

ARTICLE

Why Be a Subjectivist about Wellbeing?

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Abstract

Subjectivism about wellbeing rests on the idea that what is good for a person must ‘fit’ her, ‘resonate’ with her, not be ‘alien’ to her, etc. This idea has been called the ‘beating heart’ of subjectivism. In this article, I present the No-Beating-Heart Challenge for subjectivism, which holds that there is no satisfactory statement of this idea. I proceed by first identifying three criteria that any statement of the idea must meet if it is to provide support for subjectivism: Distinctness, Exclusiveness, and Explicitness. I then argue that no statement of this idea meets these criteria.

Keywords: Wellbeing; welfare; prudential value; subjectivism; objectivism; idealization; internalism

1. The beating heart of subjectivism

One important question in ethical theory is what is good or bad for a person—that is, what a person’s wellbeing consists in. If we want to know what we ought to strive for in our own lives and how we ought to treat others, we must know what is good or bad for ourselves and for them.

Subjectivism is perhaps the most widely accepted theory of wellbeing. It asserts that a person’s wellbeing depends on her own pro-attitudes. Pro-attitudes are such attitudes as desiring, liking, valuing, finding attractive, finding compelling, caring about, etc. Many subjectivists hold that a person’s wellbeing is a function not of her actual pro-attitudes but of the pro-attitudes she would have under certain idealized circumstances. They do not want to attach ethical significance to pro-attitudes that are incoherent, irrational, ill-informed, or that reflect some other cognitive error.¹ The conditions of idealization are supposed to correct for such errors. Subjectivists thus accept some version of what I call subjectivism’s core tenet.

Core Tenet: Something is intrinsically good for a person if and only if and in virtue of the fact that this person has the right kind of pro-attitude toward it, possibly under idealized circumstances.²

Subjectivism’s main competitor are objective theories of wellbeing, according to which what is good for a person is good for her independently of whether it is the object of some pro-attitude of this person. The version of objectivism that I will focus on in this paper is objective list theory. It holds that there is a fixed set of goods that make a person’s life go well, such as achievement, pleasure, knowledge, the experience of beauty, friendship, happiness, virtue, and so forth. I will treat perfectionism as one kind of objective list theory. According to perfectionists, the items on the list

¹Though see Bruckner (2016), Heathwood (2005), Lemaire (2021), Lin (2019), and Murphy (1999).

²Like many, I use the term ‘intrinsically’ to mean ‘noninstrumentally/finally.’ Prominent advocates of subjectivism include Brandt (1979), Dorsey (2012b, 2021), Gauthier (1986), Heathwood (2006), Raibley (2010), Railton (1986), Rawls (1999), Sobel (2016), and Sumner (1995).

should correspond to our essential human capacities, which we must develop and exercise in order to live a good life.³

A typical and much-cited rationale for preferring subjective over objective accounts of wellbeing has been offered by Peter Railton (1986, 9): “[W]hat is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.” Dale Dorsey has referred to this underlying rationale as subjectivism’s “beating heart” and has dubbed it the “Deeply Plausible Thought” (2017a, 196–97). It is the thought that “for any intrinsic good φ for a person p , it must be the case that φ ‘fits’ p , resonates with p , fails to alienate p , and so forth” (2017a, 198). Others have called it the ‘resonance constraint’ or the ‘nonalienation constraint,’ but I prefer Dorsey’s ‘Deeply Plausible Thought,’ as the thought need not be spelled out in terms of ‘resonance’ or ‘nonalienation.’

In this article, I formulate a challenge for subjectivists about wellbeing—the No-Beating-Heart Challenge. I will argue that statements of the Deeply Plausible Thought (henceforth DPT) fail at least one of three criteria that any such statement must meet in order to serve as a justification for subjectivism. It is unclear whether the heart of subjectivism is even beating. As subjectivism derives much of its appeal from the DPT, the No-Beating-Heart Challenge, if successful, poses a serious threat to subjectivism and enhances the relative appeal of objectivism.

I will first say more about the structure of the rationale behind subjectivism and introduce the three criteria. Then, I will show how some familiar statements of the DPT and, in more detail, how Dorsey’s recent explication of the DPT all fail at least one of the three criteria. The following brief section discusses how the No-Beating-Heart Challenge relates to the problem of idealization. In the conclusion, I explore how subjectivists may respond to the challenge formulated in this paper.

2. The structure of the rationale behind subjectivism, and the three criteria

I find it useful to disentangle two distinct, but complementary, parts of the rationale behind subjectivism about wellbeing.

First, there is the

Internalist Constraint: Something is intrinsically good for a person only if it is the object of the right kind of pro-attitude of this person, possibly under idealized circumstances.⁴

The Internalist Constraint is similar to the Core Tenet, but they are not identical. The Internalist Constraint posits only a necessary condition on what is good for a person, whereas the Core Tenet asserts that the subject’s (idealized) pro-attitude is necessary and sufficient.⁵ Also, the Core Tenet specifies that what is good for a person is good for her *in virtue of the fact* that it is the object of a

³Objective list theorists include Arneson (1999), Ferkany (2012), Fletcher (2013), Hooker (2015), and Rice (2013). Sympathy for objective list theory is also expressed in Lin (2014, 2015). Perfectionism has been defended by Brink (1989) and, depending on interpretation (see Lin 2020, 3), by Finnis (2011), Hurka (1993), Kraut (2007), and Murphy (2001).

⁴On the Internalist Constraint, see Dorsey (2017b, 687), Hawkins (2019), Railton (1986), and Rosati (1995, 300; 1996). Subjectivists have endorsed different versions of this constraint with different pro-attitudes and conditions of idealization (or none at all). The Internalist Constraint is a statement of existence internalism rather than judgment internalism, the latter asserting a conceptual link between people’s motivations and their judgments. Unlike moral existence internalism, existence internalism about a person’s good is not formulated as a claim about motivation narrowly construed. See Hawkins (2019, 96) and Rosati (1996, 301). For a critical discussion of internalism about a person’s good, refer to Sarch (2011).

