

Authentic Happiness

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This article discusses L. W. Sumner's theory of well-being as authentic happiness. I distinguish between extreme and moderate versions of subjectivism and argue that Sumner's characterization of the conditions of authenticity leads him to an extreme subjective theory. More generally, I also criticize Sumner's argument for the subjectivity of welfare. I conclude by addressing some of the implications of my arguments for theories of well-being in philosophy and welfare measurement in the social sciences.

1. INTRODUCTION

On a familiar distinction, theories of well-being belong to one of two groups. Some of them are subjective: they hold that a person's well-being is essentially related to that person's concerns in some way. Objective theories, on the other hand, deny that such a relation is essential, even though they might agree that a person's concerns have some role in determining that person's well-being.

The distinction between subjective and objective theories, however, is not as unambiguous as it might seem. In his seminal book on well-being, L. Wayne Sumner draws it the following way: 'a theory treats welfare as subjective if it makes it depend, at least in part, on some (actual or hypothetical) attitude on the part of the welfare subject.'¹ Later in his book, however, he says that 'a theory is subjective if it makes welfare depend *at least in part* on some mental state, but it may make it depend on something else as well' (p. 82, his emphasis). On either formulation, an objective theory is one that denies the dependency: on such views, something can promote the person's well-being even if the person does not have the necessary attitude or mental state.

These formulations yield different classifications of theories of welfare.² Consider, for instance, the variant of classical hedonism which accepts what Sumner calls the 'sensation model' of pleasure and pain. On this view, pleasure and pain are introspectively accessible, homogeneous sensations with characteristic feeling tones. On the first

¹ L. Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford, 1996), p. 38. (Otherwise unattributed page references are always to this book in this article.) The book contains material from a number of papers Sumner had written on well-being before, thus I will treat it as the conclusive statement of his theory. For a more recent summary of his view, see L. W. Sumner, 'Something in Between', *Well-Being and Morality: Essays in Honour of James Griffin*, ed. R. Crisp and B. Hooker (Oxford, 2000), pp. 1–19.

² For a similar point, see David Sobel, 'On the Subjectivity of Welfare', *Ethics* 107 (1997), pp. 501–8.

way of drawing the distinction, this theory turns out to be objective, since it does not appeal to attitudes.³ On the second way of drawing the distinction, however, hedonism with the sensation model is subjective.

To be sure, Sumner's main contribution to the debate, his theory of well-being as *authentic happiness*, turns out to be subjective on either way of drawing the distinction. Indeed, Sumner argues that 'no theory about the nature of welfare can be faithful to our ordinary concept unless it preserves its subject-relative or perspectival character. . . . Welfare is subject-relative because it is subjective' (pp. 42–3). But there is a further distinction to be made between different subjective theories according to the kind of dependency they posit between welfare and attitudes or mental states. On what I shall call *moderate subjectivism*, for something to promote (or reduce) a person's well-being it is a necessary condition that the person has some pro- (or con-) attitude towards that thing (on the formulation of the subjective–objective distinction in terms of attitudes), or that the person experiences that thing in some way (on the formulation of the distinction in terms of mental states); in addition, it is also a necessary condition that the object of the attitude or the source of the experience actually obtains. On what I shall call *extreme subjectivism*, there is no such 'reality' condition.

What is intriguing about Sumner's theory is that upon scrutiny, it turns out to be a version of extreme subjectivism – contrary to his intention of developing a moderate subjective theory (see pp. 174–5). As I shall try to show, Sumner turns towards extreme subjectivism at each major junction in the course of developing his theory, even though he could head in the moderate direction. This, in turn, leads to a number of additional problems for his account of well-being, which is briefly summarized in section 2. Section 3 argues that this view is a version of extreme subjectivism, and it also addresses some considerations which might have pushed Sumner towards extreme subjectivism. Section 4 then criticizes an argument that must have pushed Sumner towards extreme subjectivism.

