

Can an evidential account justify relying on preferences for well-being policy?

Gil Hersch
University of California, San Diego

Abstract

Policy-makers sometimes aim to improve well-being as a policy goal, but to do this they need some way to measure well-being. Instead of relying on potentially problematic theories of well-being to justify their choice of well-being measure, Daniel Hausman proposes that policy-makers can sometimes rely on preference-based measures as evidence for well-being. I claim that Hausman's evidential account does not justify the use of any one measure more than it justifies the use of any other measure. This leaves us at a loss as to which policy should be chosen in the non-trivial cases for which there is substantial disagreement between the different measures in their assessment of policy.

Keywords: well-being; evidential account; well-being measures; preference-based measures; public policy.

Introduction

One goal that policy-makers might aim to achieve through their policies is to improve well-being. To choose those policies that most improve well-being, policy-makers need to know how the different policies compare. They need some way to measure well-being. Because there is an abundance of philosophical theories of well-being and it is far from clear which theory is correct, policy-makers would be in a bind if they needed to know what well-being is in order to measure it. Instead, Daniel Hausman (2011, 2012) argues that policy-makers can sometimes take people's choices as evidence for what is conducive to their well-being. According to Hausman, if policy-makers take people's choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being,

they can sometimes use preferences-based (or choice-based) measures to compare different policies.

In this paper I claim that Hausman's evidential account often does not justify the use of any one measure more than it justifies the use of any other measure. Consequently, it often does not specifically justify using preference-based measures to evaluate policies aimed at improving well-being, even when his assumptions hold.

There are many cases for which policy choices are made for which it does not matter which measure one uses. However, there are non-trivial cases for which policy choices need to be made, yet there is substantial disagreement among different measures in their assessment of policies. Because Hausman's evidential account provides no reason to think that preference-based measures, or any other measures, are the appropriate measures to use, it leaves us at a loss as to which policy should be chosen in such cases.

This paper proceeds as follows: §1 and §2 discuss Hausman's evidential account and his argument from platitudes. §3 argues that Hausman's evidential account fails to single out using preference-based measures rather than other social measures. §4 presents two cases in which relying on one measure rather than another has substantial policy implications. §5 concludes that often one cannot justify policy-makers relying on preference-based measures as measures of well-being by appealing to Hausman's evidential account.

1 Hausman's evidential account

There is no intrinsic need for economic theory to link well-being and preferences (or their numerical representation – utility¹). The need to link the two only arises when policy-makers turn to measures of individuals' choices with the intention of assessing the effects of well-being policy.² For policy-makers to use preference-based measures that reflect preferences (through choices) to assess well-being policies, well-being must be understood to be linked to preferences. The challenge is to provide an account that justifies the link between well-being and preferences.

¹It is important to avoid equivocating between the standard economic technical sense of 'utility' and the way it is sometimes commonly used as 'having value'. In the context of the current paper utility is used in the standard economic technical sense as a numerical representation of preference orderings. For a further discussion see Broome (1999).

²Choices are standardly thought of as revealed preferences, since the individual, given some assumptions that are discussed later in the paper, is thought to reveal her preferences through her choices. Measures of choices are thus usually referred to as preference-based measures. In this paper I will either talk of choices or preference-based measures.

Clearly, there are other possible reasons for policy-makers to be interested in preferences and the subsequent utility maximization, other than to promote individual well-being. One such reason might be thinking that the satisfaction of preferences is good in itself. If the satisfaction of preferences is a good in itself, then it would be a reasonable goal for policy-makers. Such a view seems plausible if one maintains that because in democracies the government is elected by the people, it ought to enact the will of the people. Furthermore, one might think that enacting the will of the people is best accomplished by devising policies that will maximally satisfy individuals' preferences. If enacting the will of the people were the only goal of policy, there would be no need, from a policy perspective, to provide an account that links well-being to preferences. Yet it seems to be the case, and in this paper assumed to be the case, that governments and policy-makers aim not only to enact the will of the people, but also to do what is good for people, by implementing policies that promote individual well-being.