⁵Dorsey distinguishes strong subjectivism (necessary and sufficient) from subjectivism simpliciter (only necessary), endorsing the former (2021, 110–12). Like others (e.g., Lin 2015, 1; Fletcher 2016, 28), I am treating strong subjectivism as the paradigm version of subjectivism, but the argument in this paper would not be affected if a weaker interpretation of the Core Tenet were used.

pro-attitude.⁶ This ‘in virtue of’-relation is most naturally understood in terms of the metaphysical grounding relation (see Frugé *forthcoming*).

Then there is the idea that what is good for a person must not be alien to her, must fit her, must resonate with her, and so on. This is the DPT proper, which was already quoted above and which I distinguish from the Internalist Constraint.

Deeply Plausible Thought (DPT): For any intrinsic good φ for a person p , it must be the case that φ ‘fits’ p , *resonates* with p , fails to *alienate* p , and so forth.

It is plausible to characterize subjectivism as resting ultimately on the DPT with the Internalist Constraint functioning as an intermediate step. Why should we accept subjectivism’s Core Tenet? Because it can capture the Internalist Constraint, that is, the idea that a person must have the right kind of pro-attitude toward her own good, at least under idealized circumstances. And why should we accept *this* idea? Because it can capture the more fundamental notion that what is good for a person must not be alien to her, must fit her, must resonate with her, etc., that is, because it can capture the DPT.⁷

Not all subjectivists distinguish between the Internalist Constraint and the DPT in this way. But the distinction is made in some of the classic statements of the rationale for subjectivism. Consider the Railton quote above. The first sentence, asserting that there must be a connection between what is good for a person and what she would find attractive, is a statement of the Internalist Constraint. The second sentence, which expresses the DPT, is offered *in support* of the Internalist Constraint. Likewise, Connie Rosati observes: “The principal intuition *supporting* internalism about a person’s good, as aptly expressed by Railton, is that an individual’s good must not be something alien—it must be ‘made for’ or ‘suited to’ her” (1996, 298, my emphasis). Again, Rosati takes the DPT (“the principal intuition ...”) to be distinct from, and to offer support for, the Internalist Constraint.⁸

There are good reasons for drawing this distinction. One is that the two principles just seem to articulate two distinct ideas. The DPT seems to hint at a philosophical idea that is much more subtle and profound than the Internalist Constraint. Another reason is that an argument for subjectivism must go beyond an appeal to the Internalist Constraint. However plausible it may appear to some, the Internalist Constraint is too close to the Core Tenet itself to possess much dialectical force. To justify the Core Tenet by appeal to the Internalist Constraint begs the question against objectivists, who do not find the Internalist Constraint any more plausible than the Core Tenet itself. Indeed, the rejection of the Internalist Constraint is central to objectivism. Its rejection has been referred to as the “core commitment of objective list theories” (Fletcher 2016, 49).⁹ Moreover, even if the Internalist Constraint were generally agreed to be intuitively plausible, this intuition has only so much dialectical force and can easily be outweighed by counterexamples to the Internalist Constraint and other arguments against it. As Dorsey observes, “the intuitive appeal of the [Internalist Constraint] should be balanced against the intuitive appeal of individual cases or competing rationales that tell *against* the [Internalist Constraint]. And if there are any—which critics of welfare subjectivism (among others) tend to believe—this would seem to entail that the [Internalist Constraint] is in a precarious epistemic position even *if* we, like Railton, find a connection between the welfare subject’s values and her good plausible” (Dorsey 2017b, 689–93). The Internalist Constraint and the Core Tenet that it supports stand in need of further

⁶See Dorsey (2017b, 686–89; 2021, 80–81), Fletcher (2013, 207; 2016, 28), and Sobel (2009, 337).

⁷One might consider skipping the middle part, arguing directly from the DPT to the Core Tenet: we should accept subjectivism because it captures the deeply plausible thought that what is good for a person must not be alien to her, must resonate with her, etc. (see footnote 22 below). Either way, the DPT plays a crucial role in the justification of subjectivism’s Core Tenet.

⁸She also refers to it as “the intuition that *lies behind* internalism” (1996, 309, my emphasis; see also 1995, 301).

⁹On how mere appeals to the Internalist Constraint would be question-begging, see Fletcher (2016, 61, 71–72).

justification. Distinguishing the DPT from the Internalist Constraint makes sense because when understood as an idea that is distinct from the Internalist Constraint, the DPT can provide the needed independent support for the Internalist Constraint and thereby for the Core Tenet.

We can now introduce the three criteria. They are:

DISTINCTNESS: The DPT must be distinct from the Internalist Constraint.

EXCLUSIVENESS: It must be difficult to accommodate the DPT without endorsing the Internalist Constraint.

EXPLICITNESS: The DPT must be sufficiently clear and explicit.

The importance of **DISTINCTNESS** and **EXCLUSIVENESS** should be obvious. A formulation of the DPT must meet **DISTINCTNESS** if it is to offer independent support for the Internalist Constraint rather than to merely rephrase it. And it must meet **EXCLUSIVENESS** if it is to provide substantial support for the Internalist Constraint at all. If the DPT can be easily accommodated by theories that reject the Internalist Constraint, such as objective list theory, the DPT can neither lend much support to the Internalist Constraint nor be invoked by subjectivists to argue against objective list theory.¹⁰

Finally, the **EXPLICITNESS** criterion requires that the statement of the DPT be explicit and clear. The reason for imposing this condition is that the appeal of the Internalist Constraint, and with it of subjectivism, is dubious if it rests on capturing some property *P* (say, that a person's good 'fits' her) that we do not understand. 'We should espouse the Internalist Constraint (and subjectivism) because it captures *P*, but I cannot really tell you what *P* is' is not a strong argument. Neither is 'We should reject objective list theory (or *any* theory that rejects the Internalist Constraint) because it does not capture *P*, but I cannot really tell you what *P* is.' To dismiss a statement of the DPT as failing **EXPLICITNESS** is not to deny that the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism seem to capture this property better than accounts that reject this constraint, such as objective list theory. Rather, it is to allege that the characterization of this property is so vague that the fact that the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism appear to capture it better than objective list theory fails to provide relevant support for the former over the latter.

