Which Problem of Adaptation?

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One widespread argument against the efficacy of subjective well-being as a measure of well-being is the adaptation problem as formulated by Sen and Nussbaum: the phenomenon that people may adapt to deprivation and find satisfaction or happiness in objectively bad circumstances. It is not generally noticed that there are two distinct arguments for why the phenomenon of adaptation is a problem for subjective well-being as a measure of well-being. The Axiological Adaptation Argument is a counter-example to theories of well-being that rely on mental states. The Epistemic Adaptation Argument illustrates that levels of happiness or satisfaction cannot be measured well when people have adapted. I argue that the most serious threat to subjective well-being measures is not the Axiological Argument, but the Epistemic Argument. I reflect on the implications the epistemic problem has for the empirical literature in general, and for research on the phenomenon of adaptation in particular.

I. INTRODUCTION

Regardless of which theory of well-being one believes to be correct, most people will agree that happiness is one of the most central aspects of human well-being. A recent strand of economic literature has utilized this observation: rather than measuring human well-being by means of economic prosperity, economists have started to explore the feasibility of measuring happiness or satisfaction with one's life. An important idea behind this is that economic prosperity cannot be seen as having intrinsic value to people by itself: after all, what is the point of economic prosperity, if it does not make us happier, or more generally, better off? The measurement of people's perception of their happiness or satisfaction with life in the social sciences has come to be known as the measurement of subjective well-being (SWB). The study of SWB has seen a flourishing decade in economics and has formed its own subfield called happiness economics. Nevertheless, not everyone is equally enthusiastic about this new current in economics. Paper titles such as 'Against Happiness'[1] and 'Happiness Is Not Well-Being'[2] demonstrate that some believe there is a darker side to the seemingly cheerful attempt to reincorporate happiness into the discipline of economics.[3]

[1] Frances Stewart, 'Against Happiness: A Critical Appraisal of the Use of Measures of Happiness for Evaluating Progress in Development', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 15 (2014), pp. 293–307.

[2] Jason R. Raibley, 'Happiness Is Not Well-Being', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13 (2012), pp. 1105–29.

[3] See for instance Julia Annas, 'Happiness as Achievement', *Daedalus* 133 (2004), pp. 44–51; Pierluigi Barrotta, 'Why Economists Should Be Unhappy with the Economics

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What is most controversial about SWB is not that happiness, or satisfaction with life, is something good generally. The controversy lies in the widely regarded assumption that SWB – a psychological state concept – is a measure of well-being simpliciter – a concept describing how good life is for the person living it.[4] It is this underlying assumption that has attracted quite some critical attention from philosophers and economists alike. While many researchers working with SWB express a more nuanced view in which SWB is only taken to be part of a multi-dimensional well-being concept, in this article I focus on the popular view among happiness researchers that SWB is a measure of human well-being (WB) in general. For brevity, I will refer to the view as the SWB-WB view.

This article focuses on one particular widely discussed objection to the SWB-WB view: the adaptation problem.[5] Adaptation occurs when a change in happiness (or satisfaction) due to external circumstances is mitigated, not due to a restoration of the external circumstances, but due to an internal change in aspiration, expectations or desires. Adaptation is most commonly discussed in the context of bad circumstances: the phenomenon that desires, aspirations or ambitions are restricted due to limiting circumstances such as prolonged deprivation. When this occurs, an individual may still think of themselves as happy or satisfied, despite their seemingly bad position. This phenomenon is discussed as a problem in a variety of contexts,

of Happiness', *Economics and Philosophy* 24 (2008), pp. 145–65; Amartya K. Sen, 'The Economics of Happiness and Capability', *Capability and Happiness*, ed. Luigino Bruni, Flavio Comim and Maurizio Pugno (2008), pp. 16–27; Matthew Adler and Eric A. Posner, 'Happiness Research and Cost-Benefit Analysis', *The Journal of Legal Studies* 37 (2008), pp. S253–S292; Séverine Deneulin and Lila Shahani, *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach: Freedom and Agency* (London and Sterling, VA, 2009); Daniel M. Hausman, 'Hedonism and Welfare Economics', *Economics and Philosophy* 26 (2010), pp. 321–44; Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Who Is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy, Happiness Research, and Public Policy', *International Review of Economics* 59 (2012), pp. 335–61; Marc Fleurbaey and Didier Blanchet, *Beyond GDP: Measuring Welfare and Assessing Sustainability* (New York, 2013).

[4] See for example Erik Angner, 'The Philosophical Foundations of Subjective Measures Of Well-Being', *Capabilities and Happiness*, ed. Luigino Bruni, Flavio Comim and Maurizio Pugno (Oxford, 2008), pp. 286–98; Angner, 'Subjective Well-Being', *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 39 (2010), pp. 361–68 for discussions.

[5] Amartya K. Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam, 1985); 'Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984', *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), pp. 169–221; Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford, 1987); *Development as Freedom* (Oxford, 1999); Sen, 'The Economics'; *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, vol. 3 (New York, 2000); Nussbaum, 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice', *Feminist Economics* 9 (2003), pp. 33–59; Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Nussbaum, 'Happy Warrior'.

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such as the fair distribution of resources.[6] However, in this article, I will only be concerned with the problem the phenomenon poses for the SWB-WB account.