While it is possible to justify linking well-being to preferences by turning to a philosophical theory of well-being, it is not clear what theory, among the many available, is the most appropriate theory of well-being to turn to.³ Consequently, policy-makers might wish to avoid relying on any specific philosophical theory of well-being and in effect remain agnostic as to what constitutes well-being. However, to justifiably rely on preference-based measures for well-being policy, while remaining agnostic about the correct philosophical theory of well-being, policy-makers need some other way to link preferences to well-being.

Daniel Hausman proposes an evidential account as a way of linking well-being to preferences. On Hausman's evidential account, "[r]ather than constituting well-being, preference-satisfaction can serve as evidence of well-being, regardless of what theory of welfare one accepts" (Hausman, 2012, p. 88). According to Hausman's evidential account, policy-makers are justified in relying on preference-based measures for well-being policy because choices can be taken as evidence for what is conducive to well-being. Choices, in turn, can be taken as evidence for what is conducive to well-being when three assumptions hold:

1. Individuals have true beliefs about what the feasible alternatives are.
2. Individuals are competent evaluators of what is conducive to their well-being.
3. Individuals' choices are aimed at promoting their own well-being.

³For some discussions of the different theories of well-being see Parfit (1984); Sumner (1996); Haybron (2008); Raibley (2011).

Thus, for example, if someone has a true belief that drinking the beverage in front of her (which is laced with arsenic) will cause her to die, if she can competently make the evaluation that dying is not conducive to her well-being, and if her choice is aimed at promoting her own well-being, then she will choose to not drink the beverage.

Of course individuals do not *always* have true beliefs about what the feasible alternatives are, they are not *always* competent evaluators of what is conducive to their well-being and their choices are not *always* aimed at promoting their own well-being. Hausman is well aware of this. Sometimes individuals might have a false belief that the beverage in front of them (which is laced with arsenic) will not cause their death, perhaps because they don't know what arsenic is. Other times individuals might be incompetent at evaluating what is conducive to their well-being and believe that death is conducive to their well-being because at the moment they are emotionally frail (or, to take no stand on suicide, they might mistakenly believe that death is not conducive to their well-being).

Yet even if a person has true beliefs about what the feasible alternatives are, and she is a competent evaluator of what is conducive to her well-being, it does not follow that she will *choose* the alternative that is conducive to her well-being. Unsurprisingly, sometimes people make choices that are not aimed at promoting their own well-being even when they know which choice is most conducive to their well-being. The person faced with the choice of whether or not to drink the beverage might choose to drink it knowing full well that she will die and that dying is not in conducive to her well-being. She might do so, for example, because it is the only way to convince the authorities that the water source for millions of people is replete with arsenic and if those millions drink the water they will die.

To use a more plausible and less macabre example, an individual might have a true belief that she can either continue to smoke or quit smoking, she competently evaluates that smoking is not conducive to her well-being, yet she nevertheless chooses to continue to smoke due to her weakness of will. Alternatively, a mildly hungry person might choose to give her sandwich to a famished stranger, despite knowing that this will leave her mildly hungry and that being mildly hungry is not conducive to her well-being.⁴

The merits of Hausman's evidential account are that, first, viewing choices as

⁴Psychological egoists think that as long as individuals have true beliefs and are competent evaluators of what is conducive to their own well-being, their choices will *always* be aimed at promoting their own well-being. For a discussion of psychological egoism see Shaver (2010). I will assume, as I think Hausman reasonably does as well, that choices are not always aimed at promoting one's own well-being.

evidence for what is conducive to well-being explains the link between preferences and well-being. If choices are evidence for what is conducive to well-being, it is clear why policy-makers are justified in using preference-based measures in order to assess well-being policies. Second, despite not knowing what the correct theory of well-being is, “[e]conomists and everyday folk do not have to wait for a satisfactory philosophical theory of welfare before they can say anything about what makes peoples’ lives better or worse” (Hausman, 2012, p. 92). If policy-makers are justified in treating preference-based measures as evidence for what is conducive to well-being, then whether there is an acceptable philosophical theory of well-being should not matter. Thus, on Hausman’s account, policy-makers can remain agnostic regarding the philosophical debate on well-being but still use preference-based measures to assess policies aimed at promoting well-being.

