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Abstract: This paper considers two different ways of formulating a desire-satisfaction theory of prudential value. The first version of the theory (the object view) assigns basic prudential value to the state of affairs that is the object of the person's desire. The second version (the combo view) assigns basic prudential value to the compound state of affairs in which a) the person desires some state of affairs and b) this state of affairs obtains. My aims in this paper are twofold. First, to highlight that these are not mere notational variants, but in fact have quite different implications, so that this distinction is not one that the theorist of prudential value should ignore. More positively, I argue that the object view is better able to capture what is distinctive and appealing about subjective theories of prudential value, on any plausible account of what the central subjectivist insight is.

On Two Interpretations of the Desire-Satisfaction Theory of Prudential Value

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1. Introduction

This paper considers two different ways of formulating a desire-satisfaction theory of prudential value.¹ The first version of the theory assigns basic prudential value to the state of affairs that is the object of the person's desire. The second version assigns basic prudential value to the more

¹ The prudential value of a life (or of some part of a life) is a measure of how well it is going *for the person living it*. I will sometimes use the more familiar term 'well-being' to express the same evaluative notion. The question at issue in this paper is which states of affairs have *basic* or *non-derivative* prudential value. I call these *the basic constituents* of prudential value.

complex state of affairs in which a) the person desires some state of affairs and b) this state of affairs obtains.²

Insofar as, on both views, a person's level of well-being supervenes on the extent to which their desires are satisfied, these are both desire-satisfaction accounts. The views need not disagree at all in their evaluations of how well off any given person is. Nonetheless, I argue that these formulations in fact amount to two distinct theories of prudential value, with different implications. One important moral of this paper is thus that, even where two theories of prudential value issue the same verdicts about how well off any given person is, these theories can nonetheless diverge significantly, both in *which* states of affairs they count as basically good for a person, and in their explanation of *why* these states of affairs are prudentially valuable.

I will call the first formulation, according to which it is *x*, the state of affairs that is the *object* of person *y*'s desire, that is basically good for *y*, the *object view*. The second formulation, according to which it is the *combination* of person *y*'s desire for *x* and *x* itself that is basically good for *y*, I call the *combo view*.³ I am not the first to point out that these formulations differ in

² To say that person *y*'s desire for some state of affairs *x* is *satisfied* is just to say that *y* desires that *x* obtains and *x* does, in fact, obtain. Where the object of *y*'s desire does not obtain, I will say that the desire is *frustrated*. I am here assuming, for simplicity, an *unrestricted actualist* version of desire-satisfactionism. On this approach, the satisfaction of *any of a person's actual desires* is relevant to that person's well-being. The approach is *actualist* in that it is the desires a person has in the actual world that count, and *unrestricted* in that it imposes no constraints on which of these are prudentially relevant. The question of which of a person's desires ought to be accorded prudential relevance is of course of crucial importance, but we can afford to bracket it, as here the same issues arise for the object as for the combo view.

³ I am adopting this terminology from Ben Bradley's extremely helpful discussion of the two views (see Bradley 2009 and 2014). My discussion throughout this paper is much indebted to Bradley's. Rabinowicz and Osterberg (1994) instead call these views the object and *satisfaction* interpretations. I prefer Bradley's terminology because it is less likely to encourage confusion between the satisfaction *interpretation* and the desire-satisfaction theory itself.

some important respects.⁴ Nonetheless, one still finds many theorists of prudential value glossing over this distinction, and those who do not tend to underestimate its importance.

My aims in this paper are twofold. First, to highlight that the object and combo view are not mere notational variants, but in fact have different axiological implications. When considering the appeal (or lack thereof), of a desire-satisfaction approach, we should not elide these differences. More positively, I argue that, on either of two plausible characterizations of what I call *the subjectivist insight*, the object view comes out as preferable to the combo view. At least, this is so if we grant (as I believe we should) that an important desideratum, when assessing the merits of any given formulation of the desire-satisfaction theory, is that it be a recognizably subjective approach. By means of this inquiry, we will thus be zeroing in, not only on the best version of desire-satisfactionism, but on what is distinctive and appealing about subjective accounts of prudential value more broadly.

The plan of the paper is as follows. I begin, in section 2, by offering a more detailed characterization of the object and combo views. In section 3, I ask what makes a theory of prudential value subjective, and consider two distinct answers to this question, both of which seem to have considerable plausibility. In section 4 I show that, on either of these conceptions of the central subjectivist commitment, it is only the object view which lands the desire-satisfaction theory on the right side of the subjective-objective divide. In section 5 I consider what some others

⁴ The first published discussion of this interpretive issue that I am aware of (and still the most thorough) is found in Rabinowicz and Osterberg. Rabinowicz there argues for the object view, while Osterberg defends the combo view. Although the stated focus of their dialogue is preference utilitarianism, much of their discussion is also relevant to the issue of how best to understand the desire-satisfaction theory of prudential value. The two views are also discussed, under various names, by Dorsey (2012b, pp.272-5 and 2013), Heathwood (2005, p.491), and Sarch (2011, pp.179-81). So far there has been no detailed, paper-length evaluation of the comparative merits of these views precisely as approaches to prudential value.

have said (and might yet say) in favour of the combo view, and find these arguments to be wanting. Section 6 concludes.