A statement of the DPT that fails **EXCLUSIVENESS** can also fail **EXPLICITNESS**. When a statement of the DPT fails **EXCLUSIVENESS**, property *P* seems to be accommodated both by accounts that accept the Internalist Constraint and by accounts that reject it. Such a statement of the DPT fails to provide support for the Internalist Constraint and with it for subjective theories. While one cannot claim that a statement of the DPT fails **EXCLUSIVENESS** without some *minimal* understanding of the meaning of this property, its meaning can, I submit, still be too obscure to satisfy **EXPLICITNESS**. When a statement of the DPT fails both **EXCLUSIVENESS** and **EXPLICITNESS**, its failure to meet **EXPLICITNESS** involves an element of counterfactuality. In reality, the property, however poorly we understand it, seems to be captured by objective accounts, too. But *if it were the case* that only accounts that accept the Internalist Constraint could capture this property, its characterization would still be too indeterminate to be of much argumentative use.

All this has been very theoretical. How statements of the DPT can fail to satisfy these criteria, and sometimes more than just one, will become clearer as I discuss different such statements below.

The three criteria are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a fully satisfactory statement of the DPT. A statement of the DPT may meet all three criteria and yet, for whatever reason, fail to provide more than just a very weak reason for accepting the Internalist Constraint. Or it might violate other necessary conditions that are not considered in this article.¹¹ Note also that the challenge formulated in this article concerns specifically subjectivism about wellbeing rather than attitude-dependent accounts of reasons or values in general. There are many rationales—metaphysical,

¹⁰While it must rule out objective list accounts, it need not (or should not) rule out the existence of *any* objective value facts (Dorsey 2017b, 693).

¹¹Dorsey mentions two other criteria (2017b). His third criterion is similar to my **DISTINCTNESS** condition.

epistemological, and other—for accepting an attitude-dependent account of normativity that are unrelated to the DPT.¹² The DPT is the beating heart of subjectivism about *wellbeing*, not that of subjectivism *tout court*.

3. Familiar statements of the DPT

It is now time to look in more detail at familiar statements of the DPT, some of which are mentioned in Dorsey's above-quoted formulation of it.

Railton's talk of 'alienation' fails either DISTINCTNESS or EXPLICITNESS. It fails DISTINCTNESS if 'alienated' just means 'not to be the object of some (idealized) pro-attitude.' Talk of 'alienation' would then fail to yield an independent rationale for the Internalist Constraint, as it would not amount to more than a reformulation of the Internalist Constraint in different terms. If, however, something else is meant by 'alienation,' it is unclear what this might be. Elsewhere, Railton writes that "alienation can be characterized only very roughly as a kind of estrangement, distancing, or separateness [...] resulting in some sort of loss" (1984, 134). But this is to characterize one puzzling concept in terms of three other puzzling metaphors. Objectivists can rightly dismiss subjectivists' talk of alienation as too hand-wavy to be of much argumentative value.

Another term used by Railton is that of 'internal resonance' (1986, 9). However, like 'alienated,' this metaphor fails either DISTINCTNESS or EXPLICITNESS. One natural interpretation of what it means for some good to resonate with a person is that this person finds this good appealing. But this interpretation is too close to the Internalist Constraint. If it means something else, what does it mean? Talk of 'resonance' is just too metaphorical to convey a philosophically useful idea of what is meant.

Tellingly, wellbeing scholars disagree about whether 'resonance' or '(non)alienness' is instantiated in any given case. For instance, Eden Lin has suggested that when a recovering drug addict is craving a drug, his taking the drug can be said to resonate with him and to not alienate him (Lin 2019, 15). Dorsey has dismissed this as "implausible in the extreme" (Dorsey 2021, 107). Such disagreement is evidence of how unclear the meaning of these terms is.

Rosati, besides invoking Railton's notion of alienation, uses the sartorial metaphors that a person's good must be 'made for' or 'suited to' her and that there "must be a 'fit' between an individual and her good" (1996, 298–99).¹³ These metaphors as such do not shed much light on the intuition behind the Internalist Constraint either, all of them failing EXPLICITNESS. While we all have an idea of what it means for a piece of clothing to suit, fit, or be made for a person, the meaning of such terms in the context of wellbeing remains somewhat opaque. Imagine you want to convince a friend that she needs more pleasure (achievement/happiness/etc.) in her life. As she remarks that pleasure (achievement/happiness/etc.) is overrated, you say to her: "Don't you see that pleasure (achievement/happiness/etc.) is something that *fits* you?" Presumably, this would only leave her puzzled at what you are trying to say.

Besides, talk of some good 'fitting' a person also fails EXCLUSIVENESS. Continuing the metaphor, objective list theorists can retort that according to objective list theory, the same set of goods 'fits' everybody. Indeed, it could be called a one-size-fits-all theory. Similarly, objectivists could maintain that the same goods 'suit' all people.¹⁴ The notion that a person's prudential good must 'fit' or 'suit' her thus fails to privilege subjectivism over objectivism. Its failure to meet EXCLUSIVENESS is probably the lesser problem, though. It is not difficult to come up with variations of these metaphors that seem incompatible with objectivism, thereby meeting EXCLUSIVENESS. Subjectivists could say that a

¹²See e.g., Lewis (1989), Schroeder (2007), Smith (1994), Street (2008), and Williams (1981).

¹³The metaphor of 'fittingness' is also used by Railton (1986, 16, 25).

¹⁴The 'suitability' metaphor is also invoked by Richard Kraut (2007). His analysis of 'suitability' is somewhat ambiguous (see Rosati 2009). In the end, he seems to hold that something suits a person when it is "productive or part of flourishing" (Kraut 2007, 141), an interpretation that does not entail the Internalist Constraint in any straightforward way.

person's good must be 'custom-made' or 'tailor-made' for her. This would rule out objectivist ready-made lists of prudential goods. The real problem here is the lack of EXPLICITNESS. These terms are just too metaphorical to substantially enhance our understanding of the appeal of the Internalist Constraint and, with it, subjectivism, even when we grant that only the Internalist Constraint captures the idea that a person's good must fit her, be custom-made for her, etc.