Yet remaining agnostic regarding the correct philosophical theory of well-being means that we lack a standard by which to assess whether the individual’s evaluations of what is conducive to her well-being are correct and whether her choice is aimed at promoting her own well-being. Consequently, we cannot assess whether preference-based measures can serve as evidence for which policy is more conducive to well-being. To overcome this problem Hausman turns to platitudes.

2 The argument from platitudes

To distinguish cases in which individuals make choices aimed at promoting their own well-being from cases in which they make choices that are not, and to distinguish cases in which individuals are competent evaluators of what is conducive to their well-being from cases in which they are not, Hausman turns to platitudes. Platitudes about well-being are supposed to help us discern the cases in which choices can be taken as evidence for what is conducive to well-being and cases in which they cannot.

Hausman appeals to platitudes because he acknowledges that “[a]n economist cannot regard people’s preferences as evidence concerning what is good for them, unless he or she has some notion of what is good for people” (Hausman, 2012, p. 92). On Hausman’s account, in order to justifiably take some choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being, there needs to be reason to think that those choices are aimed at promoting their own well-being and that people are good judges of what is conducive to their well-being. Platitudes are supposed to provide such a reason:

Platitudes concerning what makes people better or worse off, like the claims that enjoyment contributes to well-being and illness diminishes it,

depend on no philosophical theory that specifies what things are intrinsically good for people and why. (Hausman, 2011, p. 7)

One way to think of platitudes is as *commonly* agreed on propositions about what is conducive to people's well-being, *ceteris paribus*. Because the proposition is about what is conducive to well-being *ceteris paribus*, a proposition such as "devoting the weekend to recreational activities is more conducive to a person's well-being than spending it working, *ceteris paribus*" can still hold even if working this one weekend will earn Casey an extra million dollars and it seems that working once, this particular weekend, will be more conducive to his well-being than spending it rock climbing.⁵

Such an account of platitudes is positive since it makes clear, at least in principle, how to ascertain whether a proposition about what is conducive to people's well-being is commonly agreed on, and thus is a platitude. One can, at least in principle, simply go and ask enough people whether they agree or disagree with a proposition, and when enough do (whatever enough is in this case), we can conclude that the proposition is a platitude.⁶

Since, according to Hausman, it is supposed to be significantly easier to ascertain platitudes than to ascertain which philosophical theory of well-being is correct, it is supposed to be significantly easier to figure out whether his assumptions hold according to platitudes than to figure out whether his assumptions hold according to the correct theory of well-being (which we are agnostic about). Because, according to Hausman, we can use platitudes to make claims regarding well-being, then while "economists need to know something about what is good for people... it does not follow that they need a philosophical theory of well-being for this purpose" (Hausman, 2011, p. 7). It follows that policy-makers do not need a clearly defined concept of well-being, but can instead rely on platitudes about what things conducive to

⁵ Since we are interested in platitudes in the context of actual policy-making it seems we should be dealing with actual agreement rather than hypothetical agreement. If we are committed to propositions of the kind that people *actually* agree on, we cannot use either concocted propositions or propositions about particular cases. On an 'actual position' there will clearly be no platitude about a specific situation involving a specific person and specific possible actions because there will be no actual common agreement on such a specific platitude.

⁶This leaves unclear what constitutes common agreement. Clearly unanimous agreement is too demanding. It seems reasonable that for any proposition there might always be some people who think it is wrong. But whether 'common agreement' is an overwhelming majority, a simple majority, or simply enough people agreeing so that it doesn't sound far-fetched, is unclear. Whether the agreement is among all people, all adults, all rational agents or all reasonable people is also an issue. Perhaps in the context of this paper the agreement is most appropriately between the policy-makers who are actually deciding on a particular policy. Since this is a generally tricky issue in political philosophy, I only flag the issue, rather than address it. However "common agreement" is generally cashed out in political philosophy will probably be sufficient for my needs here as well.

well-being. Since policy-makers presumably do have access to platitudes, they can assess whether the assumptions needed in order to take choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold according to our platitudes.