2. A Closer Look at the Combo and Object Views

It is worth clarifying at the outset what the combo and object formulations are *not* disagreeing about. As understood here, both views take the *bearers* of basic prudential value to be *states of affairs*.⁵ Accordingly, the difference between them does not have to do with the ontological status of the entities that possess this sort of value. Rather, the question at issue is *which* states of affairs are basically prudentially valuable. It is fundamentally a dispute about what, for lack of a better term, we can call the *location* of the basic constituents of prudential value.

We can better understand how these two views differ (as well as what commitments they have in common) through the lens of a distinction that has arisen in the literature on the explanatory role of desires with respect to reasons. Suppose, first, that one holds the view that every action is motivated by some desire. As discussed most thoroughly by Pettit and Smith, there are two very different ways in which an agent's desire might figure into an explanation of why she did what she did.⁶ We might treat the desire as operating in the foreground of the agent's deliberation. On this picture, the agent is reflectively aware of the fact that she has this desire and explicitly takes the fact that *phi*-ing would satisfy it into account in deliberating about whether to *phi*. On the alternative picture, desire operates only in the background. Here, the agent *phis* just because *phi*-ing promises to bring about some state of affairs which she takes to be *desirable*. That is, according to Pettit and Smith, "[a]n agent...is sometimes prepared to act on his own ground-level desires

⁵ For our purposes, states of affairs are just those entities referred to by "that"-clauses. An example is the state of affairs *that Francine is taking pleasure in a beautiful sunset*.

⁶ Pettit and Smith (1990).

without bringing them explicitly into the foreground of deliberation.”⁷ They contrast this with the role that *the desires of others* typically play in one’s deliberations. “If somebody else desires that p, and he wishes to take this into account in his decision-making, then he must foreground the consideration of that desire. But if he himself desires that p...it will make perfect sense for him to act on that desire without explicitly focusing on it in his deliberation; all he may focus on is the fact that it is desirable in some way that p”.⁸

A comparable distinction has been drawn in the literature on *normative* reasons, and exploited most extensively by Mark Schroeder.⁹ Schroeder draws our attention to two ways in which person y’s desires might explain what y has a normative reason to do. First, y’s desires may figure in the *content* of the reasons that y has. Alternatively, y’s desires may merely provide the *background conditions* that explain why certain considerations and not others are reasons for y. On the former view, which Schroeder rejects, “the fact that Ronnie desires to dance...[is] *part* of the reason for Ronnie to go to the party...the fact that there will be dancing at the party isn’t *really* a reason for Ronnie to go there, all by itself—but only in combination with the fact that Ronnie desires to dance.”¹⁰ However, this view appears to give little weight to the role that the desire to dance actually plays in Ronnie’s psychic economy. For surely it is the opportunity to dance that really *appeals to* Ronnie, not the more complicated state of affairs that incorporates both his own desire and its satisfaction (unless, that is, he has a very unusual set of attitudes). If what we are after is a theory of normative reasons that takes the role of desire seriously, this lack of fit between

⁷ Ibid. (p. 583).

⁸ Ibid. (pp.583-4). In Rabinowicz and Osterberg (1994, p.3) a similar contrast is drawn between what they call the ‘participant’ and the ‘spectator’ models, in the context of the object and combo views. I will return to this point in section 4.

⁹ Schroeder (2007).

¹⁰ibid p.23

what the theory takes to be *normatively significant for Ronnie* and what is *actually significant to Ronnie* should give us pause, Schroeder thinks. On the alternative view that Schroeder goes on to defend, the fact that there will be dancing at the party is itself the reason for Ronnie to go there. Ronnie's desire to dance is necessary to explain why he has a reason to go to the party, but it does not constitute any part of his reason to do so. This seems, if nothing else, to match up better with Ronnie's own psychology.

I believe the object and combo views of prudential value can be fruitfully compared with these contrasting views about reasons. The parallel between Schroeder's view and the object view strikes me as especially close. Both views place desire at their very core, insofar as it is the presence of a desire for state of affairs *x* that explains why *x* is a) something *y* has a normative reason to pursue, or b) a basic constituent of *y*'s well-being. Just as on Schroeder's view Ronnie's desires wholly determine what he has reason to do, on the object view his desires wholly determine what is good for him. Nonetheless, these accounts treat Ronnie's desires as operating in the explanatory background.

When we are enumerating those states of affairs that are reasons for Ronnie, we need make no mention of his desires. Indeed, it is conceivable, if not plausible (since we typically desire among other things to be in certain mental states) that when we enumerate all the reasons that Ronnie has, his own mental states will *not appear anywhere on our list*. This last observation is quite compatible with the fact that it is certain of Ronnie's mental states (namely his desires) that explain why the considerations that *are* reasons for him are such.

Likewise, on the object view, what is good for Ronnie is the desired state of affairs *x*, *not* the combination of *x* (which could in principle be anything) and his desire. It is the state of affairs in which he dances that is a basic constituent of prudential value, not the combination of his

dancing and his desire to dance. This once more opens up the possibility that the basic constituents of Ronnie's *well-being* may all be states of affairs that are neither wholly nor partly constituted by his own mental states. The items which appear in our enumeration of the basic constituents of Ronnie's good could reside entirely outside of Ronnie's own head, even as their value would remain conditional on their bearing the right relation to what *is* going on in his head.