In my view, Sumner's theory is one of the most original and thoughtful contributions to the contemporary discussion on well-being. It goes well beyond repeating the standard arguments for or against well-known conceptions, and it raises some highly relevant issues which are seldom discussed. It also has some implications which have much

³ As opposed to a rival variant of hedonism which accepts the 'attitude model' of pleasure and pain, on which they are identified by the subject's reactions to some sensation.

broader relevance for the study of well-being. Hence in section 5 I conclude with addressing some of these lessons.⁴

2. SUMNER'S VIEW

Sumner argues that the central notion for a theory of well-being is happiness in the sense of having a happy life. In this sense, happiness has to do with how you view the way your life is going, or the way it has been: whether you affirm or endorse the conditions of your life, whether you think it is worth its while to live, or it has been worth its while to live, according to your own standards and expectations. This evaluation may be global, embracing your life as a whole, or it may concern some particular aspect of it: your career, personal life, and so on. In this sense, happiness is *non-reductive*: contrary to what classical hedonists thought, it cannot be identified with pleasure or enjoyment. Rather, it is captured by the notion of *personal or life satisfaction*.

Your happiness or life satisfaction is determined by your own evaluation. In order to accept your evaluation as a reliable indication of how well your life is going, however, it must be *relevant, sincere, and considered*. It must be relevant in the sense that you must understand that you are to evaluate your life with respect to its value for you – and not, for example, in terms of whether it is valuable according to some ethical standard, or whether it conforms to some aesthetic ideal, or whether it is a life that is appropriate to the kind of life it is in some perfectionist sense.⁵ Also, your evaluation can be taken to be authoritative only if there are no grounds to doubt that it is sincere. If there is reason to believe that you understate or overstate your satisfaction with your life, your assessment cannot be taken at face value. Similarly, if there is reason to believe that your evaluation is not considered – that it is influenced by passing moods or formed without giving enough attention to the subject – its authenticity is doubtful.

Even if all these conditions are met, evaluations may still be *underinformed*. Suppose you have lived in a relationship that you thought was faithful and dedicated by both parties. Now you realize that your partner was faithless on many occasions and their dedication

⁴ To the best I could ascertain, there has been very little general discussion of Sumner's theory, as opposed to some of his particular arguments, in the literature. For the latter, see, for instance, David Sobel, 'Sumner on Welfare', *Dialogue* 37 (1998), pp. 571–7; Richard J. Arneson, 'Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction', *Social Philosophy & Policy* 16 (1999), pp. 113–42; and Krister Bykvist, 'Sumner on Desires and Well-Being', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32 (2002), pp. 475–90.

⁵ Sumner distinguishes four kinds or 'dimensions' of value – prudential, aesthetic, perfectionist, and ethical – which constitute different ways in which a life can go well. Welfare, however, only concerns the first dimension – the value of a life to the person whose life it is. When we evaluate a person's well-being, we are interested only in this narrower aspect of the value of a life. See pp. 20–5.

and commitment were all false. What shall we say about your happiness during this period? That you were happy in this relationship? Or that you were not happy, since you did not have all the information which is relevant to the assessment of your situation?

In order to avoid the problem of lack of information, we may be tempted to require that you can only be happy if your evaluation is based on facts or at least beliefs which are justified given the available evidence. But Sumner rejects both of these alternatives: he denies that either a truth or a justifiability requirement of *happiness* is acceptable. As far as your happiness in this relationship is concerned, facts do not, retrospectively, change how happy you were. So more information matters only if we are interested in whether your life was *worse for you* in the period you were with the deceptive partner. In this sort of evaluation, you assess the importance of your happiness (in that period) to your well-being. But Sumner also denies that either a truth or a justifiability requirement of *well-being* is acceptable. He argues that both would unduly restrict your authority over your well-being. Instead, when more information is relevant is left to your own jurisprudence. Being more informed is relevant to well-being, but the extent to which facts influence how well your life goes is up to your own assessment. If you think that your partner's deception blighted and betrayed your relationship, you may judge that although you were happy, your life did not go well. Or you may accept the facts now without thinking that your life was worse for you because of them. Thus, more information is relevant only if it influences your evaluation.