In addition to these metaphors, however, Rosati has provided arguments that can be read as interpretations of the metaphors. Both her argument from autonomy and her epistemological argument can be read as attempts to flesh out the idea that a person's good must 'fit' her. But they both fail EXCLUSIVENESS.¹⁵

The argument from autonomy runs as follows:

[T]he good of a creature must suit its own nature. In the case of persons or autonomous agents, their nature most centrally includes the capacity for rational self-governance. Their good must thus suit them as creatures with this capacity. [...] [This] clearly supports simple internalism. Something cannot be a part of a person's good if it cannot enter into her rational self-governance. And it can enter into her self-governance only if she is capable of caring about it. If she is not capable of caring about it, she cannot of her own accord rationally pursue it, promote it, or simply cherish it. (Rosati 1996, 323–24)

Put differently, a person's good must 'fit' her or 'suit' her in the sense that it must suit her *nature*. And since it is one important aspect of our nature that we are autonomous agents, this principle entails that a person's good suits her only when she is capable of caring about it.

To begin with, however, our being autonomous agents is only one aspect of our nature.¹⁶ We are also agents who can set themselves goals, maintain friendships, feel pleasure and pain, who have a sense of beauty, who are capable of theoretical reasoning, and so on. These are also important aspects of our nature. If a conception of wellbeing must suit our nature, it should account for these aspects of our nature, too. And one natural way of doing so would be by recognizing achievement, friendship, pleasure, the experience of beauty, knowledge, and so on as objectively good for us. This, of course, is precisely what (perfectionist) objective list theories advocate, although there is no agreement about which items belong on the list. This means that objective list theories can accept that a conception of wellbeing must 'suit our nature' and yet maintain that this requirement is perfectly compatible with objective list theory. What is more, they can embrace the fact that our autonomy is one central aspect of our nature without having to buy into the Internalist Constraint. For they could plausibly insist that this just means that autonomy should be one of the items on the list of objective prudential goods.¹⁷

Consider now her epistemological argument. Rosati contends that "[w]e can justify to a person the claim that something is good for her [...] only if her alleged good satisfies internalism." This is because "her caring about the thing is necessary evidence of its being good for her" (Rosati 1996,

¹⁵In the same paper, Rosati offers three other arguments: an argument from judgement internalism, an argument from the metaphysics of value, and an argument from 'ought implies can' (Rosati 1996; see also Velleman 1988). While these are arguments for the Internalist Constraint, they are not plausibly interpreted as interpretations of the DPT. They have also been convincingly refuted (Dorsey 2017b; Sarch 2011). Note that Rosati, while arguing for a version of the Internalist Constraint, is not a classical subjectivist (Rosati 2016, 190–91n37).

¹⁶Rosati's talk of a person's good having to 'suit' her autonomous nature might again be problematically metaphorical, but I put this problem aside here.

¹⁷The latter point is also made by Dorsey (2017b, 699–700). I disagree, however, with Dorsey on a technical detail in that I think it involves a violation of EXCLUSIVENESS rather than DISTINCTNESS. For another refutation of the argument from autonomy, refer to Sarch (2011, 175–76). A side note on taxonomy: the objective prudential goods posited by perfectionists are 'objective' only in the sense of not depending on people's pro-attitudes (which is the relevant sense of 'objective' in this context). They are not objective in the sense of being completely divorced from the welfare subjects, as they still have to correspond to our essential human capacities.

316). The underlying premise is that what is good for a person must be justifiable to her (see Dorsey 2017b, 697–98). To say that a person’s good must ‘fit’ her is, according to this interpretation, just a way of saying that it must be possible to provide evidence that something is good for a person to this person. It must ‘resonate’ with her on an epistemological level, so to speak.

Putting aside doubts about the plausibility of this premise, it, too, fails EXCLUSIVENESS. Objectivists can reject the assumption that caring about something is necessary evidence of its being good. They have other resources to justify that something is good for everyone. To begin with, if other people intuit or believe that this thing is good for everyone regardless of pro-attitudes, this is evidence that it really is good for everyone. That is, in order to justify to a person that something is good for her when she fails to care about it, one can point out to her that other people have the intuition that it is good for her. Indeed, the fact that many people intuit that at least some things are good for people irrespective of whether they are actually appreciated by them is arguably among the strongest pieces of evidence for objectivism generally as well as for particular objectivist claims.¹⁸ Moreover, objectivists can highlight features of the thing in question upon which its prudential value supervenes. For instance, to justify to a person who does not care about, say, friendship why friendship is good for her, the objectivist can highlight that friendship is about reciprocity, that it is something long lasting, that it involves the sharing of experiences, and so on. This is a very common way of justifying normative claims, and it is also a natural way of justifying claims about wellbeing.¹⁹ Finally, perfectionists can appeal to human nature. According to perfectionism, it is the fact that some capacity is essential to human nature that explains why its cultivation contributes to wellbeing whether the individual cares about cultivating this capacity or not.²⁰

I am not here presupposing that objectivist claims really are true or justified. Rather, I am observing that it is not in principle impossible to justify that something is prudentially valuable to someone who does not care about it. The requirement that what is good for a person must be justifiable to her does therefore not favor the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism over objectivism.

In a later paper (2006), Rosati has revisited the idea of fit (and suitability), offering a more detailed account of its meaning. As I read her, she does not in this paper present the idea of fit as a consideration that supports the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism. It would, however, be an omission not to consider the analysis of fit presented there, as subjectivists might want to use it for their purposes. Rosati suggests that fit describes essentially a “relation of rewarded appreciation” (122). For there to be such a fit, a person must love something, and this something must ‘love her back.’ By the latter, she means that the things that ‘fit’ a person “tend to support or not undermine an individual’s sense of her own value, to enliven rather than enervate, to provide identity and direction, and to furnish self-supporting sources of internal motivation” (120). This analysis of fit could not serve as an independent rationale for accepting the Internalist Constraint. It fails the DISTINCTNESS criterion since it involves that the agent *loves* or *appreciates* that with which she maintains a relation of fit.²¹

¹⁸Rosati objects that we cannot appeal to others’ *experiences* to justify that something is good for someone who does not care about it (1996, 317). This may be true, but this is not what I am arguing.