By contrast, the combo view takes the basic constituents of prudential value to be more complicated states of affairs, composed of both a mental element, namely Ronnie's desire that some state of affairs (in the above case, his dancing at the party) obtains, and an extra-mental element, namely that state of affairs itself. So, on this view, all those things that are basically good for Ronnie are located *at least partly* within his own head. The combo view shares this feature with the view, against which Schroeder is arguing, that one's desires are always a constitutive part of one's normative reasons.

Despite its clear parallels with the debate about how to understand desire-based theories of normative reasons, the question of whether to embrace the object or the combo view has not yet received such sustained philosophical attention. This is not because there is less at stake in this dispute, I believe. The question of whether every normative reason goes hand in hand with some desire is far from the only question that matters. Theories that share this commitment may differ in their other commitments in ways that significantly impact their overall appeal. The same is true of desire-based theories of prudential value. The object and combo views are equally committed to the claim that, for every basic constituent of prudential value, there is some corresponding desire on the part of the relevant welfare-subject. This does not yet tell us everything we can reasonably expect a theory of prudential value to tell us, however.

It is useful to distinguish here between three distinct questions that a theory of prudential value may be tasked with answering. The first, which I will call the *enumerative question*, is ‘what are the basic constituents of prudential value?’ The second, *explanatory question*, is ‘what makes it the case that these things, and only these things, are basic constituents of prudential value?’¹¹ The third question, which is not always sufficiently distinguished from the enumerative question, is ‘how prudentially valuable is a given person’s life (or some part of their life)?’

The object and combo views give different answers to the enumerative question, for the reasons sketched above. Where the former identifies the basic constituents of prudential value with those states of affairs that are the object of Ronnie’s desires, the latter builds a desire of Ronnie’s into each state of affairs it takes to be basically good for him. Only the former view, accordingly, leaves it open that (depending on what he is like) not only some but *all* the basic constituents of Ronnie’s well-being may be extra-mental entities.¹² This is the first striking difference between the views.

The responses that the object and combo views offer to the explanatory question also diverge. On the object view, the very fact that Ronnie desires some state of affairs *x* (say, that he dances this evening) is sufficient to make it the case that *x* is basically good for him. On the combo view, it is the (compound) state of affairs in which Ronnie desires to dance this evening, and this desire is satisfied, that is basically good for him. Moreover, this last state of affairs is good for Ronnie *regardless* of whether he has any higher-order desire for *precisely this* state of affairs. In other

¹¹ I borrow the enumerative/explanatory distinction from Crisp (2006), who employs it, somewhat differently than I do, as a tool for classifying *theories* of prudential value. It is put to similar use by Fletcher (2013) and Rice (2013).

¹² There are views according part of what it is for a mental state to be a pleasure is that it is desired. Heathwood (2007) defends such a theory. If one combines the object view with a desire theory of pleasure, one thereby ensures that *some* of the basic constituents of Ronnie’s well-being are at least partly constituted by mental states (assuming Ronnie’s life contains at least some pleasure). However, I do not see any plausible way of securing the result that *they all* are, on the object view.

words, although Ronnie's desire to dance still figures in at the enumerative level (albeit in a different way than on the object view) we need not include this, or any other, desire among the background conditions that explain why the satisfaction of this, or any other, desire is basically good for him.¹³ Any instance of desire-satisfaction is good for Ronnie, on the combo view. The combo theorist has no need to invoke some further fact to explain why this is so.

Where the object and combo views may turn out to differ not at all is in their assessment of any given person's level of well-being.¹⁴ ¹⁵ At least in their unrestricted actualist forms, both views give the result that whenever one of Ronnie's desires is satisfied this corresponds to an increase in his well-being. Moreover (absent other differences in our formulation of the theories), each instance of desire-satisfaction corresponds to an increase in well-being of precisely the same amount whichever view we adopt. This potentially goes some way towards explaining the lack of attention to this distinction in much of the literature. If our aim is to identify a theory of well-being that can render the right substantive verdicts about how well off people are, it may be that there is

¹³ It would be passing strange to claim that the source of the prudential value of such compounds is always some second-order desire that the first-order desire be satisfied. This would, after all, just be to endorse the object view at one remove. Moreover, I see no principled reason for thinking that only desires that have as their object instances of desire-satisfaction possess such *value-conferring* power. A vicious regress also threatens if one ventures down this path. If a higher-order desire that my lower-order desire is satisfied is required to explain the prudential value of ground-level desire-satisfaction, how then do we explain why it is good for *this higher-order desire* to be satisfied? It appears that we will need to keep adding new desiderative levels *ad infinitum*. This is a bizarre result. It also makes it hard to see how prudential value gets into the picture in the first place.

¹⁴ Bradley (2014, p.235) also highlights the apparent extensional equivalence of the object and combo view.

¹⁵ A reviewer points out that even if the object and combo view agree about how much prudential value is realized at any time, they may still differ about the prudential value of prospects that are unrealized. Perhaps, then, I should not be so quick to grant that the theories are extensionally equivalent. The first thing to note is that establishing the extensional equivalence of the views is not part of my aim in this paper. I concede this equivalence only for the purposes of arguing that *even if* the views are extensionally indistinguishable we have reason to prefer the object view. That said, if it turns out that the combo view is extensionally more plausible than the object view in cases involving unrealized prospects, this would provide a compelling counterweight to my own argument in favour of the object view (although it would not impact this argument itself). I consider this possibility in section 5 below, when I canvass potential reasons for preferring the combo view. However, I do not see any plausible route to such a conclusion.

nothing to choose between the object and combo view. And no doubt this is *one of* the aims we should have as philosophers of prudential value. However, as I will argue below, it is not *the only* aim we should have.