That the phenomenon of adaptation poses a problem to the SWB-WB view is widely acknowledged; however, it is less clear why adaptation is a problem. While there are some exceptions,[7] no systematic attempt has been made to clearly define the different adaptation problems, or identify the different consequences for the empirical literature on happiness. One perspective about the phenomenon of adaptation is that it poses a problem to the SWB-WB view because it illustrates that happy people may not be leading good lives, and consequently, happiness is not sufficient for well-being. Because this pertains to the nature of well-being, we can call this view the Axiological Argument. Another interpretation of the problem identifies the crux of the problem elsewhere. On this alternative reading the phenomenon of adaptation provides an argument for the view that people are limited in their abilities to evaluate their own happiness. This interpretation of the adaptation problem – the Epistemic Argument – does not draw upon a view on the nature of well-being, but only on our ability to evaluate our own psychological states.

There is, however, a third perspective on the adaptation phenomenon, namely, that adaptation does not pose a problem to the SWB-WB view at all. On this perspective, adaptation to negative circumstances genuinely improves one's life; and adaptation to positive circumstances – such as hedonic treadmill adaptation[8] – genuinely mitigates an increase in well-being from improved circumstances.[9] This view is not only common among philosophers, but also among SWB researchers. Richard Layard, for instance argues: 'Clearly the secret of happiness is to seek out those good things that you can never fully adapt to.'[10]

[6] There are at least two other targets for which adaptation is thought to cause a problem. The first is the view that social benefits should be distributed according to happiness measures. The second is the view that rationality requires that an agent act on her preferences. For the latter, see Luc Bovens, 'Sour Grapes and Character Planning', *The Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1992), pp. 57–78; Donald W. Bruckner, 'In Defense of Adaptive Preferences', *Philosophical Studies* 142 (2009), pp. 307–24; Ben Colburn, 'Autonomy and Adaptive Preferences', *Utilitas* 23 (2011), pp. 52–71; Donald W. Bruckner, 'Colburn on Covert Influences', *Utilitas* 23 (2011), pp. 451–7.

[7] E.g. Mark Chekola, 'Happiness, Rationality, Autonomy and the Good Life', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 8 (2007), pp. 51–78; Tim Taylor, 'Adaptation and the Measurement of Well-Being', *Ethics and Social Welfare* 8 (2014), pp. 248–61.

[8] Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons Form a New Science* (London, 2005).

[9] Bruckner, 'In Defense'; Fred Feldman, *What Is This Thing Called Happiness?* (New York, 2010), ch. 8.

[10] Layard, *Happiness*, p. 49; see also Flavio Comim, 'Capabilities and Happiness: Potential Synergies', *Review of Social Economy* 63 (2005), pp. 161–76.

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I argue that there is a genuine *problem* of adaptation. However, I do believe the different interpretations of the problem have been a source of confusion that has left space for the perspective that adaptation is not actually problematic for the SWB-WB view. The plausibility of the view that adaptation is not a problem depends on the plausibility of the views that *do* take adaptation to be a problem. Biting the bullet on the problem of adaptation may be a plausible position, but whether it is in fact a problem depends on how we understand the adaptation problem. In this article, I have two goals. First, I want to convince the reader that there are indeed two separate problems of adaptation for the SWB-WB account that are distinct and have different implications. Second, while most philosophers seem to interpret the adaptation problem axiologically, I provide arguments for why the Epistemic Argument is a particularly salient problem for the SWB-WB account.

SWB measures come in two forms: measures of happiness and measures of life-satisfaction.[11] In the philosophical literature, life-satisfaction views on well-being – i.e. taking a person's attitude towards her life as a whole to be constitutive of well-being[12] – are significantly different from hedonic views – i.e. taking overall pleasure, or enjoyment, of experiences in life to be constitutive of well-being.[13] Both can be seen as happiness-accounts, in the sense that both life-satisfaction and pleasure are popular interpretations of happiness;[14] though, they differ significantly on what happiness entails. In the empirical literature, the concept of happiness and life-satisfaction are generally not seen as contrasting,[15] though sometimes as different components of SWB.[16] For the purpose of simplicity, I will mostly focus

[11] Some philosophers as well as SWB researchers take the view that SWB is a measure of desire-satisfaction views of well-being: Donald W. Bruckner, 'Subjective Well-Being and Desire Satisfaction', *Philosophical Papers* 39 (2010), pp. 1–28; Ulrich Schimmack, 'Well-Being', *Schmollers Jahrbuch* 129 (2009), pp. 1–9. On this view, the epistemic and Axiological Arguments can also be made, but in a slightly different form. For the purpose of simplicity, I will focus on the case of (psychological) happiness and well-being.

[12] See Leonard W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford, 1996). However, for Sumner, well-being only consists in life-satisfaction when a person's life-satisfaction is 'authentic'; that is, autonomous and informed.

[13] E.g. Roger Crisp, 'Hedonism Reconsidered', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73 (2006), pp. 619–45; Torbjörn Tännsjö, 'Narrow Hedonism', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 8 (2007), pp. 79–98. The use of 'pleasure' is sometimes considered to have confusing connotations, for which reason the term 'enjoyment' is often used by contemporary hedonists without intending a change in meaning, see Crisp, 'Hedonism'.

[14] Daniel M. Haybron, 'On Being Happy or Unhappy', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (2005), pp. 287–317.

[15] E.g. Ruut Veenhoven, 'The Four Qualities of Life', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1 (2000), pp. 1–39.

[16] Further described in Willem J. A. van der Deijl, 'What Happiness Science Can Learn from John Stuart Mill', *International Journal of Wellbeing* 6 (2016), pp. 164–79. Both life-satisfaction views (e.g. Paul Dolan, Tessa Peasgood and Mathew White, 'Do We Really

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on the general notion of happiness, without making this distinction.[17] Nevertheless, at some points in the argument the distinction will be important, at which point I will address this explicitly.