¹⁹See also Rice (2013, 202). Objective list theory is sometimes classified as an enumerative theory, contrasting with explanatory theories such as subjectivism (Crisp 2006, 102–3; Fletcher 2013). But this does not mean that objective list theorists cannot provide any explanation, or justification, at all of why something should be recognized as objectively prudentially valuable.

²⁰For two other rebuttals of Rosati’s argument, see Dorsey (2017b, 697–98) and Sarch (2011, 171–73).

²¹In a recent article (2020), Rosati offers an analysis of ‘fit’ that is intended to *capture*, rather than to provide independent support for, the idea that what is good for a person must be something that this person could care about, an idea she seems to take for granted (251). One element of her analysis of fit is therefore that it is within the capacity of the welfare subject to desire the welfare object (259). This analysis of fit, failing DISTINCTNESS, can therefore not serve as an independent rationale for

Yet another explication of the DPT worth looking at has been offered by Robert Noggle (1999):

One of the main attractions of the desire theory of well-being [is] that it [makes] clear how well-being matters to us, and thus how it is connected to us. (308)

According to desire-based theories, well-being matters to us (and gains in well-being affect us) because it consists of getting what we want. The fact that desire-based theories make our well-being something that matters to us seems to be an advantage over theories that simply posit a list of things that make a person's life go well, whether they matter to the person or not. (303)

Noggle elaborates that only the satisfaction of certain desires matters to us, namely those that reflect the core of our identity, which is constituted by our most central concerns and values. The crucial term here is that of 'mattering.' On an intuitive interpretation of what 'mattering' means, the idea that a theory of wellbeing must explain how a person's wellbeing matters to her fails EXCLUSIVENESS. Advocates of *any* theory of wellbeing can say that wellbeing matters to the person to whom it belongs for the simple reason that wellbeing *just is* what is good for this person. It is difficult to conceive how what is good for a person could possibly *not* matter to this person. If, say, pleasure and friendship are objective prudential goods, these things matter to a person because they are, well, good for her.

On a different interpretation it fails DISTINCTNESS. The phrase 'whether they matter to the person or not' seems to translate to 'whether they connect with this person's core concerns/desires/values or not.' On this interpretation the notion that what is good for a person must matter to her is not sufficiently distinct from the Internalist Constraint. The idea that wellbeing must 'matter' to people is thus either trivially accommodated by all theories of wellbeing or just a reformulation of the Internalist Constraint.

4. Kinship

Dorsey has acknowledged that familiar attempts at spelling out the DPT are inadequate. He has therefore set out to provide an improved account of the rationale behind subjectivism. His argument, which revolves around the notion of kinship, is arguably the most elaborate statement of the rationale underlying the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism. But it, too, fails EXPLICITNESS and EXCLUSIVENESS.

Before I explain why, I need to make a somewhat technical comment on how his characterization of the structure of the rationale underlying subjectivism relates to my own. This is necessary to avoid confusion and to do justice to Dorsey's writings on the topic. In his "Why Should Welfare 'Fit'?" (2017b), with which I engage below, he presents his argument from kinship as an argument for accepting the Internalist Constraint, which in turn is thought to support (a version of) the Core Tenet. At some places in his writings, however, Dorsey seems to equate the Internalist Constraint with the DPT (2012a, 275; 2017b, 687; though see 2012b, 432–34.). It is therefore not clear whether he intends his reflections on kinship as an *interpretation* of the DPT understood as the rationale behind the Internalist Constraint or as an *argument for* the DPT, which is understood to be identical with the Internalist Constraint. Again, I think we should distinguish the DPT and the Internalist Constraint. I also find it natural to read Dorsey's talk of 'kinship' and other subjectivists' talk of 'fittingness,' 'resonance,' 'nonalienation,' etc., as attempts to capture one and the same philosophical idea, an idea that is distinct from the Internalist Constraint. I will therefore, in what follows, interpret Dorsey's reflections on kinship as an interpretation of the DPT, providing independent support for the Internalist Constraint and the Core Tenet. In the end, all this is just a matter of

accepting the Internalist Constraint. Note that I am not here faulting Rosati, as she does not seem to be in the business of providing such a rationale.

framing. What matters is that Dorsey presents his argument from kinship as an argument that, by being sufficiently distinct from the Internalist Constraint, does not beg the question against objectivism.²²

This being said, Dorsey's principal idea is that "it is plausible to say that a constraint on prudential value for any welfare subject is that prudential values ought to bear the relevant 'kinship' relation to that subject" (2017b, 701). Dorsey also speaks of a 'harmony' that must exist between the welfare subject and what is good for her. But his primary focus is on the concept of kinship.

The first thing to notice is that this statement of the DPT, just like Rosati's talk of 'fit' and 'suitability,' relies on a metaphor in inverted commas, this time borrowed from anthropology and evolutionary biology. It is only natural to suspect that it, too, fails EXPLICITNESS and EXCLUSIVENESS. What is meant by kinship? And cannot objective accounts of wellbeing do justice to this metaphor, too? Although I am indeed going to argue that his statement of the DPT fails EXPLICITNESS and EXCLUSIVENESS, it would be unfair to draw this conclusion just yet. Dorsey is aware that his talk of kinship requires further clarification, and he makes an admirable effort to explain how the kinship approach satisfies both EXPLICITNESS and EXCLUSIVENESS, although he does not couch it in these terms.²³

To give us a more concrete idea, he offers examples:

[I]t certainly seems true that there is a kinship relation between the infant and the mother's warm embrace. There is certainly a kinship between the early sun's rays and the Morning Glories. There is certainly a kinship relation between the spring budbreak and the *vitis vinifera*, the mouse-hunt and tomcat, the speedy baserunner and inside-the-park homerun. (2017b, 701)