3. The Subjectivist Insight: Two Accounts

We have now identified two areas of divergence between the object and combo versions of desire-satisfactionism, and one area of agreement. In assessing the comparative merits of these formulations, we can distinguish two broad kinds of considerations. We need to ask, with respect to each of the questions identified above, whether the object or the combo view affords more plausible results. However, depending on the outcome of that initial investigation, we may also need to ask about the relative importance of these questions. If (as seems possible) one interpretation intuitively does better with respect to the enumerative question, but the other does better with respect to the explanatory question, any decision about which view we should ultimately favour will require us to take a stand on what the *primary* task of the theorist of prudential value is. In the next section, I will argue that a) the object view offers a more appealing response to the explanatory question than the combo view does, and b) this provides desire-satisfaction theorists of well-being with a compelling reason to prefer the view. Yet before I can vindicate either claim, I must turn, in the present section, to address certain taxonomical issues. This will provide further clarification about what is at stake in the dispute between defenders of the object and combo views.

Taxonomical questions are important here for the following reason. Desire-satisfactionism is generally taken to be the paradigmatic instance of a *subjective* theory of prudential value. We are here attempting to identify the most philosophically attractive version of the desire-satisfaction theory. In pursuing this sort of investigation, a reasonable first step is to inquire into what is

distinctive and appealing about subjective theories of well-being *in general*. Given the enduring popularity of such views (not to mention the recent popularity of hybrid theories of well-being, which strive to combine elements of subjective and objective theories), it is clear that many philosophers of prudential value have thought that there is some important *subjectivist insight*. It is not the task of this paper to assess whether there really is any compelling reason to go subjectivist. The point here is simply that a desire-satisfaction theory that did not capture this *apparent* insight would in an important sense not be doing its job. In considering whether one who is attracted to desire-satisfactionism should endorse the object or combo view, it is therefore critical that we isolate this proposed insight, and see whether one of these versions of the theory does a better job of expressing it.

If this is the strategy, a firmer grasp on how the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism is employed in carving up accounts of prudential value is in the first place called for. Unfortunately, there is no consensus about what the best way of drawing this distinction is. Moreover, it is doubtful whether any proposed way of delineating the core commitments of subjectivism and objectivism about well-being, respectively, will be genuinely neutral with respect to substantive theoretical issues. This is, again, because isolating the essential features of subjective and objective theories requires one to take a stand on the question of what is *distinctively appealing* about each kind of theory. That is, we need to have some idea of what subjective theories are *supposed to do*, before we can ascertain whether a given theory deserves to be called subjective. This seems to be equally true in the objective case.

Let me begin here by stating the approach to this distinction that I myself favour. I do not pretend that this method of classifying theories is either uncontroversial or substantively neutral, nor do I argue for it in this paper. It will be sufficient if the reader agrees that it has some intuitive

appeal. On the proposal I have in mind, the beating heart of subjectivism is expressed by the idea that at least some of a person's pro-attitudes (the traditional candidates are desires, but others have been suggested) are *value-conferring*. This is to say that, in at least some cases, states of affairs that would otherwise lack prudential value are good for Ronnie precisely because Ronnie *cares about them* (sufficiently and in the right way).¹⁶ Any theory of prudential value that does not imply that Ronnie can make certain things basically good for him by caring about them in the right way should, according to this view, not be classified as a subjective account. On the other hand, any theory that *does* endorse this idea should be classified as (at least partially) subjective.¹⁷

A more common and influential way of characterizing the subjectivist insight, and thus of dividing theories of prudential value into subjective and objective, is that offered by Wayne Sumner.¹⁸ Sumner holds that "a theory is subjective if it treats my having a favorable attitude toward something as a necessary condition of the thing being beneficial for me".¹⁹ Call the claim that nothing can be basically good for a person if that person does not have some pro-attitude toward it *subjective necessity*. This condition can be taken as imposing a kind of *resonance* or *anti-alienation* constraint.²⁰ If dancing leaves Ronnie completely cold, if he not only does not care

¹⁶Cf. Sobel (2016, p.1): "Subjectivism maintains that things have value because we value them. Caring about stuff makes stuff matter." This formulation, of course, leaves us with many unanswered questions ('should subjectivists focus on desires or some other class of pro-attitudes?', 'if desires are the correct focus, which desires?'). This, however, is by design. It is important that we cast as broad a net as we can, since my argument is precisely that, even on the most ecumenical understanding of the subjectivist insight, the combo view doesn't adequately capture it.

¹⁷ I say 'at least partially' because it seems to me preferable that our taxonomy leave room for genuine hybrid theories (that is, theories that include both objectivist and subjectivist elements). This sets my proposal apart from Sumner's, for example, which treats subjectivism and objectivism as exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories. In the present context, however, nothing much hangs on this difference.

¹⁸ Sumner (1995 and 1996).

¹⁹ Sumner (1995, p.768). Tiberius (2007, p.373) endorses more or less the same criterion: "Those defending subjective theories argue that a person's having a positive attitude (or a positive attitude under certain conditions) toward *x* is necessary for *x* to count as part of that person's well-being. Proponents of objective theories deny this claim."