At this point we might wonder why policy-makers should bother to ascertain what people's choices are. It might seem that policy-makers can simply treat platitudes as evidence for what is conducive to well-being, instead of bothering to ascertain individuals' choices, which requires a lot of empirical work. Indeed, Hausman seems to point in this direction:

Assuming that human beings are generally capable of judging what sorts of things are good for themselves and *others*, presumably economists are capable of doing so, too. [emphasis added] (Hausman and McPherson, 2009, p. 18)

The justification for treating choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being is that platitudes tell us that the assumptions that support treating choices as evidence hold. If all the evidential account is meant to do is tell policy-makers they can rely on people's choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being when there are relevant platitudes, it seems that policy-makers indeed do not need to turn to choices, since platitudes are more readily available. This, in turn, would undermine the point of having this account in the first place.

A more charitable way to understand Hausman is to view the reliance on platitudes as meant to inform us not when the assumptions hold, but rather the kinds of situations in which we should expect the assumptions to hold. These would include cases for which we have no platitudes. In these cases policy-makers might take individuals' choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being because they seem similar to cases for which platitudes tell us that the assumptions hold.

Platitudes can offer a window into well-being only for the generally non-controversial cases, for which there is indeed no need to turn to choices. That is why they are platitudes – they are banal, trite and obvious. Policy-makers need to turn to choices in order to figure out what is good for people in the unclear and potentially controversial cases. These can be mundane cases, such as whether school uniforms should be made from cotton or polyester, or more substantial cases, such as whether people should be required to have health insurance.⁷ Neither of these cases seem to have platitudes which apply to them. Of course, if platitudes would turn out to apply to all cases, there would indeed be no need to turn to choices at all. I suggest that a better way to understand Hausman's account is as meant to justify relying on choices

⁷Of course other considerations besides the person's well-being can be involved in the decision. The point is that it is not clear what is more conducive to the person's well-being in these cases.

as evidence for what is conducive to well-being in cases for which we have no relevant platitudes and so cannot confidently determine whether the assumptions hold.

Yet if Hausman's evidential account relies on platitudes to justify taking choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being even in cases for which there are not relevant platitudes, there is some need to justify such an extrapolation. We might do this by first acknowledging that platitudes give a decent, pre-theoretical approximation of well-being. Furthermore, in cases to which platitudes apply, we can see whether Hausman's assumptions hold. If they do, choices are good evidence. If the assumptions do not hold, choices are not good evidence for what is conducive to well-being. Next, policy-makers can extrapolate from the cases in which choices are good evidence to cases which seem similar, but where we have no platitudes by which to check whether the assumptions hold. Extrapolating allows policy-makers can treat choices as evidence also in cases for which there are no relevant platitudes.

One might contest that extrapolating from choices in cases for which platitudes apply to choices in cases for which platitudes do not apply is unjustified. This raises traditional concerns of the problem of induction which this paper does not attempt to address. While this might pose a serious challenge for how I propose to understand Hausman's account, my claim is that even if such an extrapolation is justified, Hausman's evidential account often does not specifically justify using preference-based measures to evaluate policies aimed at improving well-being over other available measures, even when his assumptions hold.

3 The limitations of Hausman's evidential account

In §1 and §2 I presented Hausman's evidential account and the argument from platitudes. Hausman's account denies the need to turn to any specific philosophical theory of well-being, and instead he relies on platitudes to tell us when the assumptions that justify viewing choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold. In this section I argue that platitudes can inform us of when the assumptions that justify viewing *several* measures as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold. When the assumptions that justify viewing several measures as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold, relying on platitudes fails to uniquely justify relying on choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being.

