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ARTICLE

Can I get a little less life satisfaction, please?

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Abstract
In the social sciences and policymaking, life satisfaction surveys are increasingly taken as the best measure of wellbeing. However, the life satisfaction theory of wellbeing (LST) barely features in philosophers' discussions of wellbeing. This prompts two questions. First, is LST distinct from the three standard accounts of wellbeing (hedonism, desire theories, the objective list)? I argue LST is a type of desire theory. Second, is LST a plausible theory of wellbeing? I raise two serious, underappreciated objections and argue it is not. Life satisfaction surveys are useful, but we should not conclude they are the ideal measure of wellbeing.

Keywords: life satisfaction; wellbeing; wellbeing measurement; welfare economics; happiness

1. Introduction

What is it that constitutes *wellbeing*, that which is ultimately good for us, or makes our lives go well? Philosophers, following Parfit's (1984: 493–52) influential classification, often hold that there are only three plausible theories of wellbeing: *hedonism*, *desire theories* and the *objective list*. On the first, wellbeing consists in 'happiness': a positive balance of pleasant over unpleasant experiences.[1] On the second, wellbeing consists in having one's desires or preferences met. On the third, wellbeing consists in several goods, which may include pleasure and met preferences but will also consist in other 'objective' items, such as knowledge, love and friendship.

Some philosophers have suggested that this tripartite classification omits a distinct, credible fourth account of wellbeing: the *life satisfaction theory* (LST). On this, wellbeing consists in an overall evaluation of how one's life is going.

[1]I understand happiness here in a standardly Benthamite way (Bentham 1789). Philosophers sometimes use associate 'happiness' with, instead, life satisfaction or an 'emotional state' view (Feldman 2008; Haybron 2016). Such alternative uses would be confusing here as a key aim of this paper is to contrast the importance of pleasure against that of life satisfaction.

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For instance, Sumner (1996), arguably the leading proponent of such a theory, states that his book *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*:

> presents an original theory of welfare, investigating its nature and discussing its importance. It considers and rejects all notable rival theories, both objective and subjective, including hedonism and theories founded on desire or preference. The book's own theory connects welfare closely with happiness or life satisfaction. (From abstract)

Sumner thus takes his preferred account, based on "happiness or life satisfaction" as a competitor to hedonism and desire theories.

In the same vein, Tiberius (2006: 494) having set out what wellbeing is and given Parfit's three-option classification, remarks that:

> One important type of theory that this [i.e. Parfit's] taxonomy leaves out, especially given an interest in comparison to the psychological theories, is life-satisfaction theory, an example of which is L.W. Sumner's authentic happiness theory.

Heathwood (2016: 142) notes that Sumner's account is not a desire theory. Haybron (2016: 364) explicitly contrasts life satisfaction theories of wellbeing with desire theories:

> perhaps the most popular account of well-being is the desire-fulfillment theory, including such variants as the preference satisfaction account favored by most economists. Preference satisfaction is easily confused with life satisfaction, but the two notions are quite different: while life satisfaction is an *attitude*, preference satisfaction is a *state of the world.* (Emphases in original)

This essay is concerned with investigating the nature and plausibility of the life satisfaction theory ('LST') of wellbeing.[2] See Feldman (2008) for a review of philosophers who have endorsed a whole-life-satisfaction account of happiness.[3]

The possibility that a distinct, plausible account of wellbeing has been, and is, overlooked should be enough to pique philosophical interest in LST. But what makes an examination of life satisfaction particularly important is its growing traction in parts of social science and policymaking, as shown in the explosion of empirical research using measures of *subjective wellbeing*: individuals' self-rated quality of life. Subjective wellbeing is often taken to have three distinct components (Dolan *et al.* 2011; OECD 2013: 29):

[2]These are sometimes referred to as life satisfaction theories, that is, in the plural, on the grounds there are many varieties of them (Feldman 2008). For elegance, I use the singular.

[3]As Feldman observes, one might endorse a whole-life-satisfaction of 'happiness', whilst maintaining that wellbeing does not consist entirely or even partially in happiness. Nevertheless, it is the best review I know of philosophers arguing, one way or another, in favour of the importance of life satisfaction.

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- An experiential/hedonic component: how good/bad you feel.
- An evaluative/cognitive component: an overall judgement of how your life goes.
- A eudaimonic/purpose component: how meaningful you think your life is.[4]

Although there is a choice about which measure to use, the 'frontrunner' among researchers and policymakers is life satisfaction (Frijters *et al.* 2020). This captures the evaluative component, and is commonly measured by asking individuals, "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life, nowadays?" on a score of 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("completely").[5] The predominance of life satisfaction results both from pragmatic considerations – it is easy to collect and plenty of data are available – and principled ones: it is preferred by researchers as the appropriate measure of welfare (HM Treasury 2021); it is preferred, in large part, because it "sets [individuals] at the top of judgement tree" (Frijters *et al.* 2020: 141). The UK's Treasury has recently approval economic appraisal in terms of wellbeing and uses life satisfaction as the main measure (HM Treasury 2021); other nations are likely to follow suit.

If the life satisfaction theory is the correct account of wellbeing, then those advocating for the use of life satisfaction scores as the metric for welfare are presumably off to the races. If it is not, such efforts will be going, at least to some extent, in the wrong direction. We should want to know which it is.

To begin this task, we need to recognize the existing confusions between the meaning of the terms 'happiness' and 'life satisfaction' as well as why we might care about one rather than the other.

Sometimes 'happiness' and 'life satisfaction' are used synonymously. The World Happiness Report, which produces the famous international ranking that the Nordic countries consistently top, bases this on a life satisfaction measure, *not* a hedonic measure of subjective wellbeing (Helliwell *et al.* 2023); given 'happiness' in ordinary language seems more closely associated to a feeling, rather than a judgement, the Report is a misnomer: less catchily, it should be the World *Life Satisfaction* Report.[6] Other times, 'happiness' and 'life satisfaction' are used antonymously, where (measures of) happiness is explicitly contrasted with (measures of) life satisfaction (OECD 2013). In this paper, I use 'happiness' in this conventional sense (referring to positive experiences, those that feel good; 'unhappiness' as the converse) and thus as conceptually distinct from life satisfaction (overall evaluations of life).