²⁰ As expressed, for instance, by Dorsey (2017), Railton (1986), and Rosati (1996).

about it but (perhaps) could not be brought to care about by various forms of idealization, it is too cut off from him to form any part of *his* good. All that is required to make a theory come out as subjective, on this account, is that it endorse subjective necessity. Objective theories, in turn, are for Sumner all those that reject subjective necessity.

These two accounts of the subjective/objective distinction clearly adopt very different strategies. The first locates the core commitment of subjectivism in a certain kind of *sufficiency claim*, namely that Ronnie's pro-attitudes are at least sometimes sufficient to make some state of affairs basically good for him. The second traces subjectivism's appeal to a certain kind of *necessity claim*, namely the constraint that if x is to be basically good for Ronnie it is necessary that Ronnie have some (actual or counterfactual) pro-attitude to x. And yet, as I will argue in the next section, these two, otherwise radically opposed, accounts of the core subjectivist commitment have the same striking result. No matter which of these approaches we take, the combo view *comes out as an objective theory*. Now, this may be taken to be a deficiency in these approaches. Perhaps there is another plausible way of carving up the landscape that will give a different result. However, I do not see what this could be, and no such approach has yet been proposed. I will call this the *problem of creeping objectivism*.²¹ I believe the moral we should draw from it is that those who understand desire-satisfactionism according to the combo view have lost sight of the fundamental subjectivist idea, on any plausible reconstruction of what this idea is.

4. The Problem of Creeping Objectivism

According to the first proposal above, the heart of subjectivism resides in the claim that a person can *confer* basic prudential value upon a given thing by caring about it (sufficiently and in

²¹ The terminology here is meant to evoke Dreier (2004). This problem for the combo view is also raised, although not under this name, in Bradley (2014, pp.234-6). As a reviewer helpfully points out, the same kind of concern has been raised about Humean theories of normative reasons (where these are understood in the way Schroeder is arguing against). On this issue see Korsgaard (1996) and Hampton (1998).

the right way). It follows that if the desire-satisfaction theory is to preserve what is appealing about subjective theories, it needs to be developed in such a way as will express this fundamental idea. Now, it should be clear that, understood according to the object view, the desire-satisfaction account of prudential value expresses the subjectivist insight quite well indeed. Suppose Evangeline desires to meet William Shatner. Then the object view implies that the state of affairs in which she meets him is basically good for her. This is so even though, considered on its own, such a meeting does not plausibly possess any value. The fact that Evangeline desires that this meeting occur is the sole source of its prudential goodness.

By contrast, the combo view does not, as it turns out, have the implication that Evangeline confers prudential value on *any* state of affairs by desiring it. True, the *combination of* Evangeline's desire to meet Shatner and the state of affairs in which she does meet him is a basic constituent of prudential value, and one partially constituted by Evangeline's desire. The state of affairs in which she meets Shatner, however, is not *itself* basically good for Evangeline. We obviously cannot say that in desiring this meeting Evangeline confers basic prudential value upon it, since it lacks any such value. As for the compound consisting of Evangeline's desire for the meeting and the meeting's occurrence, we have already seen that *this state of affairs* would be good for Evangeline regardless of her attitude to it. We are thus forced to conclude that Evangeline's desires cannot themselves make things prudentially valuable, even though those things that are basically good for her are in part built up from her desires.

Of relevance here is the contrast, drawn by Pettit and Smith, between the way that desire operates in first and in third person deliberation. Rabinowicz and Osterberg similarly distinguish between the *participant* and the *spectator* models of preference utilitarianism. As they point out, the object view appears to map on well to the former model, the combo view to the latter. The

former emphasizes “participation in...projects, the situation is to be viewed from within”.²² The latter, on the other hand, takes something like the perspective of an impartial spectator.

When evaluating the object and combo views as approaches to prudential value, it seems to me that the participant model better expresses what we as theorists should care about. This is because only it captures what the person whose well-being we are interested in cares about. If we could imaginatively assume the position of a benevolent and impartial angel, it may well be that what we would see as valuable would be the compound state of affairs consisting of Evangeline’s desire and its satisfaction. But this quite clearly does not map on to what Evangeline herself cares about. So, if the basic subjectivist insight is that certain of a person’s pro-attitudes *explain why* certain things are basically good for her, and the desire-satisfaction theory is supposed to capture this insight, the combo view becomes distinctly unappealing. If we are to be subjectivists, what matters to the person should be what matters to us. Explicitly focusing on what is *good for* Evangeline, rather than on an impersonal ranking of worlds, appears to eliminate any temptation to favour the combo version of desire-satisfactionism.

Thus, on the account that ties subjectivism to the idea of value-conferring, the object and combo readings of the desire-satisfaction theory come out on different sides of the objective/subjective divide. It is important to see that the problem of creeping objectivism looms for the defender of the combo view even if they have a very different understanding of the core subjectivist insight.