In recent years there has been a substantial growth in the various psychological and economic measures and indicators that are now available to policy-makers. Subjective Well-Being (SWB) measures have gained popularity among both psychologists and economists and are often thought of as useful for determining which well-being policies to adopt (Dolan and White, 2007). SWB measures aim to ascer-

tain a person's subjective experience of how well her life is going for her, through such methods as life-satisfaction surveys ("All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" (World Values Survey)) or the Day Reconstruction Method (subjects summarize events of the preceding day, catalog them and report intensity of feelings along 9 categories) (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006).⁸

There are also many objective measures that can be viewed as relevant to well-being, such as life expectancy, levels of caloric intake, literacy rates, crime rates, urban green spaces, etc. These objective measures include widely used indices such as the Human Development Index and the Index of Social Health.⁹ In addition there are highly specific measures such as indicators specially targeted at people with vertebral fractures and osteoporosis developed by the European Foundation for Osteoporosis (Alexandrova, 2014; Lips et al., 1997, 1999; Fitzpatrick et al., 1992; Fletcher et al., 1992), indicators targeted at children in armed conflict, or indicators targeted at children bullied at school (Alexandrova, 2014; Benbenishty and Astor, 2007; Pedersen and Sommerfelt, 2007).

The existence of these various measures complicates matters for Hausman's evidential account. Recall that Hausman's evidential account justifies taking choices as evidence for what is conducive to well-being when platitudes tell us that assumptions about individuals' competency at evaluating what is conducive to their well-being and about individuals' choices being aimed at promoting their own well-being hold. Yet Hausman's evidential account does not uniquely justify taking choices as evidence for well-being. Platitudes can also tell us that assumptions that justify treating other measures as evidence for what is conducive to well-being also sometimes hold. Consequently, Hausman's evidential account justifies relying on any social science measure as evidence for what is conducive to well-being when the assumptions that justify relying on it hold, just like it justifies relying on choices as evidence when Hausman's assumptions hold. These assumptions do not *always* hold, but they need not. Just as with choices as evidence, the assumptions that justify treating a measure as evidence for what is conducive to well-being only need to hold well enough for policy purposes.

Consider, for example, the assumption that individuals are competent evaluators of how well their life is going for them. Turning to platitudes about what is conducive to well-being we can see that this assumption holds often, though not always. We take it as platitudinous that much of the time individuals are indeed competent evaluations of how well their life is going for them. However, there are instances in

⁸Diener et al. (2009) carve up the conceptual space of measures of well-being a little differently: Monetary indicators, affective indicators and evaluative judgments of life.

⁹For a review of indices, see Hagerty et al. (2001).

which our platitudes tell us that this assumption does not hold.

Amartya Sen (1987) discusses possible cases of a satisfied begging destitute, landless laborer, and subjugated housewife, all of which might judge their lives as going well for them. In all these cases, if the individuals evaluate their lives as going well for them, we rely on platitudes to determine that these individuals are not in this case competent evaluators of how well their life is going for them.

Alternatively, consider the findings mentioned in Strack et al. (1991, p. 36):

Thus, we found that finding a dime on a copy machine greatly increased subjects' reported happiness with their life-as-a-whole (Schwarz, 1983), as did receiving a chocolate bar (Münkel, Strack and Schwarz, 1987), spending time in a pleasant rather than an unpleasant room (Schwarz, Strack, Kommer and Wagner, 1987, Exp. 2), or watching the German soccer team win rather than lose a championship game (Schwarz et al., 1987, Exp. 1).

By turning to platitudes like “obtaining small amounts of money does not significantly increase an individual’s well-being” we can see that trivial factors such as finding a dime or receiving a chocolate bar at most barely influence how well an individual’s life is going for them as a whole. It then follows that the assumption that individuals are competent evaluators of how well their life is going for them does not seem to hold in these situations.

Nevertheless, sometimes this assumption does hold and in those cases life-satisfaction surveys appear to be good evidence of what is conducive to well-being. While Hausman only claims that choices can be treated as evidence for what is conducive to well-being when his assumptions hold, three issues arise when we look at other measures as well.

First, there might be cases in which platitudes make it clear that the assumptions that justify treating a certain measure as evidence for what is conducive to well-being do not hold, while those assumptions that justify treating another measure as evidence do hold. In such cases it seems fairly straightforward that policy-makers should not treat the first measure as evidence of what is conducive to well-being. Furthermore, if platitudes show that only the assumptions that support treating a single measure as evidence for what is conducive to well-being, then Hausman’s account seems to justify doing so. This measure may not necessarily be the preference-based measures that Hausman defends, but rather whatever measure is the only measure for which the supportive assumptions hold.