What's more, some researchers advocate for the use of life satisfaction scores on the grounds that hedonism is correct and life satisfaction scores are good at

[4]I note the 'eudaimonic/purpose' component in subjective wellbeing discourse bears modest resemblance to Aristotle's own conception of eudaimonia. Aristotle thought 'eudaimonia' (literally: 'having good spirits' but often translated as 'flourishing') was "rational activity in accordance with virtue" (Nicomachean Ethics, I.7, 1098a16–18). I doubt Aristotle would have thought someone believing they lived a 'meaningful' life is much evidence they are truly living a virtuous life. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I include a comment to this effect.

[5]In contrast, an example of experiential measure would be the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM); this asks respondents to divide what they did yesterday into segments (like scenes from a movie) and recall how they felt during each, offering an aggregate account of happiness (Kahneman *et al.* 2004).

[6]See also the UK's What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which puts both affective and evaluative measures under the umbrella of 'hedonic' https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/sense-of-purpose-covid/

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capturing happiness (as I use the term here);[7] Others, however, opt for life satisfaction because they reject hedonism and take life evaluations to be central to wellbeing.[8]

These confusions have been noted by philosophers, who have pointed out that happiness and life satisfaction are conceptually different, and differently motivated, mental states, and who have also sometimes strenuously argued against the view that life satisfaction is what ultimately matters for wellbeing (see Haybron 2016 and its references). However, in my experience of talking to social scientists and policymakers interested in empirical subjective wellbeing research, they are relatively unmoved by, or unaware of, these philosophical concerns; I do not intend to retread those coals here. Rather, I aim to move the conversation on.

This paper makes two main contributions. The first is about what distinguishes life satisfaction from Parfit's 'Big Three' theories of wellbeing (hedonism, desire theories, the objective list). In the literature, the standard move has been to contrast life satisfaction theories with hedonism. While I agree with this distinction, accepting it is not sufficient to show that life satisfaction theories are also distinct from the two remaining Big Three theories. I argue LST should be understood as a type of desire theory – specifically what Parfit (1984) called the *global desire theory* ('GDT') of wellbeing – rather than as a fourth, unique theory of wellbeing. As far as I am aware, this possibility has not been considered before.

The second contribution is a novel evaluation of life satisfaction theories. I initially consider what Haybron (2016) takes to be the two most serious objections to LST. I argue they should not trouble those sympathetic to the view. I then develop and press two different objections. The first is *whimsicality*: LST implies subjects can determine how well or badly their lives are going for any reason and at any time; wellbeing cannot plausibly be so subjective. Haybron (2011, 2016) mentions this is passing, but I bring out its force. The second is LST leaves us with *too few subjects*: if wellbeing consists in an overall evaluation of life, then those who cannot make whole-life evaluations – such as children and some animals – are not welfare subjects and nothing can go better or worse for them. This too has been noted, but seemingly not adequately appreciated (Sumner 1996; de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014; Heathwood 2016). In light of these two objections, LST is not a credible account of wellbeing; in other words, if our concern is wellbeing, it's unclear why life evaluations matter in themselves. This is not to deny they may matter as indicators or causes of welfare.

Before we dive in, four caveats.

First, the objections I raise to the plausibility of LST are largely independent of whether or not it is a distinct theory of wellbeing. While understanding whether and how LST is distinct is of independent philosophical interest, this 'intellectual housekeeping' is important to more clearly identify the nature of LST and evaluate

[7]For example Dolan and White (2007: 72) claim the importance of both life satisfaction and affective measures of SWB (and not just the latter) is "generally grounded in hedonistic philosophies".

[8]For example Helliwell *et al.* (2015: 19) "we attach fundamental importance to the evaluations that people make of their own lives". Clark *et al.* (2018: 4) argue for life satisfaction as the measure of wellbeing, saying the most important reason is that it is "democratic – it allows individuals to assess their lives on the basis of what they consider important to themselves".

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it. Readers unmoved by the first part need not assume they will be uninterested by the second.

Second, in this paper, I only argue *against* one specific theory of wellbeing, rather than in favour of one as being ultimately correct. A judgement about which theory, in any philosophical debate, is most plausible is ultimately a comparative one: all theories will have some things to be said for and against them, so raising problems with one is not sufficient, in itself, to show that that theory is hopeless. In this case, however, it does not seem especially useful, or necessary, to undertake this sort of comparative work: there is already a substantial literature evaluating the three standardly-construed theories of wellbeing (see e.g. Crisp 2008 and Fletcher 2015, and references in each). Hence, my aim is merely to better place LST into the existing literature. I must leave it to readers to draw their own conclusions, although I sketch what those conclusions might be, for different readers, at the close of the paper.

Third, we must separate the question of whether the LST is the correct account of wellbeing from how useful it is, in practice, to *measure* life satisfaction via self-reports. Even if the LST is implausible, it would not follow that life satisfaction data are useless. I assume they capture something important about how well our lives are going; even imperfect measures are useful. My clam is only that life satisfaction surveys should not be considered the ideal measure of human welfare, the final methodological stop. As the science develops, we should be and remain motivated to (1) look for a better measure and (2) work out the priorities given each measure and (3) evaluate how much the choice of measure matters. It is very possible that, if we aim to increase people's wellbeing as cost-effectively as possible, then decision-makers committed to life satisfaction would adopt different policies from those committed to happiness. I know of no such analysis to date which explores how the priorities would change use of different measures of subjective wellbeing – hardly surprising, when work has only recently begun to determine them using life satisfaction data (Clark *et al.* 2018; Frijters *et al.* 2020; Frijters and Krekel 2021; HM Treasury 2021). Part of my motivation for writing this is to encourage such exploration. We should not often let the perfect be the enemy of the good. My claim is that life satisfaction scores may be good but, *contra* the direction of current thinking, they are not perfect, and we should recognise this. I invite those who believe life satisfaction scores are the ideal measure of wellbeing to (better) defend this view. While I am sympathetic to hedonism, and therefore to the hedonic measures of subjective wellbeing, I do not seriously advance those claims here.

Fourth, I am leaving to the side the important, but separate, methodological issues of how well life satisfaction – or other components of subjective wellbeing – can be measured. These have been discussed at length elsewhere (Diener *et al.* 2013; OECD 2013; Fabian 2022; Benjamin *et al.* 2023). I am interested solely in moral significance of the latent construct itself. In other words, the question is this: regardless of whether we can measure life satisfaction, how much does it matter?

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 motivates LST and emphasizes its distinctiveness to hedonism. Section 3 argues there is an unrecognized similarity between LST and Parfit's global desire theory of wellbeing. Section 4 briefly examines what Haybron regards as the two strongest objections to LST. Section 5 presses two different, more serious objections. Section 6 concludes.