Consider Sumner’s account, which as we saw above constitutes a kind of mirror-image of the value-conferring approach. On this view, recall, the essential commitment of subjectivism is expressed via the idea of subjective necessity. If Evangeline lacks (or would lack, after

²² Rabinowicz and Osterberg (1994, p.3).

idealization) any pro-attitude towards a thing, the claim is that this thing cannot be good for Evangeline, on pain of divorcing her too radically from her own good. Suppose that one is moved to accept subjectivism about prudential value by considerations of this sort. If Evangeline desires to meet Shatner, this plausibly suffices to ensure that the prospect of meeting Shatner resonates with her. Thus, if the desire-satisfaction theory is understood according to the object interpretation, all the basic constituents of Evangeline's well-being would seem to satisfy the criterion of subjective necessity. By contrast, it appears that Evangeline could, while yet desiring to meet Shatner, be quite indifferent as to whether the following conjunction holds: *I desire to meet William Shatner, and I do meet him*. That more complicated state of affairs is just not what Evangeline cares about, at least not if Evangeline is like most of us. It is of course possible that Evangeline has a generic standing second-order desire that her first-order desires (whatever these may be) are satisfied. But the combo view itself affords no guarantee that this is so. It is, moreover, very implausible that such a desire exists in all those cases where desire-satisfaction intuitively matters for well-being. Focusing again on the case at hand, whether there exists such a second-order desire is intuitively irrelevant to whether it is good for Evangeline to meet Shatner.²³ Subjective necessity is accordingly not preserved by the combo view, since what comes out as basically good for Evangeline on this view is something towards which she herself may be totally cold.²⁴ It is striking that this formulation comes out on the intuitively wrong side of the subjectivist/objectivist divide, whether we distinguish subjective theories via a sufficiency claim (as in the value-conferring approach), or via a necessity claim (as in the resonance approach).

²³ The combo view could seemingly satisfy the anti-alienation constraint only by requiring that Francine have a higher-order desire that her desire for x is satisfied. Whereas the view discussed in fn. 13 would allow the presence of a higher-order desire to *confer* value upon instances of desire-satisfaction, this view would allow the absence of such a desire to *revoke* their value. It is implausible for similar reasons.

²⁴ Dorsey (2012a, pp.272-5) also highlights the fact that the combo view fails to preserve resonance, and argues that we should prefer the object view on these grounds.

This surprising compatibility of the combo view with objectivism can be further illustrated if we reflect on some recent developments in the literature on objective list theories of well-being. It has been pointed out that hedonism about prudential value (in at least some versions) can be seen as an objective list account, albeit with only one item on the list. The reasoning behind this claim is that, while the basic constituents of Evangeline's well-being are for the hedonist all mental states, the value of these states is not explained by any of Evangeline's pro-attitudes. Some defenders of pluralist objective list accounts, meanwhile, have proposed that we reserve a space on the list of attitude-independent prudential goods for desire-satisfaction itself.²⁵ Moreover, Guy Fletcher has argued that the most plausible version of the objective list theory will recognize *only* goods that constitutively involve pro-attitudes.²⁶

These developments point towards a growing recognition that the key differences between objectivist and subjectivist theories stem from their respective answers to the explanatory, rather than the enumerative, question. If pluralist objective list accounts can include desire-satisfaction as one of the items on their list, then a monist objective list account which includes *only* desire-satisfaction should also be possible.²⁷ The fact that on such a view all the basic constituents of prudential value constitutively involve desires does not suffice to distinguish it from an objective list view, given the availability of an account like Fletcher's. So much like hedonism before it, desire-satisfactionism now threatens to be swallowed up in objectivism. Indeed, it is no longer clear what is *not* an objective list theory. Apart, that is, from the object view.

²⁵ This is suggested, for instance, by Arneson (1999, p.124), Keller (2009, p.659), and Rice (2013, p.6).

²⁶ Fletcher (2013).

²⁷ An anonymous reviewer notes that at this point "it is very natural to wonder why there shouldn't be more than one thing on the basic list of goods". Desire-satisfactionism, on the combo view, thus comes out looking like one idiosyncratic and not especially plausible version of an objective list theory. Again, this mirrors some of Korsgaard and Hampton's criticisms of Humeanism (as the same reviewer reminds me).

On the object view, it is easy to see what separates desire-satisfactionism from any version of the objective list approach. It is precisely its answer to the explanatory question. The object view holds that it is Evangeline's pro-attitudes that confer prudential value upon states of affairs. Objective theories take the basic constituents of Evangeline's well-being to possess attitude-independent value (whether or not these states of affairs are pro-attitude *involving*). We here have a clear difference between the object view of desire-satisfactionism and all objective accounts, and the problem of creeping objectivism ceases to gain any traction.

On the other hand, I can think of no plausible taxonomical approach that would conclusively land the combo view in the subjectivist camp. We ought therefore to conclude that the combo view cannot adequately capture the heart of subjectivism, whatever this might be. Granted, it is true that if one took subjectivism and objectivism about prudential value to be exclusively concerned with the enumerative question, one might be tempted to see the combo view as subjective, and indeed as more subjective than the object view. Subjectivism minimally does seem to involve some commitment to *the dependence of well-being upon the agent's mental states*. One easy way of securing such a dependence is to embrace a view according to which the basic constituents of well-being are *themselves mental states*. This may help explain hedonism's perennial appeal. Short of endorsing hedonism, the combo view nonetheless ensures that each basic constituent of well-being is *at least partly* composed of some mental state. The object view, on the other hand, does not guarantee that *any* of the basic constituents of Evangeline's well-being is made up either wholly or partly of one of her mental states. This may lead some to conclude that those who feel the pull of subjectivist intuitions would be better served by adopting the former view.