However, if we do not know what something is, providing a small sample of examples of this thing helps us only so much. It is still underdetermined. He proceeds to explain that kinship relations "all share in common that they are, broadly speaking, of positive valence" (2017b, 701). But given that 'being of positive valence' must mean something other than 'increasing wellbeing' lest it be question-begging, it is again unclear what might be meant. Dorsey admits that this term is "difficult to analyze" (2017b, 701n26) and, in an effort to elucidate the term, he provides further examples of relationships that have a positive valence:

A positive relation is one that is borne between the infant child and the mother's embrace, but not between the infant child and the ear infection. Contributions to, e.g., development rather than deformation, perfection rather than imperfection, health rather than illness, love rather than hate, and so on and so forth are all relations that are broadly positive valenced and are all potential iterations of a kinship relation. (2017b, 701n26)

Thus, Dorsey's characterization of the kinship relation relies heavily on a set of examples of kinship relations.²⁴ This is a legitimate way of introducing a concept, but the way in which Dorsey proceeds is problematic. The examples he provides are, it seems to me, mostly situations in which the wellbeing of a welfare subject is enhanced, be it a of human person, an animal, or a plant. Of

²²It should also be noted that in Dorsey's recent book (2021), which features a marginally adjusted version of "Why Should Welfare 'Fit'?", the argument from kinship is presented as an argument for a weak version of the Core Tenet *directly* rather than for the Internalist Constraint as an intermediate step. This is an interesting variation of the argument but, again, what matters is that Dorsey is in the business of spelling out an independent rationale for subjectivism (independent, that is, from the Internalist Constraint).

²³Dorsey's remarks on how the kinship account meets DISTINCTNESS are convincing (2017b, 704).

²⁴He also explains the kinship relation in terms of what contributes to a person's flourishing and what enlivens her (2017b, 701). But, as I read Dorsey, only nonvaluing welfare subjects maintain kinship relations of this sort. As Dorsey observes, something can contribute to a person's flourishing without being valued (2017b, 705).

course, this makes sense given the importance of the kinship relation for wellbeing. But this also makes it difficult to discern what is meant by kinship, if it is to refer to a relation that is distinct from the ‘increases wellbeing’ relation. What would help is (a large number) of examples of situations that instantiate the kinship relation but not the ‘increases wellbeing’ relation.²⁵ This might allow us to master the concept of kinship as a distinct concept. Given only the examples provided by Dorsey, the concept of a kinship relation as distinct from that of ‘increases wellbeing’ remains elusive.

To see this more clearly, note that it is unclear when the kinship relation is instantiated between two entities neither of which is a welfare subject. Is it instantiated between a windmill and the wind blowing into its sails, or between the near-complete jigsaw puzzle and the last missing piece, or between a light bulb and an electric current, or between hot water and tea leaves, and so on? We cannot tell. It is not a complete stretch to describe these relationships as ‘positive valenced’ of sorts. It is a bit more of a stretch to speak of a ‘harmony’ in these situations. And while there are similarities between the above relationships and Dorsey’s examples of kinship relationships, they are also in many ways quite unlike each other. Thus, for all we know about the kinship relation, it could easily be instantiated in all of the above situations, in some of them, or none. This indicates that despite Dorsey’s efforts the meaning of ‘kinship’ remains unclear.²⁶

Dorsey’s account thus fails EXPLICITNESS. Even if we agreed that accepting the Internalist Constraint is necessary to accommodate the idea of kinship, this idea is ultimately so unclear that the appeal of the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism had better not depend on it.

But it also fails EXCLUSIVENESS. That is, it does not seem that we have to accept the Internalist Constraint to accommodate the idea of kinship. Dorsey suggests that different welfare subjects maintain different kinship relations depending on the nature of the welfare subject. Humans maintain different kinship relations from, say, flowers or trees, because humans differ from flowers and trees in relevant respects. Some welfare subjects, for instance, maintain kinship relations with things that contribute to their ‘flourishing’ or that ‘enlivens’ them (2017b, 701, 705). Adult human welfare subjects, by contrast, maintain kinship relations with and only with what they value. It is their capacity to make value judgments, their being valuing agents, that singles out their relationship with things they value as special. It is useful to quote Dorsey at length on this:

[W]hen an individual gains the capacity to value, this person now has the capacity to forge deeper *relationships* to particular values (or potential values) than would otherwise have been possible. To value something is for it to be the case that *I care about, I promote, I treat as good*, and so on, that very thing—whether or not that thing has any additional underlying value properties. By exercising my valuing capacities, I can mark out particular objects, states of affairs, and so forth as mattering to me, as important to me, as—in a very real way—*mine*, in a way that is not possible for non-valuing agents. Contrariwise, in exercising my valuing capacities in a negative way (i.e., by disvaluing or failing to value), I forge a *negative* relationship to individual goods, even those that might have been valuable for non-valuers, or, indeed, other valuers.” (2017b, 702)

²⁵I am here assuming that kinship is only necessary but not also sufficient for the ‘increases wellbeing’ relation. If it were both necessary and sufficient, it would be even less clear how providing such examples might enable us to master ‘kinship’ as a distinct concept. Dorsey seems to hold that in valuing welfare subjects, kinship is both necessary and sufficient for something to be good for this subject (2021, 111). But this is compatible with kinship being only a necessary condition in nonvaluing welfare subjects. It is also compatible with kinship relations existing in nonwelfare contexts, e.g., between two things neither of which is a welfare subject. Their existence would also make sense on an intuitive level, as talk of kinship (and harmony, positive valence) does not necessarily seem to be restricted to the realm of welfare.

²⁶A reviewer wondered whether we could rely on simple intuitive judgments to help us fill out the concept’s extension. I do not think we can. For we cannot develop reliable intuitions about this based on the sketchy characterization we have been provided. Moreover, many will not have any firm intuitions about the extension of ‘kinship’ to begin with, let alone reliable ones, precisely because it is underdefined. I, for one, have no firm intuitions about whether any of the above relationships instantiate kinship or not.

Our valuing something is therefore both necessary and sufficient for there to be a kinship relation.