Consequently, the relation of happiness as life satisfaction and well-being is not a one-to-one matter. Happiness can be identified with well-being if and only if it is *authentic*. Authenticity, on the one hand, requires that a person's happiness is based on informed evaluation – informed by that person's own standards. In addition, authenticity requires that the evaluation is *autonomous*.

If your happiness is based on manipulation or socially conditioned desires, it cannot be authentic. To take a well-known example, consider the subdued housewife who adapts her expectations and satisfactions to her situation and opportunities. Intuitively, it seems that even though she sincerely says and feels that she is happy, her life is not going well for her.

In dealing with such cases, Sumner once again opts for subjective evaluations. Having been liberated from external conditioning influences, it is up to you to decide how you evaluate your welfare in the period when you were not autonomous. For instance, the subdued housewife may completely discount her years spent under manipulation; she may think her life did not go well, that those years were wasted. But she may equally think that that period was part of her life, and there is no point of denying that she was happy. So she

may choose not to lower her welfare assessment. Between these two extremes, of course, she may weight the importance of negative external influences on her autonomy for her well-being any way she sees fit.

Sumner's theory has a lot in common with the field of social science known as quality-of-life research, which grew out of the social indicators movement. Simplifying somewhat, researchers in this field measure people's quality of life on the basis of questionnaires on which at least some of the questions concern people's evaluations of their life conditions in terms of their satisfaction or happiness. It is generally held that asking people for their satisfaction reports (with respect to some of their life conditions or their overall life satisfaction) is an indispensable part of measuring quality of life.⁶

Sumner's theory, therefore, can be regarded as an attempt to provide a philosophical foundation to this research direction. Of course, whether people's reports of life satisfaction or happiness meet the conditions Sumner discusses is a hotly debated issue in the social sciences, especially with respect to the questions of how sincere and considered people's evaluations typically are.⁷ Thus, whether Sumner's theory is convincing as a philosophical account of well-being has important implications for the conceptual foundations of empirical research on well-being.

3. THE CONDITIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

Moderate subjectivists hold that it is a necessary condition for something to promote (or reduce) a person's well-being that the person has the appropriate attitude towards that thing, or that she experiences it. In addition, they hold that well-being also depends on whether the relevant state of affairs obtains: whether the object of the attitude or the source of the experience actually exists. In contrast, extreme subjectivism denies that the relevant state of affairs' obtaining necessarily makes a person better or worse off. Even though extreme subjective theories may refer to the relevant states of affairs in evaluating a person's well-being, whether those states obtain is not necessarily a determinant of the person's well-being.

⁶ A classical work of this research direction is Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, and Willard L. Rogers, *The Quality of American Life: Perceptions, Evaluations, and Satisfaction* (New York, 1976). For a modern treatment, see *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwarz (New York, 1999).

⁷ For a thorough survey, see Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack, 'Reports of Subjective Well-Being: Judgmental Processes and their Methodological Implications', in Kahneman et al. (eds.), *Well-Being*, pp. 61–84. For some of the philosophical issues that welfare measurement through people's own evaluations raise, see my 'The Concept of Quality of Life', *Social Theory and Practice* 31 (2005), pp. 561–80.

Sumner's theory identifies well-being with authentic happiness. A person's happiness is authentic if and only if her evaluation is both informed and autonomous. The role and importance of information and autonomy for a person's well-being, however, are left to that person's own jurisprudence. More information breaks the connection between happiness and well-being only if it changes the way the person evaluates her circumstances; emancipation from a non-autonomous condition breaks the connection only if the person judges that being autonomous makes a difference to how well her life goes.

Consider the information condition first. Suppose that your evaluation is relevant, sincere, and considered. It is also authentic unless we have reason to think that it would change if you had more information available. We could test this by asking you a series of questions about how your evaluation would change if the conditions of your life were different. If some of these conditions are indeed different, and your knowing that they are different would make a difference to your evaluation, your present evaluation is not authoritative. Suppose, however, that some important conditions of your life are indeed different from what you believe, but even if you were aware that they are not the way you thought they were, your evaluation would not change. You insist that your life satisfaction would be unaffected.