However, this would be a mistake. The debate between objectivism and subjectivism is best seen as orthogonal to the enumerative issue about whether the basic constituents of prudential value are located within or without the mind. We can bring this point out more clearly by considering the following view (or combination of views). Suppose that, in response to the explanatory question, one endorses a *locative account* of goodness for a person.²⁸ According to the locative account, goodness for P is best understood as goodness *simpliciter* instantiated in P's life. On this approach, nothing that is not good *simpliciter* can be a basic constituent of well-being. Moreover, all that is needed to explain why something is good for a person is the fact that it possesses this other sort of goodness, together with certain other conditions designed to ensure its connection to the person's own life.

Suppose, further, that our locative theorist thinks that the only things that are good *simpliciter* are mental states of some sort. We can be confident that this is a possible position because it has in fact been defended. G.E Moore famously held that the only way to make sense of goodness for a person is in terms of goodness *simpliciter* instantiated in that person's life.²⁹ Nonetheless, prominent among the items that are good *simpliciter* he included pleasure, provided it is of the right sort. Specifically, Moore claimed that "by far the most valuable things which we know or can imagine are certain states of consciousness which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects".³⁰ Moore did not himself defend the position that these are the *only* things that are good *simpliciter*. However, Donald Regan's recent development of the Moorean approach explicitly denies that anything is basically

²⁸ See Fletcher (2012).

²⁹ Moore (1903, p.99). One can also read Moore as a thoroughgoing skeptic about prudential value. It does not matter here which reading is historically correct.

³⁰ Ibid. (p.179).

good besides certain mental states of this sort.³¹ This revised Moorean theory of prudential value combines a) a locative explanatory account, with b) a type of mental-state view at the enumerative level. Yet presumably a theory like Regan's should not be classified as a version of subjectivism about prudential value at all. Certainly, it should not be classified as a more thoroughly subjective theory than the object interpretation of desire-satisfactionism. This again suggests that it is a theory's answer to the explanatory question that really matters in assessing whether it captures what is essential to subjective accounts of prudential value.

I hope to have brought out by now that a good deal hangs on the decision between these two formulations of the desire-satisfaction theory. This is so even if the object and combo views do not diverge at all in their substantive judgments about how well off people are. When it comes to assessing a person's well-being level, nothing much may hang on the choice between the object and combo views. Hence, perhaps, the temptation to treat them as mere notational variants. However, we should not suppose that if two theories of prudential value agree about people's respective well-being levels they agree on *everything that matters*. We have seen that the object and combo views differ in their responses to both the enumerative and the explanatory question. It is the latter question, we have argued, that is of primary importance when assessing the merits of these two formulae.

A large part of the task of any theory of prudential value is to provide a plausible explanation of why the things that are prudentially valuable are so, and of why certain people are better off than others. Here is a silly example that nonetheless serves to sharpen the point. Imagine a view according to which some state of affairs *x* is basically good for any person *y* if and only if *x* is something that William Shatner wants for *y*. Suppose also that all the benevolent Shatner wants

³¹ Regan (2004).

for any of us is for us to have exactly what we ourselves desire. We now have an approach that, in its extension, need not differ at all from either interpretation of the desire-satisfaction theory. But where desire-satisfactionism seems (at least when understood correctly) to be quite plausible, Shatner-satisfactionism is patently absurd.

Of course, the combo view is much more intuitively appealing than Shatner-satisfactionism. Indeed, of those who commit to one or the other interpretation, it is noteworthy that one finds support for the combo view among defenders of the desire-satisfaction theory as well as among its opponents.³² Nonetheless, we should conclude that to the extent there is a subjectivist insight, it is better represented by the object view, whether this insight is understood as essentially tied to value-conferring, or in terms of subjective necessity.

One alternative moral that might be drawn from it is that the subjectivism and objectivism are simply not useful categories for thinking about theories of prudential value. However, if embracing the combo view requires us to jettison these categories, we should recognize how revisionist such an implication is. It is not merely that we would be forced to re-classify certain approaches. The very idea that there are any theories of prudential value that are not objective list theories would have broken down. We would need to find a radically new way of conceiving what is at stake in philosophical discussions of well-being, then. This implication has not, I think, been adequately appreciated.

5. The Combo View Strikes Back?

³² Desire-satisfactionists who favour the combo view include Heathwood (2005, p.491), Lukas (2010, pp. 3-4), and Osterberg. Opponents of the theory who also favour this interpretation include Bradley (2009, pp.25-30) and Sarch (2011, pp.179-81).

Despite the above considerations, which amount to a forceful case against it, the combo view of desire-satisfactionism retains notable adherents. What might account for this view's appeal?