II. ADAPTATION

The problem of adaptation has been introduced in the context of welfare measurement by Amartya Sen. Sen has stressed the importance of adaptation in considering the 'utilitarian approach',[18] or 'happiness approach' repeatedly in his work.[19] In *On Ethics and Economics* he formulates it as follows:

> [T]he hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed or the over-exhausted coolie may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy.[20]

In more recent formulations, Sen focuses more specifically on the happiness scales used in SWB research: 'the use of the happiness scale can be quite misleading if it leads to ignoring the significance of other deprivations that may not be at all well-judged in the scale of happiness'.[21]

That these examples pose a serious threat to the SWB-WB view should be clear. If a person clearly has a low well-being, but nevertheless has a high reported happiness or satisfaction with life, reported happiness or satisfaction with life are bad measures of her well-being. However, Sen does not specify exactly why he believes this to be the case. On an axiological reading, the problem is that happiness and well-being do not correlate well even if we are perfectly able to judge our

Know What Makes Us Happy? A Review of the Economic Literature on the Factors Associated with Subjective Well-Being', *Journal of Economic Psychology* 29 (2008), pp. 94–122), and (Benthamite) hedonic views (e.g. Daniel Kahneman, Peter P. Wakker and Rakesh Sarin, 'Back to Bentham? Explorations of Experienced Utility', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112 (1997), pp. 375–405; Veenhoven, 'The Four Qualities'; David G. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald, 'Well-Being over Time in Britain and the USA', *Journal of Public Economics* 88 (2004), pp. 1359–86) are sometimes considered to be the central concept behind the empirical literature on SWB.

[17] Sen does not make the distinction (see below). However, it is important to consider that the problem is significantly different for different conceptions of happiness.

[18] Needless to say, utilitarianism comes with a commitment to sum-ranking that is not relevant for the present purpose, as it is unrelated to identifying happiness with well-being.

[19] See Sen, *Commodities*; Sen, 'Well-Being'; Sen, *Development*; Sen, 'The Economics'; Sen, *The Idea*.

[20] Sen, *On Ethics*, pp. 45–6.

[21] Sen, *The Idea*, p. 282.

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own happiness. On this reading happiness and well-being are simply not the same:

The Axiological Argument
(1) The happy deprived are genuinely happy.
(2) The happy deprived do not have a correspondingly high well-being.
(3) Hence, genuine happiness and well-being are distinct.

Those who endorse the Epistemic Argument do not accept the first premise of the Axiological Argument – the deprived in Sen's examples do not appear to be genuinely happy. While they agree that the people in Sen's example do not have a high degree of well-being, the reason for this is not (only) that happiness does not constitute well-being, but that under these conditions people are bad evaluators of their own happiness.

The Epistemic Argument
(1) The deprived are not happy.
(2) The deprived do report to be happy.
(3) Hence, reported happiness is a bad indicator of genuine happiness.

The Axiological Argument is essentially a philosophical argument about the nature of well-being. On this interpretation, the problem of adaptation is a problem for philosophical theories that identify well-being with happiness. In particular, both accounts of happiness we have discussed (pleasure or satisfaction with life) conceive of happiness in terms of mental states.[22] While mental-state accounts of well-being were prominent in the nineteenth century, the view lost popularity due to a number of prominent counter-examples that were formulated against it.[23] Most notable among them is Robert Nozick's experience machine objection. Imagine that there would be a machine that would create a dream world for you if you plug in, in which you can experience the most incredible things.[24] Your life would be highly pleasurable and you would feel deeply satisfied. Nevertheless, the objection goes, a life lived in an experience machine would not be considered a fully good

[22] Defining happiness in terms of mental states is not completely uncontroversial. Daniel Haybron defends a view on which happiness is constituted by emotional states, which need not have phenomenological components, further discussed below. However, this is solely an account of happiness not of well-being.

[23] Dan Weijers, 'Hedonism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hedonism/> (2011); Matthew Silverstein, 'In Defense of Happiness: A Response to the Experience Machine', *Social Theory and Practice* 26 (2000), pp. 279–300.

[24] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York, 1974).

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life, and thus, while this life would be optimal in terms of happiness, it would not be so in terms of well-being.[25]

The view that adaptation is mostly a problem for the conceptual identification of well-being and happiness – just like Nozick's experience machine example – is not rare in the literature. Erik Angner, for instance, puts the two problems on a par: 'Philosophers have traditionally made the point [that happiness is not well-being] by reference to thought experiments like Robert Nozick's experience machine, . . . , or evocative vignettes like Amartya Sen's descriptions of destitute beggars, landless labourers, overworked servants, and subjugated housewives.'[26] Similar interpretations are given by many philosophers writing on the topic.[27]

While the Epistemic Argument is less widespread, there is some recognition that the Axiological Argument is not the only way of analysing what problem(s) adaptation poses to the SWB-WB view. In particular, Marc Chekola, in a wider discussion about happiness, observes that there are two different ways of looking at the problem:

> One would be to claim that the person thinks he's happy, but he really isn't . . . . Another possibility, and the one I prefer, is to allow that he may indeed have a happy life, but one involving severe and unjustified limitations. Were he to have more opportunities open to him for a life with richer alternatives he would have a better life. So he may well be living a happy life, but not such a good life.[28]

While Chekola prefers the Axiological Argument, he acknowledges that it is not the only way to see the problem. There are also philosophers writing on the topic who emphasize the epistemic challenge that adaptation poses. In an article called 'Do we know how happy we are?' Daniel Haybron writes:

> Everyone knows that we often adapt to things over time: what was once pleasing now leaves no impression or seems tiresome, and what used to be highly irritating is now just another feature of the landscape. Could it also be

[25] See Dan Weijers and Vanessa Schouten, 'An Assessment of Recent Responses to the Experience Machine Objection to Hedonism', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 2 (2013), pp. 461–82 for a recent review.