Such cases are not uncommon at all. Think of a depressed person, who believes her life is a failure, that nobody likes her, that her achievements are hollow. You point out that she has impressive achievements, she is popular and has many true friends, that by all accounts she is a successful person. These facts won't change her evaluation, yet we know her life is not as bad as she thinks it is. Or consider the well-known phenomenon that people may adapt their aspiration levels to their situation: they may choose goals for which they have the resources and lower their expectations in adverse circumstances. These will influence their evaluations, even though in some cases at least there seems to be no reason for that.

Ordinarily we would say that if a person is depressed, then *to that extent* her life goes worse than it could. It seems that there are reasons to suspect the authority of the evaluation of the depressed person. Nevertheless, Sumner cannot appeal to the distorting effects of depression or adaptation on a person's evaluation, since then he would appeal to some non-subjective standard.

Evaluations may also fail to be authentic if there is reason to think that they are not autonomous. But the judgment about the importance of happiness based on non-autonomous desires for a person's well-being is also up to that person. Not surprisingly, a similar argument applies here. Suppose your desires are manipulated. The more thoroughgoing the manipulation has been, the less you are going to be able to recognize

it – the mark of successful manipulation or indoctrination is that you do not think that your desires have been subtly altered by outside factors. If you come to expect very little from life due to the way you were brought up and you are told that you could aspire to more than you are content with now, the more thoroughgoing your indoctrination has been, the more likely you are to reject that this is possible. You will insist that your assessment of your opportunities and the worth of your pursuits is correct. So, paradoxically, the more indoctrinated you are, the less likely it is that you are able to discount your non-autonomous desires, and the more likely it is that you will insist that your happiness is authentic. This gets things the wrong way around, since it is hard to see how you could be convinced that your evaluation is not authoritative, which it certainly seems to be, without, once again, appealing to some external, non-subjective standard.

The exclusive reliance on the person's own assessment of the importance of relevant states of affairs to the person's well-being, even if the person's evaluation is based on all the relevant facts and only on autonomous desires, makes Sumner's theory a version of extreme subjectivism. Notice that other things being equal, the person who is happy or satisfied with some state of affairs is not necessarily better off if that state of affairs does obtain compared to the case in which the state of affairs does not obtain – this depends on how she would evaluate her happiness in light of the facts. Similarly, if the person is unhappy or dissatisfied with some state of affairs, then she is not necessarily better off if the state of affairs does not obtain compared to the case in which the state of affairs does obtain – this again depends on how she would evaluate her unhappiness. In order to determine how well a person's life is going for that person, what matters is not whether some relevant state of affairs obtains, but what the person's attitudes are towards that state of affairs.

It is not entirely clear why it should be entirely up to the person to determine the relation of her happiness to her well-being, as cases like the depressed person show. In contrast to moderate subjectivists, Sumner insists that there are no 'external standards' which could play a role in determining a person's well-being. One argument he gives is that such standards would take the form of *value requirements* which partly determine how well a person's life goes for that person on the basis of the independent value of pursuits and activities. But, according to Sumner, this causes a problem: a value requirement either introduces circularity into an account of well-being or conflates welfare with some other kind of value.⁸

⁸ See n. 5 for Sumner's distinction between different kinds of value.

External standards of well-being do not have to take the form of value requirements, however. They do not have to stipulate the value of pursuits and activities. Rather, they can serve as constraints or conditions of what can genuinely benefit a person, without making the account circular or appealing to other kinds of value. Truth and justifiability requirements do just that: they do not specify which goods, activities, or experiences a person has to take into account in order to evaluate her life conditions – or, for that matter, which goods, activities, or experiences anyone else has to take into account in evaluating the person's welfare. Although these requirements do partly determine how well a person's life goes for that person, they do this by imposing conditions on whether any given good, activity, or experience can contribute to the person's welfare, *whatever* these goods, activities, or experiences may be.