Second, even if policy-makers can rule out some measures, there might be cases in which platitudes make it clear that the assumptions that support treating one

measure (e.g. choices) as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold, as well as assumptions that support treating another measure (e.g. life-satisfaction surveys) as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold. In such cases Hausman's evidential account does not provide policy-makers with any reason to treat one measure as better evidence for well-being than another.

Third, there might be cases for which we do not have platitudes that can help us tell whether assumptions that justify treating a certain measure as evidence for what is conducive to well-being hold. These can be either the mundane or substantial cases discussed in §2 (school uniforms and mandatory health insurance), which do not seem to have platitudes which apply to them. In such cases, Hausman's evidential account does not provide policy-makers a reason to either accept or reject the assumptions that support treating a measure as evidence for what is conducive to well-being. As a result, it is not clear which measure, if at all, policy-makers ought to treat as evidence. But it is also clear that in such cases the evidential account does not favor any one measure over another.

That assumptions that justify relying on different measures sometimes hold does not in itself undermine Hausman's evidential account. All that follows from it is that policy-makers might be justified in using these other measures to assess the effects of different well-being policies as well. It might seem reasonable to think that even if platitudes justify a host of other social measures, it is fine to simply rely on preference-based measures whenever platitudes justify them.

First, these different measures, for the most part, indicate the same policies as conducive to well-being. So even if there are multiple measures that might be justified to use, most of the time they will be in agreement, and cases of actual disagreement between measures might be rare. Second, even if the cases of disagreement are not rare, they might only pertain to trivial policy cases. So while it might be true that platitudes can generally justify using a variety of measures, this can be seen as a mere theoretical issue that does not pertain to actual policy. Third, the disagreement might not be substantial. If measure x ranks policy a just a little higher than policy b , while measure y ranks policy b just a little higher than policy a , then it seems the difference will not be substantial enough for policy purposes.

In the next section I argue that not only do cases of disagreement between measures exist, but that they can pertain to non-trivial policy cases and they can disagree substantially.

4 Two cases of measure disagreement

It seems that preference-based measures, SWB measures and objective measures (among others) can all provide evidence of what is conducive to well-being well enough for policy purposes when the relevant assumptions hold. As a result, one might draw the conclusion that when either platitudes support assumptions that justify several measures or when there are no relevant platitudes, a savvy policy-maker ought to consult with all of the measures when deciding on policy aimed to promote well-being. Consulting with all the different measures might indeed boost confidence in a policy when all measures are in agreement. However, problems arise when there is disagreement between the measures. When a person's choices tell us one thing and her report of her life-satisfaction, for example, tells us another, it is not clear which policy is most conducive to her well-being.

One such well known case has to do with the correlation between measures of income and measures of self-reported happiness. Richard Easterlin raised the "Easterlin Paradox," as it has come to be known, when he asked:

Why do national comparisons among countries and over time show an association between income and happiness which is so much weaker than, if not inconsistent with, that shown by within-country comparisons? (Easterlin, 1974, p. 111)

While Easterlin's findings have come under attack (Hagerty and Veenhoven, 2003; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008), Easterlin et al. (2010) respond to these criticisms. If Easterlin is indeed correct and the correlation between income and happiness breaks down across countries and across time, then policy-makers who use GDP per capita or subjective well-being (as measured by life-satisfaction and financial satisfaction reports) as measures of well-being will assess potential well-being policies differently.

The substantial implications to policy are not lost on Hagerty and Veenhoven and Stevenson and Wolfers. Hagerty and Veenhoven say that Easterlin's finding "is particularly worrisome because accepting the conclusion that economic growth has no effect on happiness would have sweeping implications for national policy, suggesting that a focus on economic growth will not benefit the long-run happiness of citizens." (Hagerty and Veenhoven, 2003, p. 3). Similarly, Stevenson and Wolfers explain that "[t]he conclusion that absolute income has little impact on happiness has far-reaching policy implications. If economic growth does little to improve social welfare, then it should not be a primary goal of government policy." (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008, p. 2)

Both preference-based measures and life-satisfaction measures can be seen as evidence of what is conducive to well-being according to the platitude-based argument

of Hausman’s evidential account, and so policy-makers might be justified in using either measure to assess the effects of different well-being policies as well. Since these measures substantially diverge, it is not clear which measure is more appropriate to use. Hausman’s evidential account, in denying the possibility of turning to theories of well-being, lacks the resources to adjudicate between them.