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2. Happiness and Life Satisfaction

We want to investigate the claim that LST is a plausible theory of wellbeing distinct from hedonism, desire theories, and the objective list. Although, as noted, happiness and life satisfaction are often conflated or taken as identical, the easiest way to understand the distinct appeal of LST is in contrast with hedonism. Let's start there, before comparing LST to the other two theories in the next section.

Haybron (2007: 104) writes (emphasis added):

> We seem to care about life satisfaction mainly as an evaluation: as an ostensibly authoritative verdict on the overall quality of one's life. It seems important whether our lives go well by our standards, and what better measure of this than our own judgments? *Note that life satisfaction and pleasure can diverge quite radically, and in fact this is part of life satisfaction's appeal*: even dysthymic philosophers could be satisfied with their lives, and thus perhaps achieve a measure of well-being, insofar as they see their pursuits as worthwhile and value such things more than pleasure. Conversely, small-town residents might sometimes be dissatisfied with their lives, longing for the fast life of the city, despite having favorable emotional conditions and leading pleasant lives.

The intuition that one could be happy, but dissatisfied with life, or vice versa, is easy to grasp, as is the intuition that one might take either of them to be of primary (or sole) importance for wellbeing. However, it is worth going into slightly greater depth to bring out the differences.

Crisp (2006) points out that any adequate theory of wellbeing has two parts. First, the *enumerative*: which thing (or things) constitutes wellbeing? Second, the *explanatory*: what is it about that thing (or things) that makes it good for us?

Hedonism, classically understood, combines e*numerative hedonism* – wellbeing consists in happiness, that is, those experiences that are overall pleasurable – with *explanatory hedonism* – it is the intrinsic pleasurableness of these experiences that makes them good for us. To highlight a contrast, someone who held that wellbeing consists in pleasurable experiences, but that pleasurable experiences were good *because* they fulfilled our nature, would be an enumerative hedonist but *not* an explanatory hedonist – they would be an explanatory perfectionist.

What are the two parts of LST? We could call *enumerative life satisfactionism* the view that wellbeing consists in a judgement of how one's life is going overall (more on this in a moment). What is the explanatory part? In the philosophical literature, the only explanation on offer seems to be *subjectivism*: the view that you get to decide what makes your life go well. Sumner (1996: 160), a proponent of the life satisfaction theory, writes:

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

We might alternatively call subjectivism *agent sovereignty*, the view Arneson (1999: 116) defines as "that what is good for each person is entirely determined by

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that very person's evaluative perspective".[9] Thus, the two parts of LST seem to be enumerative life satisfactionism and *explanatory subjectivism*.

Now, hedonism and life satisfaction theories are both naturally understood as *mental state* theories of wellbeing, in the sense that wellbeing consists, in some important sense, in one's mental states – as opposed to events in the world outside the head (Haybron 2016). However, they take different mental states to matter. An intricacy with the mental state of being satisfied with one's life is that it seems to comprise both an evaluative/cognitive aspect, the judgement, and a hedonic/affective aspect, a pleasant feeling of satisfaction. These could, in theory, come apart: you could judge your life to be going well but have no associated pleasant feeling (Feldman 2010). In practice, they seem inseparable.

Importantly, while both the hedonist and life satisfaction theorist will likely agree that this mental state of being satisfied with life is intrinsically good for our wellbeing, they will give a different explanation as to *why* this is the case. For the hedonist, being satisfied is good because and to the extent that it *feels* good; the positive feeling of being satisfied with life is, however, just one among many pleasant mental states, and not special in any way.

For the life satisfaction theorist, being satisfied is good because wellbeing is determined by the person's judgements of how their life is going; this shows that they have made a favourable assessment. The life satisfaction theorist cannot sensibly suggest that being satisfied with life is good because it feels good. Why? If they did, then they would hold enumerative life satisfactionism and explanatory hedonist and this is an implausible conjunction: the view would be that welfare consists in life evaluations (enumerative life satisfactionism) but that life evaluations matter because they feel pleasurable, and pleasure is intrinsically good for us (explanatory hedonism). But if pleasure is intrinsically good for us, surely welfare consists in all our pleasurable experiences, not just the pleasurable experiences associated with life evaluations. Hence, for motivational consistency, accepting explanatory hedonism pushes us to also accept evaluative hedonism. But if we accept both explanatory and evaluative hedonism, then we are back to accepting full-blown hedonism, not the life satisfaction theory!

This is why, as we saw in the Haybron quote earlier, to understand the appeal of life satisfaction as distinct from happiness, life satisfaction seems to matter as a judgement, not as a feeling.[10] It makes it apparent that the case for LST rests on the plausibility of subjectivism – not on whether pleasure is good for us. I challenge subjectivism later (§5).

From this, we can now see the problem with the view that, on hedonist grounds, life satisfaction scores should be the primary or sole measure of wellbeing. The happiness we feel about our life as a whole is only one of our mental states.

[9]Note Arneson (1999) does not specifically relate this to the LST, but it does capture the spirit of it. For those who explain the justification for life satisfaction's importance is subjectivism, see Tiberius (2006) and Haybron (2016). For further expressions of the importance of subjectivism, but which also don't tie it specifically to the life satisfaction theory, see Railton (1986) and Hawkins (2010).

[10]Note that Sumner's (1996: 145) concept of 'having a happy life' "in its fullest form has both a cognitive and an affective component". I am unclear how to interpret this. If Sumner accepts explanatory hedonism and explanatory subjectivism, he has a hybrid, dual-explanation account of wellbeing. I am not concerned with exegesis here. My main aim is evaluating whether we should accept explanatory subjectivism.

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Hedonists will want to capture all our mental states, not just a subset. Life satisfaction scores may be a good proxy for all our states of happiness but are less ideal than the hedonic measures – those which seek to directly elicit how good/bad our experiences are. As evidence shows that measures of happiness and life satisfaction give non-identical results (Boarini *et al.* 2012; Deaton and Stone 2013; Han and Kaiser 2023), the claim that life satisfaction scores are a good practical proxy for happiness must be understood as tentative.

3. Life Satisfaction and Desire

That should suffice to distinguish LST from hedonism. I'll quickly contrast it with the objective list, then argue it is really a desire theory in disguise.

The differentiation from the objective list is straightforward: on the objective list, there are, standardly, multiple goods that constitute wellbeing (we could call this *enumerative pluralism*) and at least some of these goods are 'objective' in the sense they are good for us whether or not we judge they are – that is, it accepts *explanatory objectivism* and rejects explanatory subjectivism. We need say no more about the objective list.