Recall that Sumner rejects not only truth and justifiability requirements of happiness – which many would agree with – but also truth and justifiability requirements of well-being. In defense of this stronger claim, he argues that external standards for the evaluation of well-being are 'incompatible with the individual sovereignty which characterizes a subjective theory' (p. 160), since they could determine a person's well-being without taking that person's concerns into account. This is not the claim that people are infallible judges of their well-being; Sumner accepts that evaluations are *defeasible*, that is, 'they are authoritative unless we have some reason to think that they do not reflect the individual's own deepest priorities' (p. 161). Insufficient information and non-autonomous desires are reasons to doubt that evaluations reflect a person's priorities. So certain external standards can help to determine the *authenticity* of a person's evaluation of her well-being, even though they cannot determine her *well-being*.

If this is so, then Sumner's theory is not a moderate subjectivist theory at all, notwithstanding the information and autonomy conditions. If a person's evaluation does not satisfy these conditions, what follows is not that her well-being is not as she reports it, but that her evaluation cannot be regarded authentic. After all, if the person lacks relevant information, she does not evaluate her life as it really is. If her evaluation is based on non-autonomous desires, it does not reflect her deepest priorities.

To be sure, Sumner does claim that his theory is what I have called a moderate subjective theory (see pp. 80–3, 174–5). It incorporates an information requirement, which ensures that merely experiencing a state of affairs is not sufficient for promoting a person's well-being: it is also necessary that the person has true beliefs about that state of affairs. But Sumner associates the information requirement not with the determination of the person's well-being, but with the

determination of the authenticity of a person's evaluation of her well-being. These are different.

This raises the question of what we can say about a person's well-being if her evaluation is not authentic. We cannot rely on her present evaluation and we cannot guess what her authentic evaluation would be, since even when we assess our lives in authentic conditions, *'there is no right answer to the question of what our reaction should be'* (p. 159, Sumner's emphasis). If a person does not satisfy the conditions of authenticity, her well-being cannot be determined. Inauthenticity makes well-being uncertain.

The problem with this idea is that at least in some cases when a person's evaluation of her life conditions is inauthentic, it is hard to see why that would make her well-being uncertain. Suppose you know the deepest priorities of a close friend, and you learn that her partner has betrayed her. You know that the betrayal, if it came to light, would profoundly affect your friend's evaluation of her life with respect to this relationship. What you are more likely to conclude is that your friend's life is worse for her with respect to the relationship; you are less likely to conclude that, given the truth, her well-being is uncertain.

But perhaps Sumner is not making a claim about the nature of welfare. Rather, the idea may be that if the person's evaluation is inauthentic, then her well-being is uncertain in an epistemic sense. This reading is supported by what Sumner says in his discussion of the political implications of his view: 'where the social conditions for the autonomous adoption of personal values are lacking, *we cannot know wherein people's well-being consists'* (pp. 218–19, his emphasis again). There is no doubt that sometimes we may not be able to assess a person's well-being at all or we may be able to make only very crude assessments. But the claim that unless people are informed and autonomous we can never evaluate their well-being is too strong. Neither is it supported by our ordinary concept and experience of well-being, which, in Sumner's view, is one of the criteria of adequacy for a theory of well-being.

Before I discuss what I take to be Sumner's most powerful argument against external standards of welfare, I mention yet another reading of the claim that there is no right answer to the question of how we should take into account facts and the effects of non-autonomous desires in the evaluation of people's lives. At several places, Sumner seems to make *normative* claims. Thus, he says that 'reality/value and justification requirements are unacceptably patronizing and puritanical in their implications concerning the quality of people's lives' (p. 166); hence there can be 'no authoritative public standard' (p. 161) for assessing their well-being. If people's evaluations are inauthentic, we have moral reasons prohibiting their second-guessing.