“For valuers, valuing attitudes *construct* the kinship relation. If this is correct—and if a theory of prudential value ought to respect the extent to which a welfare subject bears a kinship relation to the good, this simply implies, for valuers at least, *The [Internalist] Constraint*.” (2017b, 702)

This is how, according to Dorsey, the notion of kinship vindicates the Internalist Constraint. More precisely, it vindicates the version of the Internalist Constraint that features ‘valuing’ as the relevant pro-attitude.

Objectivists can agree that kinship relations, however vague this concept may be, vary as a function of the subject of these relations (whether the subject is a plant, an animal, an adult human being, a child, etc.). They can also, of course, agree that adult human beings are valuing agents and, as valuing agents, forge relationships to (potential) values. This is a truism. Objectivists can, however, reject that this entails that we maintain kinship relations with and only with the things we value. An objectivist could argue along the following lines to demonstrate how Dorsey’s account fails EXCLUSIVENESS: It is true that we are valuing agents, but we possess, again, many other important traits. We are agents who can set themselves goals, who maintain friendships, who feel pleasure and pain, who have a sense of beauty, who are capable of theoretical reasoning, and so on. Given these traits of ours, why not say that we maintain a kinship relation to such values as achievement, friendship, pleasure, the experience of beauty, knowledge, and so on, which are classical items on the lists of objective list theorists? This is a very natural interpretation of what ‘kinship’ might mean in this context. The relation between, say, an adult human and friendship would hardly appear as the ‘odd one out’ among the examples of kinship relations provided by Dorsey. The idea, then, that what is good for a person must stand in a kinship relation to this person does not rule out objective accounts of wellbeing in any obvious way.

Dorsey might respond that this objection fails to take seriously his insistence that the trait of being a valuing agent is privileged over all other traits. The reason why according to Dorsey our being valuing agents must be the decisive trait is that it means that we can forge deeper relationships with values. I do not find this reasoning convincing. For a trait to be privileged, it has to be privileged or salient *from the point of view of the idea of kinship*. The argument would have to be that *given what kinship is*, our trait of having the capacity to value is special. But this inference is ad hoc. Objectivists can accept Dorsey’s characterization of kinship and plausibly reject that our trait of being valuing agents is the decisive one. Nothing in his characterization of kinship forces us to privilege this trait. He would have to claim that *given how he has characterized the notion of kinship*, it makes no sense to say that adult humans maintain a kinship relation to (for instance) friendship, irrespective of whether they value it. But this is just not plausible.

To be sure, this inference is not ad hoc if this deeper relationship we forge with what we value is assumed to be the kinship relation itself, rather than just the ordinary valuing relationship. If we assume that when an agent values something, a kinship relation with this thing is created, it is of course true that our capacity to value is privileged from the point of view of the idea of kinship. But to make this assumption would be to beg the question. Whether kinship relations depend on what we value is precisely the question at issue. That this is so needs to be *established*.

There is another problem with Dorsey’s argument. Our being valuing agents, whether this trait is privileged or not, need not even imply that we maintain kinship relations with what we value. Instead, it could mean that we maintain a kinship relation with autonomy, that is, with the freedom to decide for oneself on the basis of one’s value judgments. And autonomy is, of course, another item that many objectivists have on their lists. An objectivist could thus agree that our being valuing agents is *one* of our relevant traits. She could also agree that when we gain the capacity to value, this “changes our relationship to value” (2017b, 706). But she could plausibly insist that what this means

is that autonomy is objectively a prudential good. Dorsey's reasoning thus runs into a similar problem as Rosati's argument from autonomy.

I do not mean to say that Dorsey's own suggestion as to what the kinship idea entails is entirely implausible or false. That our being valuing agents is the decisive factor and that we therefore maintain kinship relations with and only with things we value is certainly *compatible* with his characterization of kinship. But so is an objectivist interpretation of kinship. The problem is that Dorsey's argument is far from conclusive. For all we know about kinship, it may be that we form kinship relations with and only with what we value. But it is also perfectly conceivable that we maintain them with the sort of things we find on objectivists' lists. This indeterminacy is due to the lack of clarity as to what kinship is. The account we have been provided is too sketchy to rule out an objectivist interpretation.²⁷

Dorsey deserves credit for taking seriously the necessity to flesh out the DPT, but his attempt to do so is, as far as I can see, unsuccessful. It fails both EXPLICITNESS and EXCLUSIVENESS. The notion of kinship remains too vague to provide a justification for the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism. Moreover, objectivists can plausibly maintain that objective list theory is perfectly compatible with the idea that kinship is a necessary constraint on prudential value.

5. The No-Beating-Heart Challenge and the problem of idealization

One reason why the rationale behind subjectivism has received increased attention recently is that its precise formulation seems relevant for whether subjective theories can include an idealization procedure without being inconsistent. David Enoch has argued that adding a procedure of idealization is incompatible with the rationale behind subjectivism (2005). If one accepts some version of the DPT as the rationale behind subjectivism, assigning ethical significance to a person's idealized rather than her actual pro-attitudes is to betray this underlying thought. It would be to move away in an ad hoc fashion from what 'fits' her or 'resonates' with her or with what would not 'alienate' her. But without idealization, subjectivism would be extensionally inadequate. Few subjectivists would be willing to bite the bullet and maintain that what is good for a person is determined by her *actual* pro-attitudes, no matter how ill-informed or irrational they are.

It is in the context of the problem of idealization that Dorsey has underscored the centrality of the DPT for subjectivism. Advocating a value-based version of subjectivism, he argues that subjectivists can and should accept idealization, but only at the level of a theory of valuing (2017a).²⁸ I do not want to weigh in on this debate, except to note that the implications of my criticism of the DPT with regard to the problem of idealization are ambivalent at best. If the principal rationale for subjectivism turns out to be flawed and must be jettisoned, the introduction of conditions of idealization can no longer clash with this rationale. In a way, the problem of idealization dissolves. This is no cause for rejoicing, though. If we discard the DPT, we lack an important reason for accepting subjectivism about wellbeing in the first place.

6. What are the options?

What is widely regarded as the principal rationale for accepting a subjective account of wellbeing has proven elusive. Subjectivists might respond to the No-Beating-Heart Challenge in four different ways.