[26] Erik Angner, 'Is It Possible to Measure Happiness?', *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 3 (2013), pp. 221–40.

[27] Sumner, *Welfare*; Valerie Tiberius and Alicia Hall, 'Normative Theory and Psychological Research: Hedonism, Eudaimonism, and Why It Matters', *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 5 (2010), pp. 212–25; Annie Austin, 'On Well-Being and Public Policy: Are We Capable of Questioning the Hegemony of Happiness?', *Social Indicators Research* 127 (2016), pp. 123–38.

[28] Chekola, 'Happiness', p. 72.

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that some things are lastingly pleasant or unpleasant, while our *awareness* of them fades? I would suggest that it can.[29]

The conclusions of the two separate arguments can both be held at the same time – happiness may not identify with well-being, while at the same time, happiness and people's perceptions of happiness may diverge as well. However, it is also perfectly possible to accept one argument without accepting the other.[30] The two problems for the SWB-WB view are thus analytically independent but compatible.

III. ADAPTATION AS AN AXIOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Is the problem of adaptation viewed from the perspective of the Axiological Argument convincing? While many philosophers commenting on happiness research take this perspective, I will argue that it is not. The Argument suffers from a number of weaknesses, but the most serious weakness is that the counter-example it is based on leaves much room for interpretations compatible with happiness-accounts of well-being; this makes the argument vacuous. Rather than showing that such views fail to be plausible in cases of adaptation, it *presupposes* it.

First, regardless of whether those defending a happiness-account of well-being *should* be convinced by the argument, it is important to point out that few happiness researchers have been affected much by the force of the Axiological Argument. Many researchers take measures of SWB to be a direct measure of general human well-being even if they acknowledge Sen's adaptation argument.[31] Perhaps this is due to

[29] Daniel M. Haybron, 'Do We Know How Happy We Are? On Some Limits of Affective Introspection and Recall', *Nous* 41 (2007), pp. 394–428. As a matter of fact, the epistemic interpretation of adaptation is also covered by what Daniel Haybron calls 'scale norming': 'Scale norming can be a source of adaptation. Insofar as this happens, then we have a second reason for thinking that hedonic adaptation may be less extensive than self-reports would suggest: for these reports may reflect a kind of "scaling adaptation," in which subjects' scales change over time. Lasting changes in hedonic state may thus be obscured by adjustments in the scales we use to rate our experience' (p. 404).

[30] Sen's citations given above do not clearly favour one of the interpretations of the argument. There are places in which they do. For instance, in *On Ethics and Economics* Sen writes that there is a 'basic problem', 'to wit, the insufficient depth of the criterion of happiness or desire-fulfilment in judging a person's well-being' (*On Ethics*, p. 46), indicating an axiological interpretation. Nevertheless, in *The Idea of Justice*, Sen concludes that from the adaptation problem: 'our perceptions may tend to blind us to the deprivations that we do actually have, which a clearer and more informed understanding can bring out' (p. 284), indicating an epistemic interpretation. There is thus support for both arguments in Sen.

[31] See for example Layard, *Happiness*; Dolan, Peasgood and White, 'Do We Really Know What Makes Us Happy?'; John F. Helliwell and Christopher P. Barrington-Leigh, 'Viewpoint: Measuring and Understanding Subjective Well-Being', *The Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 43 (2010), pp. 729–53.

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a substantive disagreement with the argument, but that is not often spelled out. Rather, Sen's argument is often rejected on the basis of simply being mistaken empirically.[32] The poor do not regard themselves as happy, neither do the unemployed. This empirical argument avoids the more crucial conceptual point that philosophers have in mind.

There are at least two prima facie problems for the Axiological Argument. At least when it comes to the hedonic interpretation of happiness, it is not at all clear whether the first premise – that the happy deprived are genuinely happy – is plausible.[33] The compatibility of deprivation and pleasure that is assumed is not at all obvious. First, we must observe that the deprived are highly likely to experience many disadvantages in their life which negatively affect their happiness: becoming ill, being overworked, the loss of loved ones who die too soon, etc. Even if they do adapt to their circumstances must they feel the strain of these disadvantages. The claim that the deprived can be happy only seems plausible if the standards of what it means to be happy are not set very high, in which case the conclusion of the argument loses support. A second prima facie problem with the first premise is that even if the deprived happy are genuinely happy when they report it, their lives as a whole may be less happy in the probable case that deprivation leads to a reduction in the length of their life. In short, being deprived – i.e. lacking necessities of life – does not go without consequences, even on happiness-accounts of well-being.

The point that it is conceptually possible to be deprived and still be genuinely happy is not undermined if these observations are correct. But scrutiny reveals that such conceptual possibilities may be more hypothetical than Sen makes it seem.

