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## 2 Objectivity/Subjectivity of Values

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prominently, there is a debate about whether the 26  
true theory of welfare treats welfare as objective 27  
or subjective. There is also considerable contro- 28  
versy concerning what makes theories objective 29  
and subjective in the first place. 30

## 6 Synonyms

7 [Objective/subjective distinction](#)

### Objectivity and Subjectivity in Value Theory 31

In general, evaluative facts (e.g., the fact that 32  
knowledge is good, the fact that stealing 33  
is wrong) are called *objective* if they obtain 34  
independently of the beliefs and other attitudes 35  
(e.g., desires, approvals, hopes, wishes, fears, 36  
likings) of subjects. By contrast, evaluative 37  
facts are *subjective* if they depend for their 38  
existence on the beliefs or attitudes of subjects. 39  
For example, if knowledge is good simply in and 40  
of itself, irrespective of whether people actually 41  
do or would desire it, then the fact that knowledge 42  
is good is objective – or equivalently, knowledge 43  
is an objective good or value. By contrast, if what 44  
makes stealing wrong is that certain people do 45  
or would disapprove of it, then the relevant 46  
evaluative fact is subjective – or equivalently, 47  
stealing is subjectively bad. 48

## 8 Definition

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10 knowledge is good, the fact that stealing  
11 is wrong) are called *objective* if they obtain  
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14 likings) of subjects. By contrast, evaluative facts  
15 are *subjective* if they depend for their existence  
16 on the beliefs or attitudes of subjects.

Historically important ► [ethicists](#) can be 49  
classified as objectivists or subjectivists 50  
depending on whether they hold that the most 51  
important and fundamental evaluative facts are 52  
objective or subjective. Plato, Aristotle, Henry 53  
Sidgwick, G. E. Moore, and W. D. Ross are 54  
usually classified as objectivists. Moore in 55  
particular appears to hold a very strong form of 56  
objectivism according to which evaluative facts 57  
obtain independently of the very existence of 58

## 17 Description

18 The objective/subjective distinction is deployed  
19 in several related ways within the philosophical  
20 and psychological literature on welfare,  
21 ► [well-being](#), ► [happiness](#), prudential value,  
22 and ► [quality of life](#) (hereafter, “welfare”).  
23 There is controversy about whether the welfare  
24 of human beings and other sentient creatures is  
25 itself objectively or subjectively good. More

59 creatures with minds or psychologies (Moore,  
60 1903). On the other hand, Hume, James, Nietz-  
61 sche, and Dewey are normally classed as subjec-  
62 tivists. For such theorists, value and normative  
63 reasons get into the world through the sentiments,  
64 reactive attitudes, valuing activities, or purposes  
65 of human beings. Other famous ethicists, such as  
66 Hobbes, Kant, J. S. Mill, and Rawls, are more  
67 difficult to classify, in part because there is con-  
68 troversy about the interpretation of their views  
69 and in part because their views combine objective  
70 and subjective elements.

### 71 Objective and Subjective Theories of Welfare

72 Theories of welfare can also be classified as  
73 objective or subjective or as hybrids. There is  
74 more agreement among welfare theorists about  
75 *which* theories are objective and subjective than  
76 about precisely *why* they count as such.

77 Versions of the Objective List Theory, perfec-  
78 tionism, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's  
79 capabilities approach, Richard Kraut's  
80 developmentalism, and Daniel Haybron's self-  
81 fulfillment theory are all *objective* theories of  
82 welfare (see Murphy, 2001, Hurka, 1993, Sen &  
83 Nussbaum, 1993, Kraut 2007, Haybron, 2008).  
84 This is because they allow that at least some  
85 conditions and activities are directly good for  
86 one, whether or not one desires them, enjoys  
87 them, takes satisfaction in them, or believes that  
88 they are good. Conditions and activities thought  
89 to have this status include knowledge, friendship,  
90 love, moral virtue, the appreciation of beauty,  
91 sensory awareness, mobility, and emotional  
92 health.