How do life satisfaction theories differ from desire theories of wellbeing? *Prima facie*, they are *about* different things: life satisfaction theories are *about* being satisfied with your life; desire theories are *about* getting what you want. Case closed? Not so fast. The literature on desire theories is rich with arguments over which desires count (Crisp 2008; Heathwood 2016, 2017). Is it all our desires? What about ill-informed desires? Malicious desires? Base desires? Pointless desires? Remote desires? And so on. It's not relevant, for our purposes, to state or discuss all these. The point is that there are many types of desire theory. The claim I'll advance is that life satisfaction theories bear an uncanny and seemingly unrecognized similarity to one type of desire theory, namely the *global desire theory*. To explain that theory, it will help to introduce the *summative desire theory* first.

On the summative desire theory, all your desires count and how your life goes overall is the product of the extent to which each desire is fulfilled and the intensity of each desire. Parfit's (1984: 497) objection to the summative theory is that it gets the wrong answer in the following case:

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

Parfit observes the summative theory implies your life goes better if you become addicted in the manner just described: you get more desires and those are fulfilled. Yet, intuitively, our lives are worse in *Addiction*. To explain this, Parfit draws a

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distinction between *local* and *global* desires. A desire is "global if it is about some part of one's life considered as a whole, or is about one's whole life" (Parfit 1984: 497); hence, local desires are those not about one's whole life, or not about a part of one's life when one's life is considered as a whole.

By contrast, on a *global desire theory* (GDT), only our global desires count. GDT has the resources to explain why *Addiction* is worse for us: when we think about our lives as a whole, we do not desire to become addicted; we judge that life is worse, overall, for us. Thus, on this theory, it is natural to say our higher-order desires (our desires about our desires) 'trump' our lower-order ones: although we want to take the drug – a first-order desire – we don't *want* to want to take the drug – a second-order desire – and what matters for our wellbeing is if the higher-order desires are met.[11]

From this, we can see how GDT, like LST, honours explanatory subjectivism: individuals are the authorities on what makes their life go well. What about the enumerative aspect of wellbeing – what wellbeing consists in? Global desires are those desires about our whole lives. Life satisfaction is a judgement of how well your whole life is going. But how else can I judge how my life is going except by forming a view on how I desire it to go overall, then comparing that to how it is actually going? Hence, on GDT, how you judge your life to be going overall seems similarly central to determining your wellbeing. Hence, it is unclear what distinguishes GDT from LST when we look at either the enumerative or explanatory parts of the theories. GDT and LST may have different names, but this seems to be a distinction without a difference.

A natural worry here is that something has been overlooked. What might the distinction be? Earlier (§1), I quoted Haybron, who suggests the distinction is that LST is a mental state theory while desire theories are not. Similarly, he says: "Crudely, we might say that preference [i.e. desire] satisfaction involves actually getting what you want, while life satisfaction involves thinking you're getting what you want" (Haybron 2016: 365).

This is, however, too crude, because desire theories admit of mental state and non-mental state flavours. For instance, Heathwood (2006) has argued that the most plausible version of the desire satisfaction theory is *subjective desire satisfaction*, where wellbeing consists in believing one is getting what one wants – this is a mental state theory. Someone might try to insist that the distinction between GDT and LST is that the former is not a mental state theory and the latter is. This would be an awkward stipulation given that Sumner (1996), the arch-proponent of the life satisfaction theory, opts for a kind of non-mental state version: he insists there is an information constraint on wellbeing: someone who is satisfied with life only because they are incorrectly informed is not doing well (we return to this shortly). What's more, whether the stipulation was granted, both theories would still be desire theories of wellbeing with wellbeing consisting in the global desires. Finally, this distinction seems of little practical importance; at least, the objections I raise later will apply equally whether aimed at a mental state or a non-mental version of the global desire theory.

[11]I am not interested in the intricacies of orders of desires here. All we need is a rough and ready conception that we can make cognitive evaluations of our desires.

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I am not aware of other arguments in the literature explicitly distinguishing life satisfaction and global desire theories. Although Sumner states his theory is not a desire theory, and provides some criticism of desire theories, he doesn't contrast his preferred account with the global desire theory, so perhaps he never considered the possibility (which is puzzling, given he references Parfit (1984), who discusses the global desire theory).

What about Tiberius (2006), quoted above, who supposes Sumner's authentic happiness/life satisfaction theory is not part of Parfit's standard three-theory taxonomy? She also does not specify what she takes the distinction to consist in.

Taking a step back, perhaps the focus on whether and how the life satisfaction theory is distinct from hedonism has led to the following possibility being overlooked: that life satisfaction theories are a type of (admittedly not-well-known) desire theory in disguise, the global desire theory, and hence not a distinct alternative to the Parfitian Big Three theories of wellbeing. It is difficult to prove a negative. I do not claim to have shown there could not be any meaningful difference between LST and GDT. I encourage those who believe there is one to set it out.

That concludes my analysis of the nature of the LST. We now move to investigating its plausibility. For brevity, as I consider LST and GDT to be practically identical and motivated by subjectivism, I will generally just refer to LST or subjectivism.

4. Life Satisfaction and its Discontents

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

According to Haybron (2016) there are two main problems for LST. First, evaluating one's life involves a global judgement of how well one's life measures up to one's standards. Yet:

> It is doubtful that most individuals have well-defined notions of what matters to them and how to add it all up in a single judgment: life is full of apples and oranges, and it is likely to be substantially arbitrary, even from the agent's own perspective, how to add up all the good and bad things in her life. [. . .] [T]here's no reason to expect people to know how to make such a judgment. As a result, any judgment about the overall quality of one's life is bound to be substantially arbitrary. (Haybron 2016: 366)

Specifically, then, the concern here is that it's unclear which principled procedure individuals should use to judge their lives. However, if we accept subjectivism, this concern is moot: because individuals are the authorities on how their lives are going, they can evaluate their lives however they want – that is the point. As they would say

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in Silicon Valley, this is a feature, not a bug. Hence, this objection fails to account for the motivation for the view.