The second premise – that the happy deprived do not have a correspondingly high well-being – is also contentious, as it is based on intuitions that are very unlikely to be shared by someone who also has intuitions supporting a happiness account of well-being. Like the Experience Machine counter-example, the Axiological Argument uses the adaptation phenomenon as an intuition-pump. Just as the

[32] See for example David A. Clark, 'Adaptation, Poverty and Well-Being: Some Issues and Observations with Special Reference to the Capability Approach and Development Studies 1', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 10 (2009), pp. 21–42; Conchita D'Ambrosio, Andrew Clark and Simone Ghislandi, 'Adaptation to Poverty in Long-Run Panel Data', *Review of Economics and Statistics* 98 (2015), pp. 591–608; Nicolai Suppa, 'Capability Deprivation and Life Satisfaction: Evidence from German Panel Data', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 16 (2015), pp. 173–99.

[33] As life-satisfaction may be more robust with respect to personal tragedies, this problem may not have force if it comes to life-satisfaction views of well-being. The same caveat does not apply to the second prima facie problem. The fact that deprivations rob someone of their ability to be happy, or satisfied, arguably still holds with respect to this view.

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experience machine objection shows that, even from the perspective of the mental-state theorists, there is something counter-intuitive about mental-statism in certain cases, the Axiological Argument counts on the reader intuitively agreeing with the second premise. Even a fierce defender of mental-state accounts has to admit that there is *something* unsatisfactory about saying that a person in the experience machine lives a fully prudentially good life.[34]

But does the same apply to adaptation? If we start from the intuition that well-being consists in happiness, it is unlikely that we also have the intuition that a genuinely happy person living in deprivation is not leading a good life. In fact, the intuition that an adapted poor person does not lead a happy life may seem quite paternalistic to someone with intuitions supporting happiness-based accounts on well-being. For instance, Marc Fleurbaey and Didier Blanchet write:

> If happiness is really the ultimate goal of people in life, the [objection] . . . [is] not compelling. . . . Sen's objection points to the real phenomenon of adaptation, but the correct attitude about this phenomenon is to worry about the ills to which people do not adapt, such as pain and noise, rather than insisting that the ills to which they do adapt are still priorities.[35]

The Axiological Argument does not demonstrate that the judgement that the happy deprived are leading lives with a high degree of well-being is counter-intuitive; it simply *assumes* that it is. In this sense, it is question begging. The intuition is not obvious and *not independent* of the view one holds on the nature of well-being. Someone defending a happiness-account of well-being may agree that the experience machine example is counter-intuitive for her view, but is unlikely to share the intuition that the happy deprived are not leading good lives.

If the deprived really do have the same quality of experience (and live equally long lives) it is not obvious that their lives are still worse in virtue of having lowered aspirations. There has been a wide array of schools of thought that have emphasized that the key to a good life is living a simple life, satisfying only a minimal amount of ambitions and desires, such as Buddhist, Epicurean and Stoic thought; but the idea arguably also captures a key Christian insight.[36] It is not at all implausible that a reduction of desires and ambitions may genuinely improve a person's life by making her happier. In short, neither of the premises supporting the Axiological Argument is obvious, and taking them for granted begs the question.

[34] Crisp, 'Hedonism'.

[35] Fleurbaey and Blanchet, *Beyond GDP*, p. 169.

[36] Darrin M. McMahon, 'From the Happiness of Virtue to the Virtue of Happiness: 400 BC–AD 1780', *Daedalus* 133 (2004), pp. 5–17; Stephen E. Harris, 'Suffering and the Shape of Well-Being in Buddhist Ethics', *Asian Philosophy* 24 (2014), pp. 242–59.

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There is a final, more pragmatic reason to resist the Axiological Argument in the context of well-being measurement, which does not concern the specifics of the Axiological Argument. The well-being debate has known a number of instances where intuitions of philosophers have gone in different directions. Despite Nozick's experience machine, there are still mental-statists,[37] and despite well-known counter-examples to desire-satisfactionism (such as Rawl's grass-counter[38] or Derek Parfit's stranger on the bus)[39] there are still defenders who are willing to bite the bullet.[40] Because intuitions clash, the debate is not easily resolved. Adaptation, as an Axiological Argument, suffers from the same fate. There is something unfruitful about the usage of intuition-pumps in this context: because intuitions clash, they are unlikely to resolve debates. Thus, regardless of whether the Axiological Argument is question begging or not, an argument that relies on contentious intuitions does not stand on firm ground.

IV. ADAPTATION AS AN EPISTEMIC PROBLEM

The epistemic version of the adaptation argument, as I will argue in this section, succeeds in providing a convincing argument that does not rely on contentious intuitions about well-being.

The idea that we are imperfectly able to evaluate our own happiness is actually a widespread idea.[41] There are a variety of ways in which the Epistemic Argument can be made precise. An important question that needs to be addressed is: how could one possibly be incorrect about one's own happiness? In fact, there are a number of ways in which adaptation may lead to a misjudgement of a psychological state. Below I briefly discuss these issues and then provide a thought experiment – borrowed from Marc Fleurbaey and Didier Blanchet[42] – to argue that adaptation poses a severe epistemic challenge to the SWB-WB view.

To appreciate the epistemic argument one must first consider how different happiness-accounts of well-being vary. Hedonism about

[37] See Dan Weijers, 'Nozick's Experience Machine Is Dead, Long Live the Experience Machine!', *Philosophical Psychology* 27 (2014), pp. 513–35.

[38] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1971).

[39] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984).

[40] Mark Lukas, 'Desire Satisfactionism and the Problem of Irrelevant Desires', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 4 (2009), pp. 1–24.

[41] Haybron, 'Do We Know?'; Tännsjö, 'Narrow Hedonism'; Jason Marsh, 'Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability, and Procreative Responsibility', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89 (2014), pp. 436–66; but also J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp, Oxford Philosophical Texts (London, 1871); see van der Deijl, 'Happiness Science'. However, only Haybron explicitly cites the adaptation phenomenon as an argument in favour of such a view.