One possible explanation is that its advocates are committed (either explicitly or implicitly) to the idea that basic prudential value supervenes on intrinsic properties. The object view, unlike the combo view, would require us to give up on any such commitment. As Alexander Sarch highlights, the object view implies that the basic prudential value of the desired state of affairs supervenes on something other than its intrinsic features (namely the relation between this object and my mental state).³³

I do not think the partisan of the object view need be swayed by this implication, however. The objection assumes that basic prudential value is a) a kind of *intrinsic* value, where this is contrasted with the broader category of *final* or *non-instrumental* value, and b) that the intrinsic value of an object or state of affairs supervenes on its intrinsic properties. Neither of these are uncontroversial positions in axiology. I have been careful to speak in terms of basic or non-derivative prudential value throughout. This leaves open the issue of whether the value involved is best understood as intrinsic value, as opposed to another species of final value, and it certainly leaves open whether the value of any basic constituent of prudential value must supervene on its intrinsic *properties*. Moreover, when the value we are dealing with is specifically prudential value, these assumptions strike me as especially questionable. Part of what is distinctive about prudential value is that it is a fundamentally *relational* kind of value. The ability to readily account for this relationality is no doubt part of what makes subjectivist approaches so appealing to many. But even the staunchest objectivist must hold that some state of affairs x being valuable *for* me (as

³³ Sarch (2011, p.180). See also Osterberg (p.17) and Lukas (p.9)

opposed to *simpliciter*) implies some relation between x and myself. Granting this point, it does not seem at all surprising that the relational features of a thing (specifically, the attitudes I have toward this thing) can make a difference to whether it is basically valuable for me.³⁴

Another possible explanation (although not one that any advocate of the combo view, to my knowledge, has explicitly invoked) has to do with what the object view implies about the prudential value of merely prospective states of affairs. Contrary to what I granted above, it may be that, even if the object and combo view agree about how much prudential value is in fact realized at any time, they will disagree about how prudentially valuable certain states of affairs will be when they are realized.³⁵

Suppose, for instance, that Elon presently desires that Mars be colonized by humans.³⁶ On the most natural reading of the object view, this implies that the state of affairs in which Mars is colonized is good for Elon. But now imagine that Elon has ceased to have any such desire by the time at which Mars is successfully colonized (this may be due to a routine change in his desires or, more dramatically, to his own death). The object view seems to imply that the colonization of Mars is nonetheless good for Elon (assuming, that is, that his desire for this state of affairs did not include an explicit or implicit time-index).³⁷ This may be difficult to accept.

The combo view might seem to escape the above implication. This will depend on how it is formulated. Recall, the combo view holds that it is the combination of y's desire for x and x itself that is basically good for y. In the above case, it is not the colonization of Mars itself that we attribute prudential value to, but the compound state of affairs in which Elon desires that Mars is

³⁴ See Dorsey (2012a) for further elaboration and defense of this point.

³⁵ Again, I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

³⁶ The example is borrowed from Bradley 2016 (pp.4-5)

³⁷ A further question that arises on this sort of view is 'when is it good for Elon'? There have been several proposed answers to this question (see Bradley 2016 and Dorsey 2013). I can remain agnostic. What is important to note here is that the choice between the object and combo view does not settle this issue.

colonized and Mars is colonized. There are at least two ways we might read this conjunction, however. It might be taken to incorporate an implicit time-stamp, such that what really bears prudential value is the combination of Elon desiring colonization *at time t* and colonization occurring *at time t*. On this reading, the combo view avoids the potentially worrying result. However, there is nothing in the combo view as initially stated that requires such a reading. Some defenders of the combo view do accept such a *concurrency requirement*.³⁸ However, others do not.³⁹

Even if a concurrency requirement is not built into the combo view, it is evidently consistent with it. If it turns out that such a requirement is not compatible with the object view, this would provide reason for those who favour concurrency to prefer the combo view. Yet I see no reason to suppose this. The object view can be quite easily modified so as to incorporate such a condition. Even though it is the state of affairs itself that is the basic unit of prudential value, it is the presence of a desire for this state of affairs that makes it valuable. If it turns out that there is no such desire at the time at which the state of affairs obtains, we may well be inclined to say that there is also no value. This is quite compatible, I think, with the spirit of the object view.⁴⁰

These are only two possible explanations for the popularity of the combo view. I have suggested that they do not hold up well under scrutiny. There may be other explanations, but these are not readily apparent. We have already seen that there are weighty reasons to favour the object view. So, absent further arguments in favour of its opponent, we ought to conclude that the object view is on balance preferable.

³⁸ See Heathwood (p.490).

³⁹ See Lukas (pp. 18-21).

⁴⁰ It seems to me that a similar story should be told about cases those where person *y* presently lacks a desire for state of affairs *x* but will come to acquire such a desire. What the object and combo views, respectively, imply about such cases will depend on whether a concurrency requirement is built in. This decision is independent of which of the two formulations we adopt.

6. Conclusion

If nothing else, the preceding discussion indicates that the distinction between the object and combo views is something that more theorists of prudential value should be thinking about. These two formulations of the desire-satisfaction theory diverge significantly in both their enumerative and explanatory commitments, and we do well to keep this in mind. I hope, moreover, to have shown that the object view is better able to capture what is distinctive and appealing about subjective theories of prudential value, on any plausible account of what the central subjectivist insight is. This does not conclusively settle the matter, as there may yet be some powerful countervailing argument we have failed to consider. I do not know what this would be. As things stand, I believe we can be confident in concluding that the object view is to be preferred.⁴¹

⁴¹ I wish to thank David Enoch, Iwao Hirose, Andrew Reisner and Sarah Stroud for extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I am also grateful to audiences at McGill University's Philosophy Workshop Series and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Centre for Moral and Political Philosophy for valuable feedback. Finally, I am indebted to two anonymous referees for this journal, whose detailed and perceptive comments resulted in significant improvements to the article.

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