Haybron claims the second major issue is that:

> Life satisfaction embodies a judgment, not about how well one's life is going, but about whether one's life is good *enough*: is it satisfactory? It is doubtful that most people have very clear ideas about how good their lives must be to count as satisfactory, or that anyone should care very much if they did. In short, life satisfaction is a gauge, not of the goodness of a life, but of the good-enoughness of a life. A *person might reasonably be satisfied with what even he regards as a life that's going badly* – things could be worse, he might think, so why complain? (Haybron 2016: 366, emphasis in original)

It is unclear what, precisely, the problem is here, or whether any of them bite. Is it that individuals do not know how to judge when they are overall satisfied or dissatisfied? If it is, it merits the same response as that just given to the first issue: the appeal of LST is that individuals decide how to draw these boundaries.

Is the concern that people's judgements of life satisfaction lack granularity: they treat them as a 'pass/fail' on whether they are overall satisfied or not, rather than as a manner of degree? This is an empirical claim and it is false: people are able to answer life satisfaction questions on a 0–10 scale: response rates to these in surveys are about 96–99% (Bonikowska *et al.* 2014). What's more, different scores predict different behaviour – e.g. people are more likely to leave their job if they had previously expressed a higher rather than low level of dissatisfaction with it (Kaiser and Oswald 2022).

If the concern is that someone judges their life as overall satisfactory even though they regard it as going badly, that is simply inconsistent on LST: they would be judging their life as going well and badly simultaneously.[12] Someone might *feel* satisfied but judge their life as going badly, but that is no threat: as noted, the appeal of LST is that our judgements can come apart from our feelings.

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

5. Two Objections

We have seen that, on LST, wellbeing consists in a judgement of how your life is going, according to your own standards, and the explanation for this is subjectivism: individuals' judgements are authoritative on what makes their life go well. While this subjectivity is what makes LST distinctive and, *prima facie*, appealing, it opens the view up to some serious objections. The next two subsections consider one of these apiece.

[12]As an empirical matter, the concern that life evaluation surveys are disconnected from respondent's prudential judgements seems undermotivated. In the case of the Cantril Ladder, a standard question of this type, it asks respondents to score their life from a "best possible life for you" to "worst possible life for you". I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing this to my attention.

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5.1 Whimsicality

Consider the following:

> *Philosopher, King*: suppose that, yesterday, you decided that all that matters is that you had studied some philosophy, which you have. You conclude your life could not be going better. Today comes. You've changed your mind. You decide the only thing that matters to you is being the King of England. Unfortunately for you, you are not the King of England. You conclude your life could not be going worse.

According to the life satisfaction theory of wellbeing, however well you think your life is going, you're right. Your view on what makes your life go well is authoritative – you're the boss. The implication of this is that you really did have maximum wellbeing yesterday and minimum wellbeing today, even though nothing about your life has changed except your opinion on what constitutes your wellbeing.

Life satisfaction theories thus imply an implausible whimsicality to wellbeing: that our level of wellbeing can change by any amount and for any reason because our opinions do. Our opinions about how our lives go presumably matter somehow, but intuitively they cannot be all that matters. Interestingly, Sumner (1996: 159) accepts that we can alter our life-evaluations without restriction but does not explore how this may be problematic: "When we reassess our lives in retrospect, and from a superior epistemic vantage point, there is *no right answer to the question of what our reaction should be* – that is surely up to us" (emphasis in original). Haybron (2016: 365) mentions that "Opinions don't seem that important" but does not press the point or draw out the implications.

An immediate implication of whimsicality is that, if LST is correct, wellbeing has become trivial: everyone can have whatever wellbeing level they wish, including maximum wellbeing, with no more effort than wishing it upon themselves. The triviality charge does not apply to hedonism. Simply wishing you were happy does not make you so. You need to genuinely be happy. Objective list theories are similarly resistant. Suppose wellbeing consists, inter alia, in love and knowledge. Hoping you have those will not make it such that you do.

Further, the objection does not seem to apply to every other type if desire theory.[13] On the *rational* desire theory, what is good for you consists in what you would desire if you were fully informed of all the (non-moral) facts and given sufficient time to deliberate (Sobel 1994). The classic objection to this theory is Rawl's (1971) *grass-counter*: what if someone's rational desires were to count blades on the grass of Harvard lawn? Would their life go well if they achieved that desire? Intuitively, no. Although the rational desire theory faces the grass-counter objection, it does not face that of whimsicality: your rational desires will be stable and non-changeable, because they are, by specification, what you *would* choose if given all the facts and time to think; hence, there are no new facts or additional reasons to consider that would produce a change. But, on LST, you – rather than a rational,

[13]On the summative desire theory, your life goes well if you realize the desires you have, not those you want to have. This makes it open to the addiction objection, but not that of whimsicality. I won't attempt an exhaustive assessment of desire theories.

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fully informed, hypothetical version of you – are the authority on what makes your life go well. And *you* can change your mind.[14]

Now, I expect advocates of LST will think this is much too quick. How might such a person respond?

Let's get a first, unpromising reply out of the way: this doesn't matter because people won't, in reality, be whimsical.

This reply won't do for two reasons. One is that we are interested in which theory of wellbeing is theoretically adequate. Thus, it is sufficient to raise theoretical problems.[15] Many have objected to hedonism on the grounds that it implies it would be good for us to plug into a Nozickian Experience Machine, a Matrix-like device that generates a pleasant, simulated reality (Nozick 1974). It is hardly satisfactory for the hedonist to claim that such a machine does not (yet) exist.[16] The supposed subjectivist who says "the individual's point of view is authoritative on how their life is going" then adds the caveat, "oh, but only if they make the right judgements in practice" has, with that caveat, undermined subjectivism: clearly, individuals are not sovereign after all.

The other is that, even if people aren't whimsical, they *should be* because it presents an easy route to higher wellbeing. Even those sceptical of life satisfaction should, in the spirit of a Pascalian Wager, decide their lives are going maximally well: this is only a small cognitive effort and, if the life satisfaction theory is true, they would suddenly be living their best life. Indeed, the strangeness of subjectivism is that it implies that, to live the best life for you, there is *no need* to change any of the conditions of your life. If you alter your life's desires such that you are already realizing all of them, that is sufficient, on subjectivism, for maximum welfare. Don't worry about finding a better job, falling in love, getting fitter, and so on – simply change how you *think* about your life. Absurdly, almost no effort is needed to achieve maximum welfare for yourself. As noted, hedonism does not suffer from this problem. Thinking positively can, and often does, make us happier; many positive psychology interventions focus on cognitive reframing, such as practising gratitude. However, positive thinking does not, in practice, give us maximum happiness and so, on hedonism, maximum welfare. Our cognitive efforts to judge our lives as going as well as possible may improve our welfare but, intuitively, they do not automatically result in us having maximum welfare.