[42] Fleurbaey and Blanchet, *Beyond GDP*.

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happiness comes in various forms, each with different epistemic challenges. While some hedonists maintain that pleasure is a specific experience,[43] others[44] take pleasure to be heterogeneous, with some types of pleasurable experience being of a higher quality than others.[45] Life-satisfaction views are epistemically significantly different from these views because they take happiness to be a person's self-assessment of life, which seems more accessible from a researcher's perspective than pleasurability of experience.[46] A different notion of happiness is Haybron's recently developed account on which happiness is an emotional state, which may or may not directly enter experience.[47]

What is required for the Epistemic Argument to be sound is a conceptual distinction between the *judgement of one's own happiness* and happiness *itself*. For Haybron's emotional state view this is most evidently the case. On Haybron's view stress, anxiety, and even depression, may (to some extent) go unnoticed by people even if these emotional states do constitute unhappiness.[48] A person may judge herself to be happy, while she is under more stress than she realizes. For qualitative hedonists, like Mill, there is also quite clearly such a distinction.[49] Mill famously argued that people who have only experienced low-quality pleasures believe that they are happy, while people who have experienced high-quality pleasures may be less satisfied (by comparison) but nevertheless are happier. Even monist hedonists draw the same distinction. Torbjörn Tännsjö, in an article defending monist hedonism, writes:

> The fact that I can directly experience (introspectively) what hedonic situation I am in, does not presuppose that I can always make correct judgements about it. It is certainly true that, at any time, I feel what I feel, but this does not mean that my description of my state must be correct. And when I compare the state I am in right now, and the state I was in some time ago, I may very well reach the wrong conclusion.[50]

[43] Tännsjö, 'Narrow Hedonism'.

[44] Starting from Mill, *Utilitarianism*.

[45] See also Crisp, 'Hedonism'. Fred Feldman, *What Is This Thing Called Happiness?* also defends a version of the view. However, his view differs from other hedonists because he takes pleasure to be attitudinal.

[46] Sumner, *Welfare*.

[47] Haybron, 'On Being Happy or Unhappy'; Daniel M. Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (New York, 2008).

[48] See also Haybron, 'Do We Know?'.

[49] See also Christoph Schmidt-Petri, 'Mill on Quality and Quantity', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003), pp. 102–4; 'On an Interpretation of Mill's Qualitative Utilitarianism', *Prolegomena* 5 (2006), pp. 165–77.

[50] Tännsjö, 'Narrow Hedonism', p. 86.

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However, on the life-satisfaction view, the distinction between judgement of one's own happiness and happiness itself is not as obvious. Could someone judge her own satisfaction with life wrongly? In order to understand this question it is important to see the difference between *content errors of judgements* and *scale errors of judgements*.[51] Making a content error of judgement involves a failure to take into account a relevant part of the concept in a judgement of happiness. When someone misidentifies her own happiness, or misses out on an important part of happiness, she commits a content error. Making a scale error, on the other hand, means that the degree of happiness is not proportionately identified in relation to an intended scale. The concept of scale error is illustrated in cases of making a judgement about length. Because the concept of length is quite clear, it is not easily misidentified. However, in judging whether something is 'tall' or not, different people may have different views. A Filipino would most likely judge me – roughly 1.80 metres in height – to be tall, while for Dutch standards, I am actually quite small.[52] Different people may use different standards to make judgements of degree.

Content errors of judgement may be definitionally ruled out for the life-satisfaction conception of happiness, because it may be conceptually impossible to misidentify one's own satisfaction. Scale errors, however, are not. There is at least one way in which two people who report equal degrees of satisfaction may not in fact be equally happy, even on a life-satisfaction view of happiness. Just as in the case of length, people may hold different standards about the meaning of 'very satisfied', in particular about the meaning of 'very'. A person who has experienced a large amount of satisfaction in life and is back at a normal level will most likely judge her satisfaction to be lower than someone who comes from a very dissatisfied state. So, even for life-satisfaction views – for which the possibility of content errors may be excluded – there is a conceptual distinction between actual happiness and happiness judgement, which is due to the possibility of scaling errors. Two people who equally judge themselves to be 'very satisfied' with their life may not be equally satisfied, if their interpretation of degree (in this case 'very') is not the same. By focusing on scaling errors, the Epistemic Argument can now be precisely formulated so that it applies to the variety of happiness conceptions that I discussed above:

[51] In 'Adaptation' Taylor discusses a similar distinction in the adaptation context.

[52] I do not want to argue, of course, that any of these perspectives is correct. There is no context-independent standard for counting as tall. So, 'error' may be a misleading term. What is important though is that people have diverging standards on what is 'tall', so that taking any one standard will make the other person's judgement erroneous.

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(1) When someone undergoes adaptation, she changes the standards by which she evaluates her happiness.
(2) For this reason, people who have undergone adaptation apply different standards of evaluation to their happiness than people who have not undergone the same (degree of) adaptation.
(3) Reported happiness does not represent the degree of happiness well in comparisons, when two reports have resulted from different degrees of adaptation.