93 By contrast, desire satisfactionism,  
94 preferentism, L. W. Sumner's life satisfactionism,  
95 Valerie Tiberius's values-based theory, and Dale  
96 Dorsey's judgment subjectivism are *subjective*  
97 theories of welfare (see Feinberg, 1984, Sumner,  
98 1996, Tiberius, 2008, Dorsey, 2012). This is  
99 because they say that in order for something to be  
100 directly good for one, one must desire or prefer or  
101 enjoy it, or else derive satisfaction from it, or else  
102 believe that it is good.

103 ▶ **Hedonism** is a more controversial case. Fred  
104 Feldman's *attitudinal hedonism* construes the  
105 building blocks of welfare as episodes of

106 enjoyment taken in propositional objects 106  
(Feldman, 2004). This form of hedonism resem- 107  
bles other forms of subjectivism because it is 108  
based on personal attitudes; additionally, these 109  
attitudes may be conceptually linked with desire 110  
(Heathwood, 2006). However, other forms of 111  
hedonism construe pleasure as an experiential 112  
state or a family-resemblance class of such states 113  
(Crisp, 2005). These resemble the Objective List 114  
Theory, insofar as they claim that a particular 115  
experience is good for one, no matter whether 116  
one desires it, enjoys it, takes satisfaction in it, 117  
or believes it is good. For this and other reasons, 118  
some theorists have doubted hedonism's subjec- 119  
tivist credentials (Dorsey, 2011, Fletcher, 2012). 120

121 Other theories of welfare count as *hybrids* 121  
insofar as they combine objective and subjective 122  
elements. Of course, looked at in one way, most 123  
of the objective theories already mentioned are 124  
hybrids: for most of them allow that ▶ **desire** 125  
**satisfaction**, ▶ **pleasure**, or aim achievement is 126  
welfare-enhancing, but insist that other things 127  
like knowledge and friendship are also welfare- 128  
enhancing. Still, these are usually classed as 129  
objective theories. Paradigmatic hybrid theories, 130  
by contrast, require that the individual building 131  
blocks of welfare each have subjective and objec- 132  
tive elements. For example, Robert Adams pro- 133  
poses that welfare consists in the enjoyment of 134  
things that are objectively excellent or worth- 135  
while (Adams, 1999; cf. also Parfit, 1984; 136  
Scanlon, 1998; Arneson, 1999; Feldman, 2004; 137  
Appiah, 2005). Other approaches, while largely 138  
subjectivist, count as hybrids insofar as they 139  
claim that the preservation of the systems that 140  
make conation and goal-directed action possible 141  
is good for one (Raibley, 2012). 142

143 Before examining the reasons for thinking that 143  
welfare must be either objective or subjective, let 144  
us further consider the nature of this distinction. 145  
Formulating it precisely has proven somewhat 146  
difficult. 147

148 David Brink writes that "Subjective theories 148  
of value claim that the components of a valuable 149  
life consist in or depend importantly on certain of 150  
the individual's psychological states. . . . By con- 151  
trast . . . objective theories of value claim that 152  
what is intrinsically valuable neither consists in 153

[Au1]



154 nor depends importantly on such psychological  
155 states” (pp. 220–1). One worry with this proposal  
156 is that “psychological states” form a broad  
157 category. A theory that says that the only  
158 welfare goods are knowledge and the  
159 appreciation of beauty would effectively say  
160 that the valuable life consists in psychological  
161 states. But this would not be a characteristically  
162 subjective theory.

163 L. W. Sumner has written that, according to  
164 subjective theories, having a favorable attitude  
165 towards one’s life or some of its ingredients is  
166 a *necessary condition* for one’s life to be going  
167 well for one (Sumner, 1996, p. 38). By contrast,  
168 he says, objective theories allow that one could be  
169 well-off without favorably regarding one’s own  
170 life or any of its ingredients (p. 38). Sumner does  
171 not provide both necessary and sufficient condi-  
172 tions for subjective theories, so this analysis is at  
173 best incomplete. This necessary condition for  
174 subjective theories may be approximately cor-  
175 rect. However, it is not entirely clear that one  
176 must have favorable attitudes towards the ingre-  
177 dients of one’s life to be faring well on some  
178 forms of desire satisfactionism and aim  
179 achievementism: if one is satisfying one’s desires  
180 (or getting what one aimed for), it may not matter  
181 that one does not enjoy (or is not satisfied with)  
182 what one gets. Furthermore, most objective the-  
183 ories that have actually been defended *do* require,  
184 at least for high levels of welfare, that one favor-  
185 ably regard aspects of one’s life.