Turning to another social measure, Daniel Kahneman’s objective happiness, one can observe a similar divergence from preference-based measures. Kahneman (2000) proposes a measure of objective happiness, which is a summation of moment-utility over a certain time and refers to the sign and intensity of affective/hedonic experience at that duration time. Kahneman’s experience-based measure comes apart from memory-based measures (which include both SWB measures and preference-based measures) in cases such as his colonoscopy study (Redelmeier and Kahneman, 1996). According to Kahneman’s objective-happiness measure shorter colonoscopy procedures, with fewer moments of dis-utility, rank higher than longer procedures with more moments of dis-utility. Nonetheless, subjects exhibited a preference that was barely correlated to length of the procedure (.03), and therefore barely correlated with the amount of dis-utility they suffered from. Instead, subject preferences correlated with a relatively high accuracy (.67) with what Kahneman terms the “peak-end rule,” which takes the “average of the most intense level of pain reported during the procedure, and of the mean pain level reported over the last three minutes” (p. 676).

Thus, rather than the amount of dis-utility being negatively correlated with the individuals’ preferences, which would imply that preferences and objective happiness point in the same direction, Kahneman discovered that preferences correlate much better with what might seem to be an arbitrary rule. Patients will prefer to undergo longer procedures, and so suffer more moment dis-utility, if the pain at the end of the procedure peters off. Other experiments arrived at similar results, for example an experiment involving unpleasant sounds (Schreiber and Kahneman, 2000). In this experiment most subjects also chose longer durations of unpleasant sounds over shorter durations in conformity with the peak-end rule. These experiments provide clear cases in which preferences and the objective happiness measure diverge.

While findings regarding such divergences might at first seem to only pertain to marginal policies that deal with either colonoscopies or loud noises, their policy implications can be much wider. These findings can potentially pertain to any instance in which pain or discomfort are involved, and if the findings extend to pleasure as well, then it would seem that policies that have some effect on individuals’ hedonic states (which are far from rare) will be assessed differently based on whether preferences or objective happiness are taken as the appropriate measure.

In addition to preference-based measures, both life-satisfaction and objective hap-

piness measures can be seen as evidence of well-being according to the argument of Hausman's evidential account. Since these measures diverge it is not clear which measure is more appropriate to use to assess well-being policies.

Hausman's evidential account, which explicitly denies appealing to controversial philosophical theories of well-being, lacks the resources to discriminate between measures. One could make the argument that one measure is better than another as a measure of well-being *qua* well-being by appealing to a theory of well-being. But this path is explicitly what the evidential account is trying to circumvent. If policy-makers appealed to a theory of well-being they would no longer be agnostic with respect to which theory of well-being is correct.

We might have other reasons to turn to preferences rather than to other measures. Preferences might exhibit more respect for individual autonomy, they might be easier to measure or they might be easier to work out using mathematical tools. There might be a whole host of pragmatic reasons to rely on preference-based measures, but none of these potential pragmatic advantages give us any reason to think that preference-based measures are better measures of well-being than any other available measure. All these potential advantages are advantages only insofar as we are interested in things other than actually measuring well-being.

5 Implications for policy

When different measures substantially diverge and platitudes tell us that the assumptions that support several measures hold, then Hausman's evidential account does not justify relying on preference-based measures even when platitudes tell us that the assumptions that support preference-based measures hold. There are often substantial policy cases for which Hausman's evidential account gives no reason to prefer preferences (or any other measure) as evidence for what is conducive to well-being over other types of measures. Hausman's evidential account can, however, be taken as a general argument in favor of relying on well-being measures when the assumptions that support them hold. Thus, without appealing to philosophical theories of well-being, all we may conclude is that when it comes to assessing policies aimed at promoting well-being, policy-makers are *not* justified in relying on well-being measures when the assumptions that support them do *not* hold.