So far, I have argued that the Epistemic Argument is valid. But is it also sound? One example which illustrates its soundness is the debate about the Easterlin paradox. The paradox is based on findings which suggest that while the rich are reportedly happier than the poor within countries, and rich countries are happier average than poor countries, the increase in prosperity of the past four or five decades has not led to significant increases in happiness scores over time in western societies.[53] Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers for instance report the noted problem that SWB may not be informative of quality of life over time because it captures people's judgements of their 'relative well-being': 'If individuals assess their life relative to contemporary standards, then as countries and the world grow richer, reported satisfaction may not change'.[54] Marc Fleurbaey and Didier Blanchet provide us with the following thought experiment to illustrate this point:

> Imagine a scenario in which, over the next century, the situation of European countries stagnates, whereas Northern America benefits from a multiplication of its GDP per capita by 10, and the life expectancy of its population doubles (this would mimic the current gap between the rich countries and the poor countries). The Weber-Fechner interpretation would have it that European satisfaction would remain as high as it is nowadays. It appears more realistic to conjecture that, contemplating the much greater standard of living and longevity in Northern America, the Europeans would revise their view of what the 'best possible life' is and would have a substantially lower satisfaction as a result.[55]

[53] Andrew E. Clark, Paul Frijters and Michael A. Shields, 'Relative Income, Happiness, and Utility: An Explanation for the Easterlin Paradox and Other Puzzles', *Journal of Economic Literature* 46 (2008), pp. 95–144; Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, 'Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox', *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (2008), pp. 1–87.

[54] Stevenson and Wolfers, 'Economic Growth'.

[55] Fleurbaey and Blanchet, *Beyond GDP*, pp. 189–90. Fleurbaey and Blanchet only describe the Axiological Argument of adaptation under the heading of adaptation, and do not describe this thought experiment as adaptation. However, as it illustrates quite clearly what I mean by adaptation in the Epistemic Argument in terms of scale errors of judgement, I believe it is justified to use the example as such.

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There are two aspects of Fleurbaey and Blanchet's illustration that are particularly powerful. First, it not only shows that it is plausible that people do adapt their standards of evaluation, but it also illustrates how absurd it would be if people would not. It is almost unthinkable that Europeans would judge their own happiness by the same standards in the scenario where the United States maintains the standards of living of today, as they would in the scenario that Fleurbaey and Blanchet describe. In other words, it is almost unthinkable that people's benchmarks would *not* adapt, even though their lives do not change substantively. Second, Fleurbaey and Blanchet's suggestion that our standards adapt explains – or is compatible with – many of the behaviours of the SWB data. It explains why the poorest countries in the world also report the lowest levels of happiness – the standards used are influenced by their disadvantaged position. It also explains why the richest people report highest levels of happiness within countries – their standards will be affected by their advantaged position. At the same time, it explains why countries do not appear to get happier over time if they do get richer: people apply contemporary standards to their self-evaluation. In short, it provides a plausible story that is compatible with the evidence, while their thought experiment shows that its alternative – the idea that happiness has truly been left unaffected by societal changes over time – is implausible.

If applied to Sen's examples, the Epistemic Argument would illustrate that the lives of the deprived who report to be happy are not in fact happy. Their standards of judgement have adjusted, but their actual levels of happiness have not. Deprivation not only makes a person resilient in the face of bad external circumstances, but it reduces the standards that they use to evaluate their happiness. Thus, it is plausible that people who are genuinely unhappy in perpetually deprived circumstances report less unhappiness than those who have not endured it for the same length of time. The Epistemic Argument does not take the process of adaptation to genuinely improve happiness, but only to improve the perception thereof. Not only is this a plausible interpretation of Sen's examples but, if the arguments in the previous section are convincing, it is a better argument for considering why there is a gap between reported happiness and well-being than the Axiological Argument.

V. CAN THE EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT BE TACKLED EMPIRICALLY?

The Epistemic Argument turns the adaptation problem into an empirical challenge: can we really capture how happy people are? If correct, the Epistemic Argument provides reasons to be sceptical about

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this challenge. Nevertheless, even if correct, it is still an open question how bad the problem is for happiness research. It may very well be that while adaptation would distort happiness measures, the effect is small. An empirical challenge may have to be tackled by empirical technology. In fact, a potential objection to the efficacy of the Epistemic Argument is that SWB measurements have been under extensive scrutiny and that none of these tests indicate severe measurement problems with the SWB measurements.

The most common way measures are empirically tested is through construct validation. Construct validation – as it is used in psychometric practice – implies an assessment of the statistical evidence of the measures given our expectations of how these measures should behave if they were good measures of what they are aimed to measure. In the present discussion this is the concept of happiness.[56] Examples of construct validation results include high correlations of SWB measures with unemployment,[57] facial expression[58] or neurological activity.[59] Andrew Oswald and Stephan Wu construct an objective well-being measure on the basis of real-estate prices, and find it correlates well to aggregate happiness measures in the areas.[60] John Helliwell discusses the predictive value of SWB measures for suicide probability.[61] Lucas et al. show that there is a correlation between optimism and reported happiness, but the correlation is not high enough to suspect that they measure the same concept.[62]

SWB measures have done reasonably well for the standards of construct validation. If SWB were 'just noise',[63] as some sceptics in fact

[56] See Ed Diener et al., *Well-Being for Public Policy* (New York, 2009); Ruut Veenhoven, Cross-National Differences in Happiness: Cultural Measurement Bias or Effect of Culture?', *International Journal of Wellbeing* 2 (2012), pp. 616–28. See Anna Alexandrova and Daniel M. Haybron, 'Is Construct Validation Valid?', *Philosophy of Science* 83 (2016), pp. 1098–1109, for a general critical assessment of this approach in the context of SWB.

[57] Andrew E. Clark and Andrew J. Oswald, 'Unhappiness and Unemployment', *The Economic Journal* 104 (1994), pp. 648–59.