186 Sobel (2009) recommends a different way of  
187 distinguishing between objective and subjective  
188 theories. He writes: “Subjective accounts of well-  
189 being maintain that one’s rationally contingent  
190 non-truth-assessable pro-attitudes ground true  
191 claims about what is good for one” (p. 336).  
192 A problem is that this criterion may not correctly  
193 classify versions of life satisfactionism and judg-  
194 ment subjectivism. This is because judgments  
195 that one’s life is satisfactory or that one is faring  
196 well *do* seem to be truth-apt. Some forms of  
197 subjectivism base welfare on *truth-assessable*  
198 pro-attitudes.

199 Dorsey proposes that subjectivism requires  
200 that “prudentially valuable states be endorsed by  
201 the person for whom these states are valuable”

(2011); he also writes that “subjectivism [states 202  
that] a person’s evaluative perspective, under the 203  
right conditions, determines that which is good 204  
for her, and how good it is for her” (2013, p. 1). 205  
While these formulations are suggestive and 206  
plausible, it is a little unclear what endorsement 207  
and a person’s evaluative perspective amount to. 208

On account of the difficulties noted in this 209  
section, there may be no neat and precise way to 210  
distinguish between objective and subjective the- 211  
ories of welfare. Perhaps this is to be expected: as 212  
Fletcher notes, our taxonomies of welfare theo- 213  
ries are interest relative, and so they are not likely 214  
to reflect perfect joints in nature (Fletcher, 2012). 215  
Perhaps if some of the building blocks or main 216  
determinants of welfare are partly constituted by 217  
pro-attitudes (desires, attitudinal pleasures, lik- 218  
ings, values – perhaps also aims and intentions) 219  
or by judgments of satisfaction or beliefs that 220  
things are good for one, this is sufficient for 221  
a theory to be partially subjective. Of course, 222  
there are hybrid theories that are partially but 223  
not wholly subjective, insofar as they say that 224  
the contribution made by the building blocks of 225  
welfare to the value of one’s life depends on the 226  
objects of one’s pro-attitudes. Roughly speaking, 227  
the more a theory says that one’s welfare level 228  
depends on the objects of one’s pro-attitudes – or 229  
on things besides one’s pro-attitudes, judgments, 230  
and beliefs – the more objective the theory is. 231

### Is Welfare Objective or Subjective? 232

Arguments for welfare’s objectivity aim to show 233  
that subjective theories have unacceptable impli- 234  
cations about the welfare of individuals who pur- 235  
sue trivial, worthless, masochistic, or immoral 236  
ends. A person who simply desires – and enjoys – 237  
scratching an itch, counting blades of grass, or 238  
knocking down icicles is surely not faring well 239  
(Plato’s *Philebus*; Rawls, 1971, Kraut, 1994). 240  
Those who aim for, achieve, and enjoy great 241  
fame and wealth – or revenge upon their ene- 242  
mies – do not seem to benefit proportionally 243  
(Kraut, 2007). A person who desires and enjoys 244  
pain, bodily mutilation, and humiliation – and 245  
gets all these things – is not normally thought to 246  
be faring well (Carson, 2000; Raibley, 2012). 247  
Finally, a person who desires and enjoys 248

249 inflicting harm on others does not appear to be  
 250 faring especially well.

251 But on the other hand, if a person does not like  
 252 or enjoy his life – and if he does not get anything  
 253 that he wanted or set out to achieve – it does not  
 254 seem that it can plausibly be called a good life *for*  
 255 *him* (cf. Adams, 1999, p. 95). And so it seems that  
 256 there is also some kernel of truth in the neighbor-  
 257 hood of subjectivism.