The second reply is to deny that people can, even in theory, be whimsical and have it alter their wellbeing. "Surely", one might say, "you aren't allowed to simply change your mind like that. Individuals are the authorities on how their lives are going, but there must still be *some rules* about how to assess one's life". Indeed, Tiberius (2006) supposes that a 'sophisticated' version of the theory will have some restrictions and that Sumner's is such a version.

[14]Note the rational desire does not honour subjectivism: it's not your desires that matter, but those of some hypothetical, rational, omniscient version of you which is definitely *not* the real you. To press, suppose the rational you would want to go to the opera, but the real you does not. Is it good for you to go? See section 5.2 on hypotheticalism.

[15]This comment may seem facile to philosophers but, in conversations with social scientists, it's often been put to me that a moral theory only needs to get the 'right answer' in practice, e.g. utilitarianism is true generally, but if you face a real opportunity to kill one and save five, it 'becomes' false.

[16]N.B. Sizer (2010) argues LST is equally vulnerable to the Experience Machine objection.

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There are a few ways the subjectivist can develop this reply. The difficulty is how to blunt the force of the objection without accidentally abandoning the view. After all, if individuals are the authorities on how their lives are going, how could there be any restrictions on how they can assess their lives? If there are restrictions, they are not the authorities over their wellbeing. If they are not the authorities, subjectivism is false.

An initial thought is that it does not seem so problematic to insist on *procedural* or logical constraints, those about how the person reasons, even though it does seem incoherent to insist on *substantive* constraints, those about the conclusions they reach about which things – e.g. happiness or success – individuals use to determine their overall evaluation of life. For instance, one might insist individuals cannot judge their lives as going well because they believe something is both true and not true. It seems reasonable to claim that, even if individuals are sovereign over how their lives are going, they are not sovereign over the rules of logic.[17]

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

> it requires that a subject's endorsement of the conditions of her life, or her experience of them as satisfying or fulfilling, be authentic. The conditions for authenticity, in turn, are twofold: information and autonomy. (Sumner 1996: 139)

For our purposes, we do not need a deep understanding of the *information* and *autonomy* conditions. The following should suffice. Regarding information, the idea is that if subjects are satisfied with their lives, but they would not be if they had some further information, then their lives are not, in fact, going well for them after all. Sumner gives the example that a person who is satisfied because they live in serene ignorance about their partner's philandering, but would be deeply dissatisfied if they learnt the truth, is not living a high wellbeing life. Regarding autonomy, Sumner's view is that the person's endorsement of her life must be truly her own, in the sense that she formed that endorsement in what he calls the "normal" way – that is, without being manipulated. We might grant that the authenticity constraint is a procedural – rather than substantive – constraint and only the latter is incompatible with subjectivism.

However, these procedural constraints do not block whimsicality. It is still left wide open to individuals to choose what matters to them, and to change their mind about this at any moment. I might decide my life is going well for some conventional reason, such as that I've climbed Mount Everest. But, equally, I might decide my life is going well because Paris is the capital of France. So, although Haybron (2007: 105) protests that "even the most ardent subjectivist will want to grant that there's

[17]I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me towards DeYoung and Tiberius (2022) and the concept of 'appropriate' values, that is, values that do not have conflicting goals. However, as I elaborate below, this won't block the whimsicality concern, as what generates that is that subjectivism allows individuals to base their welfare on any (single) item, for that to change over time and without restriction, and thus for their welfare levels to change wildly as a result.

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something wrong with someone who views her life favorably on patently irrelevant grounds, say because three is a prime number", it's not clear *how* the subjectivist could argue this is wrong without appealing to substantive constraints about what wellbeing can be. Much as Henry Ford once supposedly quipped about his cars that customers can have "any colour they want – so long as it's black", subjectivists who state that individuals are the authorities on what makes their lives go well – but only if they pick the 'right answers' – have ultimately denied that individuals are the authorities and thus jettison their stated view.

To respond to this, subjectivists could add a *sincerity* condition: you can't merely wish something matters to you, you must truly believe it does. Appealing to sincerity generates its own problems. What if someone sincerely believes their life goes well if and only if Paris is the capital of France? Is it now more plausible their life is going well? Intuitions may differ, but it hardly seems so (cf. the *grass-counter*). What's more, a sincerity condition appears to leave individuals hostage to their actual desires about their life, not the desires they *wish* they had. Consider:

> *Vestigial beliefs*. A man grows up in a deeply religious family and absorbs the belief that homosexuality is immoral. The man turns out to be gay but, try as he might, he cannot shake the belief that his actions are deeply wrong, even though he would like to believe otherwise.

This is not a merely hypothetical case. Tiberius (2018) writes about John Gustave-Wrathall, a gay man and member of the Mormon church.[18] It seems exactly the sort of case where the person should be able to conclude their life is going well. Yet, applying the sincerity conditions implies it goes badly. What's more, if my actual/vestigial/deep beliefs are authoritative for my wellbeing, that means my more cognitive/reflective beliefs are not. This seems to generate a dilemma for the subjectivist. Given my deep/vestigial beliefs are the one I can't control, if they are authoritative on my wellbeing, in what meaningful sense can I be the authority on my wellbeing? If these deep beliefs aren't authoritative, we seem to lack a way to block the implication that I can whimsically decide for my wellbeing to consist in anything – including that my life goes best iff Paris is the capital of France.

It does not seem that life satisfaction theories can escape the charge of whimsicality. What is the root of the problem? We can adapt Plato's Euthyphro dilemma and pose the following question: is my life going well because I judge it to be going well, or do I judge it to be going well because it is?

The life satisfaction theorist accepts subjectivism and thus the first reading: you judging your life to go well is what causes it to go well. On the second reading, our judgements are reflective, or indicative, of how our life is going: we have pre-existing ideas of what makes our life go well, and our judgements are an assessment of how well we measure up to those. On this latter reading, I alter my judgements if the facts change, but altering my judgements does not change the facts. By analogy, I should think I am tall because I am tall; believing I am tall does not change my height. Hence, it seems the only way to avoid whimsicality is to accept the second reading and thus reject subjectivism. I conclude we should reject subjectivism. This opens

[18]I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

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the question of what wellbeing is, if wellbeing does not consist in whatever each individual decides for themselves; that is not a question I can consider here.

