends on their individual make-up and the felt quality of their mental experience. The six items above go some way to explaining Christian aversion to subjective theories of well-being, but they do not justify it. I addressed aversion to Christian theories of well-being *qua* theories of self-interest in the introduction to this chapter. The second item, a preference for objective standards, merely reports a trend.

Items three through six take us into deeper waters. Item three, the link between having a life that is good for you and having a good life, is concerning only insofar as one argues for the monistic picture of the good life—that is, an account of the good life that unifies prudential and moral goodness.

There are two related issues here. The first has to do with how we live. We can oversimplify the point as follows: good lives include virtuous activity and bad ones include vicious activity. In Section 1, I noted that prudential goodness and moral goodness are at least conceptually distinct. I think this distinction runs deeper than our concepts. Returning to Haybron's example, I find it intuitively plausible that morally reprehensible behavior and character traits contributed to the well-being of plantation owners in the Antebellum South. To put it another way, I am not convinced that virtue is its own reward (or vice its own punishment). On the Christian picture of the afterlife, conflicts between prudential value and moral value will ultimately be resolved—there will be no sin in Heaven—but this eventuality does not change the fact that for the here and now, I can be made better off at your expense.

The second issue concerns the nature of our experience. Can an immoral pleasure or the satisfaction of a sinful desire be prudentially valuable? Subjectivists about well-being will have to say yes. So, yes. I grant that some Christians will take umbrage. On this point, I agree with C. S. Lewis:

> I have no doubt at all that pleasure is in itself a good and pain in itself an evil; if not, then the whole Christian tradition about heaven and hell and the passion of our Lord seems to have no meaning. Pleasure, then, is good; a "sinful" pleasure means a good offered, and accepted, under conditions which involve a breach of the moral law. (1967, 21)

> But aren't there bad, unlawful pleasures? Certainly there are. But in calling them "bad pleasures" I take it we are using a kind of shorthand. We mean "pleasures snatched by unlawful acts." It is the stealing of the apple that is bad, not the sweetness. The sweetness is still a beam from the glory. That does not palliate the stealing. It makes it worse. There is sacrilege in the theft. We have abused a holy thing. ([1964] 1992, 89)[29]

Chapters 3 and 4 will give my argument for the basic goodness of pleasure and the basic badness of pain. I begin with a modest thesis—that pleasure is sometimes basically good for us and pain is sometimes basically bad for us because of what they feel like—in Chapter 3 and then, in Chapter 4, I advance to the stronger thesis—that pleasure is always basically good for us and pain is always basically bad for us because of what they feel like.

The monistic picture of the good life that I've resisted here is often advanced as part of a popular form of eudaimonism: *perfectionism*. On this account, a well-lived life is good for you, and a life that is good for you is well-lived. To put it another way: virtue or excellence is basically prudentially good. Beyond this, perfectionism is typically associated with kind-based standards and the identification of perfectionist value with prudential value.[30] Here, the fourth and fifth items above come into play: the Fall's corruption of human nature and the convertability of goodness and being. The corruption of human nature will be basically prudentially bad on a perfectionist account of well-being, or any subject transcendent eudaimonism for that matter. On my account, the corruption of human nature that resulted from the Fall is instrumentally bad for us. I will defend the claim that it is basically good for us to fulfill our individual nature, but not our kind nature in Chapter 2. I will argue that we should reject the convertibility of goodness and being, indirectly in Chapter 3, and directly in Chapter 4.

On the sixth and final point above—that human well-being and human purpose coincide—I will concur with Christian teaching: The best thing a human person can hope for is union with God and the saints in

[29] See Goetz (2025) for a concise overview of Lewis's views on pleasure and pain. See Goetz (2015) for a detailed account.