[58] Paul Ekman, Richard J. Davidson and Wallace V. Friesen, 'The Duchenne Smile: Emotional Expression and Brain Physiology: II.', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58 (1990), pp. 342–53.

[59] Heather L. Urry et al., 'Making a Life Worth Living: Neural Correlates of Well-Being', *Psychological Science* 15 (2004), pp. 367–72.

[60] Andrew J. Oswald and Stephen Wu, 'Objective Confirmation of Subjective Measures of Human Well-Being: Evidence from the USA', *Science* 327 (2010), pp. 576–9.

[61] John F. Helliwell, 'Well-Being, Social Capital and Public Policy: What's New?*', *The Economic Journal* 116 (2006), pp. C34–C45.

[62] Richard E. Lucas, Ed Diener, and Eunkook Suh, 'Discriminant Validity of Well-Being Measures', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71 (1996), pp. 616–28.

[63] Rafael Di Tella and Robert MacCulloch, 'Some Uses of Happiness Data in Economics', *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20 (2006), pp. 25–46.

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have suggested,[64] the measures would not pass a construct validation test. This should provide some confidence that these measures indeed capture something consistently. However, the adaptation problem does not imply that SWB is 'just noise'. The Epistemic Argument drives a wedge between perceived degrees of happiness and actual degrees of happiness in certain contexts. In particular, it does so when people have suffered prolonged deprivation. If the Epistemic Argument succeeds, measures of SWB capture *perceived* degrees of happiness. Similar to *actual* degrees of happiness, we would expect perceived degrees of happiness to correlate to unemployment, facial expressions, suicide probability, etc. In fact, it is likely to be correlated to actual happiness and in many cases very closely.

Unfortunately, an implication of the Epistemic Argument is that the wedge between perceived and actual degrees of happiness implies that there is a limit to the empirical testing of measurement problems. As measures of SWB cannot provide us with direct information on actual degrees of happiness, we cannot test how closely related actual happiness and measures of SWB truly are. What we would need are variables that are correlated with actual, not just perceived, happiness. It is difficult to think of variables that can fulfil this role. This implies that there is a limit to how much confidence construct validation can provide for measures of SWB.

As the extent of the problem the Epistemic Argument poses cannot be assessed empirically, its assessment must remain suggestive. On the one hand, we can worry that the problem is ubiquitous and severe. After all, there is no reason to assume that everyone applies the same standards of evaluation. Nevertheless, given that the study of SWB, and happiness economics in particular, concentrates on relationships at the group level, general scepticism may not be warranted. In lack of a specific worry that two groups being compared have adapted differently, it is likely that differences in measures due to different applied standards of assessment 'average out' on a group level.

The real worry arises when comparisons are made between groups that have presumably adapted differently and for that reason apply different standards to assess their happiness. The problem is that in these cases, the degrees of perceived happiness do not correspond to degrees of actual happiness. To provide an example, consider the finding that Latin American countries reach high levels of reported happiness

[64] Helen Johns and Paul Ormerod, *Happiness, Economics and Public Policy* (London, 2007), <https://iea.org.uk/publications/research/happiness-economics-and-public-policy>.

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despite low levels of economic prosperity.[65] Without questioning the authors' conclusions (Latin American countries may of course indeed be very happy), it follows from the Epistemic Argument that there is good reason to doubt that the observed measures of SWB can be interpreted as degrees of happiness that can be compared among countries. Growing up in Latin American countries would probably result in different degrees of adaptation than growing up in, for example, European countries. This would effectively make comparisons in actual happiness on the basis of SWB difficult.

Another crucial example pertains to the empirical results discussed in section III that have been used to argue that adaptation does not actually occur. For example, the fact that the unemployed do report low levels of SWB has been taken as evidence that adaptation does not occur. However, if the Epistemic Argument is correct, we still have good reasons to be sceptical about interpreting the degrees of perceived happiness in SWB measures as degrees of actual happiness. It may be that actual levels of happiness are more sensitive to unemployment than measures of SWB. As such, even in light of corroborating empirical findings, whether adaptation affects empirical results in such cases remains an open question.

VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

We have arrived at the following conclusion. There are two distinct adaptation arguments against the measurability of well-being by means of reported happiness. While the Axiological Argument is prominent in many philosophical reflections on the field of research, I have argued that such an interpretation of the argument would not be very convincing for someone who starts with intuitions supporting a happiness account of well-being. Moreover, the available evidence seems to render the axiological problem vacuous. The Epistemic Argument challenges the relationship between reported and actual happiness in the context of adaptation. While there is room for a denial of the problem of adaptation of the Axiological Argument, the Epistemic Argument poses a significant problem for SWB as a measure of well-being. Even if the Axiological Argument does not convince you that happiness accounts of well-being are false, the Epistemic Argument of adaptation should convince you that we cannot measure happiness in a comparable way when adaptation has occurred. Because the Epistemic

[65] Ronald Inglehart et al., 'Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective (1981–2007)', *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3 (2008), pp. 264–85; a fortiori, Carol Graham, 'Adaptation amidst Prosperity and Adversity: Insights from Happiness Studies from around the World', *The World Bank Research Observer* 26 (2011), pp. 105–37 discusses high reports of SWB in Afghanistan.

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Argument does not depend on contested philosophical intuitions, it is much more difficult to bite the bullet on the adaptation problem. The problem presents a genuine challenge to the field of research in cases in which we may doubt that people share standards of happiness. Consequently, adaptation *is* a genuine problem, limiting the confidence we should have in our ability to compare our own happiness to that of others.[66]

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