5.2 Too Few Subjects

Suppose wellbeing consists in an overall judgement of how one's life is going. Not all sentient creatures seem capable of making such judgements – for example, small children, many non-human animals, and humans with cognitive disabilities. These entities are therefore not welfare subjects – that is, they cannot have wellbeing at all, and their lives cannot go better or worse for them. This is absurd. Therefore, the life satisfaction theory is false. The life satisfaction theory faces the *Too Few Subjects* objection: as the name implies, it leaves us with too few welfare subjects.

To highlight this absurdity, consider:

> *Fido on fire*. You love your dog, but it's winter and you are cold. You decide to set your prize pooch aflame. Fido wails and howls and clearly seems to suffer. However, Fido does not judge his life, as a whole, as going worse, because he is not capable of such a judgement.

If LST is right, then Fido is not worse off when you incinerate him because nothing can make Fido better or worse off.

Now, Sumner is aware that the cognitive nature of life satisfaction will rule out some sentient creatures as being welfare subjects: "Clearly this sort of prudential stocktaking is possible only for creatures capable of assessing their lives as wholes, either at a time or over some extended period of time" (Sumner 1996: 145–6).[19]

He goes on:

> This [i.e., the life satisfaction theory, but which Sumner sometimes calls the 'happiness theory'] leaves some important kinds of creature on the periphery: all non-sentient animal species (as well as plants), human embryos and fetuses up to a certain stage of prenatal development, and persons who have permanently lost the capacity for conscious awareness. The happiness theory entails that none of these creatures has a welfare of its own; no change in their condition could make them either better or worse off. (Sumner 1996: 178–9)

Sumner makes comments that, prima facie, head off the worries I have just raised by tying being a welfare subject to having sentience:

> For the happiness theory, the minimal wherewithal for having welfare is being a subject who is capable of being satisfied or unsatisfied by the conditions of one's life [. . .] the *sine qua non* is the base-line ability to experience one's life, in the living of it, as agreeable or disagreeable. The most primitive form of this ability is the capacity for enjoyment and suffering, or for pleasure and pain. If we call this capacity sentience then we may say that on the happiness theory the

[19]Strawson (2004) argues that people do not, and should not, life a 'narrative life'; hence it's unclear if human adults would engage in the 'stocktaking' required to be welfare subjects.

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> class of core welfare subjects is populated by all sentient creatures. (Sumner 1996: 178)

The problem is that sentience seems necessary, but not sufficient, for the ability to make whole-life evaluations. We can concede that sentience is necessary and sufficient for being able to experience pleasure and pain and to have attitudes towards parts of one's life. Recalling the earlier terminology, sentience is thus sufficient for local desires. But local desires are not sufficient for having global desires: to make an overall evaluation about one's whole life seems to require some further cognitively complex steps. It appears to require not only a sense of self and one's life over time, but also the capacity to determine standards by which you want your life to go, and then to take all the various bits and pieces of your life in aggregate to make an overall judgement. We can accept that dogs are sentient. But do they, or can they, ever think about what a good life would be for them and how closely their life matches up with that? That is hard to believe.

I am not the first to raise such a concern. For instance, de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2014: 221) writing about the global desire theory – which I have suggested is equivalent to the life satisfaction theory – comment that it "gives us no way of saying what is good for beings who lack the intellectual capacity to envisage their existence over extended periods of time". We might understand de Lazari-Radek and Singer as framing the situation as one where things *can* be good or bad for dogs, but that the subjectivist theorist needs to fill out their theory a bit more and tell us how welfare works for dogs. This doesn't seem right. If welfare requires, as Sumner puts it, "prudential stocktaking" then the straightforward implication is that creatures who can't do this have *no* welfare – and not that they have welfare, but we don't know what it is (yet). Indeed, asking the subjectivist to fill in the details for 'non-stocktaking' lives would be incoherent, hopeless: the whole point of subjectivism is that individuals get to decide for themselves what makes their lives go well. No one else can decide for them. That includes the subjectivist theorist. The would-be subjectivist who says, "look, let me tell you what makes life go well for *those* beings" has abandoned their view.

How can the subjectivist respond? I consider four moves.

The first is to insist that all sentient creatures can make overall assessments of their lives. This does not seem credible. Do we really think infants and all animals can judge their lives overall? As a quick test, we might suppose that self-awareness is a necessary condition for being able to make an overall evaluation of one's life: if a creature lacks a sense of itself, it cannot have a view on how its life is going. As a first pass, being able to recognize oneself in a mirror seems a good test of self-awareness. Yet very few animals have passed the 'mirror self-recognition' test. Those that have passed include great apes, dolphins and elephants (Pachniewska 2015). Those that have failed include several species of primates, giant pandas and sea lions (Delfour and Marten 2001; Ma *et al.* 2015). Hence, assessed this way, subjectivism would deny that even many of the most seemingly cognitively advanced sentient creatures are welfare subjects. It is admittedly unclear what cognitive apparatus is required to make an overall life evaluation, but this hardly helps the subjectivist: presumably, they need to show all sentient creatures have it, not that it's uncertain which do.

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The second option is supposing that what matters is how an entity *would* judge its life, not how or whether it *actually* does. Feldman (2008) distinguishes between actualist and hypotheticalist life satisfaction theories: on the former, you actually have to assess your life to determine how well it goes; on the latter, your life satisfaction is determined by what you would conclude if you thought about it. If the subjectivist goes for the former, then, as we've just sketched, beings who do not actually judge their lives would lack welfare. If we move to a hypotheticalist version, that would allow us to say how well Fido's life goes depends on how satisfied he would be with his life if he were to judge it. Hence, to be a welfare subject, one only needs the capacity to judge one's life.

The problem is that Fido lacks this capacity. We could imagine a cognitively enhanced version of him that would. Yet, that would not be Fido assessing his life, but some other hypothetical entity evaluating Fido's life. The appeal of subjectivism is that you get to decide what makes your life go well. If your welfare depends, instead, on how some hypothetical individual, who is not you and has a different perspective, would evaluate your life, we have given up on subjectivism.[20]

Another problem with the hypotheticalist move is that it is too permissive: it seems to give us too *many* subjects. We can speculate on how Mt. Everest *might* judge its life, if it could think – perhaps it's satisfied by being the biggest mountain on Earth but dissatisfied with all the tiny humans that scramble across it. Shouldn't we then conclude that Mt. Everest, which is not even sentient, is a welfare subject?