258 Sumner famously argues that objective theo-  
 259 ries of welfare such as the Objective List Theory  
 260 and perfectionism fail to capture welfare’s “char-  
 261 acteristically positional or perspectival charac-  
 262 ter” (Sumner, 1996, p. 43). He concludes that  
 263 “subjectivity turns out to be a necessary condition  
 264 of success in a theory of welfare” (Sumner, 1996,  
 265 p. 27).

266 Sumner has several arguments for this conclu-  
 267 sion. One, which we can call the weak argument,  
 268 claims that any plausible theory of welfare must  
 269 “make your well-being depend on your own con-  
 270 cerns: the things you care about, attach impor-  
 271 tance to, regard as mattering, and so on” (Sumner,  
 272 1996, p. 42). It is then claimed that objective  
 273 theories that accord no importance to a subject’s  
 274 hedonic and emotional states, conative attitudes,  
 275 or judgments of satisfaction cannot tie welfare to  
 276 one’s own concerns in this way. Therefore, such  
 277 objective theories are unacceptable. This argu-  
 278 ment is persuasive, but it merely establishes that  
 279 pro-attitudes or beliefs of the right sort be  
 280 included among the direct determinants of wel-  
 281 fare. But some objective and hybrid theories *do*  
 282 include these states (Arneson, 1999; Adams,  
 283 2003; Appiah, 2005; Fletcher, 2013).

284 A second argument can also be found in Sum-  
 285 ner. The first premise of what we can call the  
 286 strong argument states the subject relativity of  
 287 welfare: “the prudential value of my life is its  
 288 value *for me* . . .” (p. 42). That is, welfare value  
 289 is a form of value *for* a subject, as opposed to for  
 290 the world or for mankind or for no one in partic-  
 291 ular; it has a “characteristically positional or per-  
 292 spectival character” (p. 37, p. 43). Since  
 293 subjective theories of welfare say that welfare is  
 294 largely or wholly constituted by perspectival atti-  
 295 tudes – i.e., attitudes anchored in a subject’s per-  
 296 spective – they afford the best explanation of this

297 fact: “welfare is subject-relative because it is  
 298 subjective” (p. 43). Accordingly, some subjective  
 299 theory of welfare must be true: we could not have  
 300 an account of welfare’s nature that made no ref-  
 301 erence to the subjective experiences of the partic-  
 302 ular subject. This argument seems  
 303 inconclusive. It might establish that welfare  
 304 does not turn entirely on non-experiential prop-  
 305 erties of the subject. But whoever held that it did?  
 306 Sumner seems to be claiming that the positional  
 307 or perspectival character of welfare value (the  
 308 fact that it is value *for* a subject) requires that  
 309 welfare be given a *strictly* subjective treatment.  
 310 But it is not explained why this is so (Sobel,  
 311 1997).

312 Another popular argument for subjectivism  
 313 about welfare turns on the internalism require-  
 314 ment (Rosati, 1996). This requirement states that,  
 315 if something, x, is good for a subject, S, then  
 316 S must be capable of being motivated to pursue  
 317 or promote x. Peter Railton explains the main  
 318 idea behind this requirement as follows: “[W]  
 319 hat is intrinsically valuable for a person must  
 320 have a connection with what he would find in  
 321 some degree compelling or attractive, at least if  
 322 he were rational and aware” (Railton, 2002, p.  
 323 47). Some reason that if this requirement is true,  
 324 then some version of subjectivism is true. How-  
 325 ever, the requirement itself is difficult to inter-  
 326 pret. What precisely is it to “be capable of being  
 327 motivated to pursue or promote” something?  
 328 Additionally, there is a worry that this use of the  
 329 internalism requirement is question-begging,  
 330 because the requirement itself is just subjectivism  
 331 stated in another way. For further discussion of  
 332 these and related issues, see Sarch, 2011.

**Cross-References**

- ▶ Ethics 334
- ▶ Eudaimonia 335
- ▶ Good Life, Theories of 336
- ▶ Happiness 337
- ▶ Preference Satisfaction Theories 338
- ▶ Wellbeing, Philosophical Theories of 339



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