But I doubt this reading would be acceptable to Sumner, since it is contrary to his intention of keeping the descriptive and the normative adequacy of a theory of well-being separate. Any theory, first and foremost, must dovetail with our ordinary assessments and considered judgments about well-being; it must satisfy certain descriptive criteria, independently of its role in our broader ethical theory. Sumner (in my view, at least) correctly points out that this approach is more desirable than that which starts from some theoretical framework assigning a role to well-being and accepts the account that best fits that role (or, more often, denies a role to well-being since no traditional account is able to fill the predetermined role). But this requirement rules out considerations of individual sovereignty over well-being from a discussion on the nature of well-being.

4. THE SUBJECTIVITY OF WELFARE

Why, then, does Sumner repeatedly emphasize that there are no external standards for evaluating a person's well-being? I suggest that his claim is based on his more general argument for the subjectivity of well-being.⁹

The starting point of the argument is the consideration that well-being has a special feature. If something promotes the well-being of a person, then that thing must be good *for* that person; the person who is well-off must benefit from the source of her well-being. No theory of welfare is acceptable unless it is compatible with this feature of well-being, since what distinguishes welfare from other values is its *subject-relativity*. Moreover, subject-relativity is a central feature of our ordinary, everyday concept of well-being; thus an account that does not provide room for it is descriptively inadequate.

Sumner's own theory of welfare easily satisfies this requirement. It connects well-being to how a person evaluates her life based on her own concerns and attitudes towards it. These concerns and attitudes provide the point of view from which something can be judged good or bad for the person. Thus, the relevant perspective for assessing a person's welfare is the person's own perspective. The account incorporates subject-relativity since it anchors welfare in the appropriate perspective. More generally, subjective theories typically meet the requirement that the feature of subject-relativity must be part of a theory of welfare, or at least they can be easily modified to do so. Objective views, however, have difficulties with subject-relativity, since they do not connect welfare to the appropriate perspective.

⁹ The argument I discuss is to be found on pp. 42–4. An earlier version appears in L. Wayne Sumner, 'The Subjectivity of Welfare', *Ethics* 105 (1995), pp. 764–90.

The problem with this argument is that it equivocates on the concepts of subject-relativity and perspective. On the one hand, there might well be other ways to take into account subject-relativity in a theory of welfare – unless, of course, the requirement that an adequate theory must satisfy subject-relativity simply *means* that it must connect well-being to the person's own perspective. On the other hand, even if subject-relativity entails perspectivity, it does not follow that the relevant perspective is the person's *actual* perspective.

It might be possible to argue for the claim that subject-relativity does not entail perspectivity in several different ways. Consider some other popular accounts of well-being. An objective list theory might hold that the valuable goods and activities it includes are the objects of desires and the sources of satisfaction, even if the relation between these goods and activities and people's attitudes is merely contingent. On an Aristotelian theory, one might argue that the valuable excellences promote a person's well-being only if the person experiences the pursuit of those excellences as satisfying. Or a hedonist with a simple sensation model of pleasure and pain might argue that it is sufficient to connect well-being to a person's mental life, as opposed to connecting it, more narrowly, to her concerns and attitudes.¹⁰

Even if subject-relativity does indeed entail perspectivity, however, it remains an open question what way the person's perspective is to be taken into account. Sumner assumes without argument that the relevant perspective is the person's actual perspective, constituted by the attitudes and concerns the person actually has. But many theories of well-being are likely to deny this. For many objectivists, the relevant perspective is associated with the point of view the person *would* have if she truly appreciated the properties of valuable goods and ideals. For those who accept an informed desire theory, the relevant perspective is constituted not by the concerns and attitudes the person has, but by the concerns and attitudes she *would* have were she adequately informed and reasoned appropriately. Taking the person's actual perspective as central to a person's well-being is the exception rather than the rule.