A third option is to supplement subjectivism with some other form of prudential value that rescues the intuition that sentient beings who can't yet – or never will – have the capacity to make life satisfaction judgements are nevertheless welfare subjects. One natural move is to say that happiness always constitutes welfare, but life satisfaction *also* constitutes welfare as and when sentient entities can make whole-life judgements. This gives us a hybrid theory of welfare which, roughly and in slogan form, claims "life satisfaction and happiness for human adults, happiness for everyone else".[21]

This generates at least three problems which I state briefly. First, note this concedes that life satisfaction is not the only thing that matters for us and thus that LST is not plausible as a monist theory of wellbeing.[22] This is important, given a key concern of this essay is whether LST is plausible or not.

Second, if we (now) favour some hybrid account of wellbeing, with life satisfaction as an element of it, we (now) no longer seem to have a justification for the conclusion that life satisfaction scores are the ideal measure of wellbeing; at the minimum, we need to measure life satisfaction and something else to know how well

[20]Suikkanen (2011) argues, in response to actualist-hypothetical concerns, an improved version of the LST would be what a hypothetical rational, informed version of you would choose; for the reasons given, this is questionably an improvement, given it rejects the original, subjectivism motivation.

[21]My original suggestion here was that subjectivists move to a theory on which happiness mattered for all sentient beings until and unless they could make life satisfaction judgements, at which point only life satisfaction matters – a sort of 'one in, one out' welfare theory. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the more natural move is to a hybrid theory where life satisfaction and something else can both count. I stress the objections below apply to both versions, but I do not draw this out for reasons of space.

[22]See Lin (2018) who argues against such a view and for a universalist account of welfare.

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someone's life is going (leaving aside vexing issues about whether and how to aggregate multiple elements into an overall wellbeing score).

Third, and most seriously, any attempt to 'bolt on' some other good to life satisfaction seems essentially inconsistent with subjectivism. Recall that subjectivism is the view that individuals are the authorities on their welfare. Hence, if we move to a hybrid view where some other thing – say, happiness – matters independently of whether individuals judge matters to and for them, we have abandoned subjectivism. To be clear, hedonism is an objectivist theory, in the sense that it holds that your happiness is good for you whether or not you judge it to be so: if you're overall happy but judging your life as going badly, hedonism holds you still have positive welfare in that moment. While hedonism is not a subjectivist theory of welfare, it is, in some important sense, a *subjective* one: the subject's mental state determines their welfare. Thus, a life-satisfaction-and-happiness hybrid theory of wellbeing is bizarrely motivated: it appears to accept subjectivism *and* accept its negation, objectivism. My suggestion, for the person who is initially attracted to LST because of its subjective-ness, but then considers moving to this hybrid theory in light of these issues, is to go the whole hog: give up on subjectivism and accept hedonism. This retains the subjective element to welfare but avoids the Too Few Subjects problem and the issue of bizarre motivation (as well as the Whimsicality problem).

The fourth and final play is to bite the bullet, noting that our best theory of welfare may have revisionary implications for which sort of things count as welfare subjects. The life satisfaction theorist could point out that animals were historically excluded from what Peter Singer called the 'moral circle', but hedonist-inspired arguments by the likes of Bentham and Singer have, in large part, led to their increased inclusion over time (Bentham 1789; Singer 1975). So, concluding a theory of wellbeing has counterintuitive and revisionary implications for 'who counts' should not be seen as a decisive reason to reject the theory – assuming, that is, we have strong independent grounds for believing that theory is correct.

Do we have such grounds? I do not think so. The preceding objection was that the life satisfaction theory is implausibly whimsical, it makes wellbeing trivial, and LST is thus already on thin conceptual ice. That it appears to, in addition, exclude many of those who are, intuitively, welfare subjects – infants, the cognitively disabled, and nearly all animals – seems, to switch metaphors, the final nail in the coffin.

6. Concluding Remarks

We started with the claim that life satisfaction theories are a distinct, plausible alternative account of wellbeing to the Parfitian Big Three: hedonism, desire theories and the objective list. I argued that while LST is importantly distinct from hedonism (despite occasional confusions to the contrary) it seems indistinguishable from a type of desire theory, namely the global desire theory. Hence, it is not distinct from all of the Big Three. I then argued that the life satisfaction(/global desire) theory does not seem plausible either: it is objectionably whimsical and leave us with too few subjects. What should we take from all this? I close with three comments.

The first is aimed at those interested in self-reported life satisfaction scores as the measure of wellbeing.

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If they were drawn to life satisfaction scores because they were sympathetic to hedonism and believed judgements of life satisfaction were a good measure of happiness (how good/bad we feel), they are only half right. Judgements of life satisfaction may be based on, and influenced by, our happiness, but they are not the same thing (many, but not all, subjective wellbeing researchers would regard this point as obvious and uncontroversial; see §1). Hedonists will prefer the more hedonic, experiential measures of wellbeing.

If they were drawn to the LST because they were sympathetic to the life satisfaction theory of wellbeing and believed life satisfaction scores capture our judgements of life satisfaction, they are also only half right. I have not and do not deny that life satisfaction surveys measure the mental state of life satisfaction. What I deny is that it is plausible that wellbeing consists in life satisfaction.

If life satisfaction scores appealed because one accepted some other theory of wellbeing, that is, another desire theory or the objective list, it would be a surprising coincidence if life satisfaction theories were the ideal theoretical measure of that, whatever it is.

None of this is to deny that life satisfaction scores likely capture *something* important about our wellbeing, whatever wellbeing is. It is unclear, however, how closely life satisfaction scores track the various (non-life-satisfaction) accounts of wellbeing – something that merits further scrutiny. My suggestion then, is to use life satisfaction scores for the time being but look for better measures. The suggestion scientists should seek ever-better measures is not, in general, controversial. My specific proposal here is controversial, given some subjective wellbeing researchers believe that, in life satisfaction, they have already arrived at the ideal measure.

The second comment concerns, what should we take wellbeing to consist in, if it's not life satisfaction? I cannot answer that here. It is a question for the reader and depends on their sympathies to the other theories of wellbeing. I suppose that those inclined towards a desire theory will want to move towards another (non-global) desire theory. Those who took life satisfaction/global desire theory as a rival to their preferred theory will, presumably, have more confidence in that other theory.

The final point is about subjectivism. As attractive as the idea is that individuals are the authorities on their wellbeing – in the sense that they get to decide what makes their lives go well or poorly – it seems hard to hold onto. Perhaps we need to accept that things can be good or bad for us whether or not we judge them to be. Perhaps our happiness is all that really matters for us – even if we do not judge that it is.

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