²⁷A reviewer has suggested that if *anything* bears the relevant kinship relation to us, it is the objects of our valuing attitudes. But this is not obvious. As objectivists are keen to point out, people desire and value all kinds of things, including things that seem to impoverish their lives, stunt their personal development, and so on. Therefore, given how kinship has been characterized, it is not obvious that we bear a kinship relation to what we value. Vague as it is, the concept of kinship *can* be interpreted to have this implication, but it *need* not be.

²⁸On the debate about idealization, see also Lin (2019) and Sobel (2009).

1. They might reject the notion that the Internalist Constraint even requires an additional underlying rationale such as the DPT.²⁹
2. They might contest the three criteria introduced above.
3. They might discard the DPT and substitute an alternative justification for the Internalist Constraint or for subjectivism's Core Tenet directly.
4. They might show that there exists a statement of the DPT that meets the three criteria. This can be done either by showing that I have failed to appreciate a compelling statement of this idea offered in the literature, or by providing a novel formulation of it that meets these criteria.

Option 1 amounts to a denial of what motivated the quest for a rationale for the Internalist Constraint in the first place, namely that it *requires* further justification. This option will leave objectivists unconvinced and subjectivism in the same precarious dialectical position as before. Option 2 is not much better. The only condition one might be tempted to reject is EXPLICITNESS. But it is difficult to see how an account of the DPT that fails EXPLICITNESS might provide the needed independent support for the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism. It would be tantamount to admitting that subjectivism rests ultimately on concepts and metaphors whose meanings elude us. Option 3 is, in principle, possible, but it would mean giving up on the 'beating heart' of subjectivism, which many subjectivists will find unpalatable.³⁰ The fourth approach is, I think, the most promising one, and I am open to the possibility that a compelling statement of the DPT can be formulated.³¹

With regard to possible future attempts to provide a compelling statement of the DPT, it is worth observing that subjectivists can say two different things about why we should accept the DPT. They can present the DPT as an independently plausible principle in its own right. This is arguably how the DPT is usually thought of. Or they can add another layer of complexity to the argument for subjectivism by suggesting that there is a deeper reason why what is good for a person must fit her, stand in a kinship relation to her, etc. While the name suggests that the DPT is, precisely, deeply plausible in its own right, Dorsey at one point seems to favor the latter view. He argues that the idea of kinship is necessary to explain how something can be good *for a person*. Any theory of wellbeing must explain how a person's good is *her* good, or good *for her*, rather than just good *tout court*. And subjectivists might hold that the DPT is at least part of the explanation how *something* good can be *someone's* good. It is *someone's* good because, and only when, it maintains a kinship relation to this person (or a relation of fit, resonance, etc.) (Dorsey 2017b, 700–1).³²

This approach has the advantage that it appeals to an idea that objectivists cannot reject. Objectivists agree that some account must be given of how *something* good can be *someone's* good. It has, however, the disadvantage that objectivists may provide such an account that does not rely on the DPT. They may, for instance, provide a locative analysis of prudential value that explains how something can be good *for a person* without having to appeal to some notion of fittingness, kinship, etc. (see Fletcher 2011). By contrast, if the DPT is argued to be independently plausible in its own

²⁹Chris Heathwood, for instance, acknowledging that “[o]ther philosophers have offered arguments for internalism,” mentions the option of accepting the Internalist Constraint on account of its intrinsic intuitive plausibility: “Why think the principle is true? I suspect that, to many people, as it does to Railton, it simply seems right: it is hard to believe that we can benefit someone by giving her things with which she is utterly unimpressed and in which she will remain forever uninterested” (2016, 137). Note that Railton does seem to offer an argument for the Internalist Constraint, namely the argument from nonalienness.

³⁰There are a few arguments in the literature for the Internalist Constraint or the Core Tenet that are not based on the DPT (Brink 2008; Rosati 1996; Velleman 1988; see also footnote 15 above and footnote 33 below).

³¹One account of the DPT discussed by Fletcher, according to which a theory of wellbeing is alienating if, roughly, “it ignores the agent's affective life completely” (2016, 72), has not been discussed here because Fletcher characterizes it as compatible with versions of objective list theory.

³²I read him as presenting it as a necessary but not sufficient condition. On this topic, see also Rosati (2020).

right, objectivists cannot dismiss it on the grounds that there are other ways of making sense of how something can be good *for a person*. I leave it to subjectivists to decide which option is more promising.³³

To summarize and conclude, the various concepts that subjectivists have invoked to spell out the DPT—‘suitability,’ ‘resonance,’ ‘fittingness,’ ‘nonalienness,’ ‘mattering,’ ‘harmony,’ ‘kinship’—fail to shed much light on the substance of this thought. Subjectivists’ failure to provide an illuminating account of the DPT does not refute subjectivism, but it significantly reduces its plausibility. The DPT has been described as the beating heart of subjectivism, and at this point it is unclear whether it is beating at all. The standard case for subjectivism thus turns out to rest on shaky ground. It is true that the Internalist Constraint has been taken by some to possess intrinsic intuitive plausibility. But appeals to its intuitive plausibility have only so much force. This is why Dorsey identified the need for an independent rationale for the Internalist Constraint that is more profound than a mere intuition. But the DPT is itself a vague and poorly understood philosophical idea. As such, it fails to lend independent support to the Internalist Constraint and thus to accomplish what it is supposed to accomplish. Until subjectivists provide an improved account of the DPT, the Internalist Constraint and subjectivism along with it remain poorly justified philosophical doctrines.

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³³Like Dorsey, I take it that the DPT and the idea that a person’s good must be *her* good, or good *for her*, are two different ideas. The DPT is the idea that a person’s good must *fit* her (or resonate with her, bear a kinship relation with her, etc.), rather than just that it must *be* hers. The former is, I take it, a substantive claim, while the latter is a conceptual one. This is why I have not discussed L. W. Sumner’s argument that only subjectivism can explain how something can be *someone’s* good (1995). In Sumner’s argument, unlike in Dorsey’s, the DPT seems to play no role. It has also been dealt with by Fletcher (2011).

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