Questions about the nature of well-being and the grounds for assessing well-being are fundamentally different, even if not completely unrelated. Since Sumner does not adequately distinguish between the two, he is led to an extreme version of subjectivism. Even if one is willing to follow him through the argument from subject-relativity to perspectivity, one is much more hesitant to follow him to the conclusion that if a person's evaluation of her well-being is not authentic, then

¹⁰ For an argument showing that even Plato's objective theory of goodness can satisfy subject-relativity, see Jyl Gentzler, 'The Attractions and Delights of Goodness', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2004), pp. 353–67.

we cannot say anything about her well-being. As my examples above show, this is in many cases implausible: although the person's own evaluation is inauthentic, there seem to be external standards from which her well-being can be assessed – even if these assessments are not as precise as one would like, or if external assessments of well-being are excluded for explicitly moral reasons.

These considerations also raise doubts about whether Sumner's theory can pass his own test of descriptive adequacy. Ordinarily, we do not think that well-being depends entirely on the person's own evaluation of her life conditions; at best, we have conflicting intuitions about the relative importance of subjective and objective conditions of well-being. Neither does the theory fit the way we ordinarily make welfare judgments. Even though we realize that others may often be unreliable judges of a person's well-being, we do not think that there are no external standards for its assessment.

5. GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

If what I have argued is correct, then Sumner's project of developing a plausible account of welfare is unsuccessful. But it is unsuccessful for interesting reasons, and these reasons have much broader relevance to theories of well-being. I conclude by briefly addressing them.

First, the distinction between objective and subjective theories of well-being muddies rather than clears the waters. Some theories, of course, will be one or the other on just about any relevant understanding of objectivity or subjectivity. A theory that says how well-off you are is a function of how much gold you have is likely to turn out to be objective; a theory that holds that the satisfaction of your desires, whatever they are, makes you better off is likely to count as subjective. But probably all remotely plausible candidate theories will include both objective and subjective components, and trying to settle whether they are more adequately classified as one or the other is likely to distract from the real issues. Sumner himself admits at one point that one can look at the distinction as a continuum along which theories can be ordered (pp. 39–40). He defends his choice of a sharp distinction by appealing to the argument I criticized in the last section. If my objections are correct, there may be no reason not to think of the distinction as a continuum instead – in which case it is not especially salient or illuminating.

If one looks for a general strategy to approach theories of welfare, it may be more profitable to look at the conditions or requirements for something to promote well-being on different theories. They can be used to identify groups of theories which can be rejected together or further narrowed in search of the adequate theory. In this article, for

example, I used the reality condition to distinguish between extreme and moderate subjective theories.

This leads to my second point. Sumner's theory is a version of extreme subjectivism; but what is wrong with extreme subjective theories? As I have tried to show, they give counterintuitive answers to questions about the nature of well-being. But they also give what seem to be inadequate answers to questions about the assessment of well-being. At least, Sumner's theory is doubly counterintuitive. A plausible theory must be descriptively adequate on both accounts. If it is true that such a theory must have both 'objective' and 'subjective' components, questions about the assessment of welfare need to be addressed: we cannot automatically derive answers to epistemological questions about the evaluation of people's welfare, no matter how well-developed our account of the nature of well-being otherwise is.

More generally, it is helpful to distinguish the question of what the most plausible account of well-being is and the question of how we can evaluate a person's well-being, given that account.¹¹ A theory of well-being tells us about the components of a person's well-being, but it typically tells us much less about how we can make welfare judgments and what sorts of welfare judgments we can make. For instance, Sumner's theory is silent on *prospective* welfare judgments: given that a person's evaluation usually concerns the present or the past and she is the only judge of her welfare, it is unclear how we could tell what alternative is most likely to promote that person's well-being.

Surely, one of the main reasons we should want to develop a theory of well-being is to be able to make welfare judgments. The lessons we can learn from Sumner's theory have implications not only for this issue, but also for how we approach the empirical measurement of well-being. What are the requirements for the authenticity of people's evaluation of the sources of their well-being? How are these related to accounts of the nature of well-being?

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¹¹ I examine this distinction in more detail in 'Welfare Judgments and Risk', *The Ethics of Technological Risk*, ed. L. Asveld and S. Roeser (Earthscan, 2009), pp. 144–60.