[30] See the quotation from Sumner (1996, 22) above. William Lauinger argues that prudential value and perfectionist value are distinct kinds of good for: "In particular, I think that we should distinguish between the prudential sense of 'intrinsically good for' and the perfectionist sense of 'intrinsically good for.' Here is a general way of putting this distinction: Whereas *X* is intrinsically good for *A* in the prudential sense if and only if, and because, *X* directly contributes to *A*'s living well or doing well as the individual she is, *X* is intrinsically good for *A* in the perfectionist sense if and only if, and because, *X* directly contributes to *A*'s living well or doing well as the kind of thing she is, namely, a human being" (Lauinger 2014).

the new heaven and new earth. One way to guarantee this result is to bake it into your theory of well-being—for example, placing the coincidence of human well-being and purpose on an objective list of basic prudential goods. As a subjectivist about well-being, I think that this approach is misguided. On my account of well-being, union with God is instrumentally and conditionally good for us.

Let me illustrate this point with a few lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost* ([1667] 2005). Consider the plight of the rebel angels as voiced by Mammon:

> Suppose he [God] should relent
> And publish grace to all, on promise made
> Of new subjection; with what eyes could we
> Stand in his presence humble, and receive
> Strict laws imposed, to celebrate his throne
> With warbled hymns, and to his godhead sing
> Forced hallelujahs; while he lordly sits
> Our envied sovereign, and his altar breathes
> Ambrosial odours and ambrosial flowers,
> Our servile offerings? This must be our task
> In heaven, this our delight; how wearisome
> Eternity so spent in worship paid
> To whom we hate. (bk 2, vv. 237–49)

Here Mammon denies that a return to God would be any good for them—in fact, it is bad for them. This is partly right. The joys of heaven are lost on the damned. Heaven is decidedly *unpleasant* and *unwanted*. So, I affirm that union with God is what I should want for myself, and for the people I care about, but I consider this a conditional claim. That is, I reject the following:

> Union with God is what I should want for myself, *whether I enjoy it or not*, and it is what I should want for the people I care about, *whether they enjoy it or not.*

Additionally, I consider union with God to be an instrumental good. Union with God *causes* the saints in heaven to fare well. These claims are consistent with a subject theory of well-being and I will elaborate on them in Chapter 4.

5. Looking Ahead

The remaining chapters of this dissertation develop my eudaimonic-hedonic hybrid account of well-being. Most hybrid theories are subjective-

objective hybrids; these hybrids often seek to maintain an objective theory of well-being that honors the resonance constraint. Christian philosophers such as Robert Adams (1999) and William Lauinger (Lauinger 2014, 2021) have developed subjective-objective hybrids. I will not take this route. The theory I propose is a synthesis of subject-dependent eudaimonism and hedonism. Human persons are both agents and patients. I fare well as an agent insofar as I fulfill my individual nature, and I fare well as a patient insofar as my experience is more pleasant than unpleasant.

In the next chapter, I develop the eudaimonic aspect of the theory. I consider various types of eudaimonism on offer, then make my case for subject-dependent eudaimonism—a eudaimonism that not only avoids alienation but also centers on self-fulfillment. The second point, self-fulfilment, ties well-being to an account of *the self*. I do not propose my own theory of the self—a task too ambitious for a dissertation chapter. I do, however, consider work by Haybron and Stump on the connection between the self and well-being and work by C. S. Lewis on the nature of personhood. I then argue that it is not our kind nature but our individual nature that matters for well-being.

In Chapter 3, I consider the import of pleasure and pain on a theory of well-being. I argue that welfare eudaimonism, even the self-fulfilment eudaimonism I developed in Chapter 2, cannot give us a satisfactory account of the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain. I argue that a satisfactory theory of well-being must account for what I call *the phenomenological value thesis*: pleasure is good for us and pain is bad for us *because of what they feel like*. I argue that the phenomenological value thesis is true and that eudaimonism lacks native resources to affirm it. The theory best equipped to handle it is phenomenological hedonism. Eudaimonic theories tell us a great deal about agential well-being, but they cannot tell us what it means to flourish as a patient; for this, we need hedonism.

Chapter 4 is devoted to my eudaimonic-hedonic hybrid. I compare my theory to other hybrids and argue that pleasure has unconditional value and pain unconditional disvalue—a thesis rejected by other hybrids. I close the dissertation by examining the relationship between my theory of well-being and Christian theism. I argue that my subjective account is compatible with a Christian conception of the afterlife as union with God without depending on the truth of Christian theism.

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