It would seem as though we arrive at an impasse. Policy-makers cannot have their cake and eat it too. If they wish to promote policies aimed at promoting well-being, and wish to use a measure of well-being that can guide them even in cases in which different social measures disagree, policy-makers must make a choice. Either forgo the agnosticism and commit to a certain theory of well-being, rely solely on

pragmatic considerations, or ditch the attempt to promote well-being through policy. Though none of these options seems very appealing, I do not see another available alternative.

Acknowledgments

I thank Nancy Cartwright, Alexandre Marcellesi, Casey McCoy, Craig Agule, Eric Angner and three anonymous referees for comments on earlier drafts. I also thank audiences at INEM 2013, ENPOSS 2013, Pacific APA 2014 and the Second International Wellbeing and Public Policy Conference 2014 for helpful comments.

References

- Alexandrova, A. 2014. Well-being. In *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction*, eds. N. Cartwright and E. Montuschi. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Benbenishty, R. and R. Astor. 2007. Monitoring indicators of children's victimization in school: Linking national, regional, and site-level indicators. *Social Indicators Research* 84(3): 333–348.
- Broome, J. 1999. *Ethics Out of Economics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Diener, E., R. Lucas, U. Schimmack, and J. Helliwell. 2009. *Well-being for public policy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dolan, P. and M. P. White. 2007. How can measures of subjective well-being be used to inform public policy? *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2(1): 71–85.
- Easterlin, R. A. 1974. Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence. In *Nations and households in economic growth: essays in honor of Moses Abramovitz*, eds. P. A. David and M. W. Reder, 89–125. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Easterlin, R. A., L. McVey, M. Switek, O. Sawangfa, and J. Smith Zweig. 2010. The happiness–income paradox revisited. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107(52): 22463–22486.

- Fitzpatrick, R., A. Fletcher, S. Gore, D. Jones, D. Spiegelhalter, and D. Cox. 1992. Quality of life measures in health care. I: Applications and issues in assessment. *British Medical Journal* 305: 1074–1077.
- Fletcher, A., S. Gore, D. Jones, R. Fitzpatrick, D. Spiegelhalter, and D. Cox. 1992. Quality of life measures in health care. II: Design, analysis, and interpretation. *British Medical Journal* 305: 1145–1148.
- Hagerty, M. R., R. Cummins, and A. Ferriss. 2001. Quality of life indexes for national policy: Review and agenda for research. *Social Indicators Research* 55: 1–96.
- Hagerty, M. R. and R. Veenhoven. 2003. Wealth and happiness revisited – growing national income does go with greater happiness. *Social Indicators Research* 64(1): 1–27.
- Hausman, D. M. 2011. Why satisfy preferences? *Papers on Economics and Evolution*, 1124. Jena, Germany: Max-Planck-Institute für Ökonomik.
- Hausman, D. M. 2012. *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hausman, D. M. and M. S. McPherson. 2009. Preference satisfaction and welfare economics. *Economics and Philosophy* 25(01): 1–25.
- Haybron, D. M. 2008. *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kahneman, D. 2000. Experienced utility and objective happiness: A moment-based approach. In *Choices, Values and Frames*.
- Kahneman, D. and A. Krueger. 2006. Developments in the measurement of subjective well-being. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20(1): 3–24.
- Lips, P., C. Cooper, D. Agnusdei, and F. Caulin. 1999. Quality of life in patients with vertebral fractures: validation of the quality of life questionnaire of the European Foundation for Osteoporosis (QUALEFFO). *Osteoporosis International* 10(2): 150–60.
- Lips, P., C. Cooper, D. Agnusdei, F. Caulin, P. Egger, O. Johnell, J. A. Kanis, U. Liberman, H. Minne, J. Reeve, J. Y. Reginster, M. C. de Vernejoul, and I. Wiklund. 1997. Quality of life as outcome in the treatment of osteoporosis: the development of a questionnaire for quality of life by the European Foundation for Osteoporosis. *Osteoporosis International* 7(1): 36–8.

- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Person*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Pedersen, J. and T. Sommerfelt. 2007. Studying children in armed conflict: data production, social indicators and analysis. *Social Indicators Research* 84: 251–269.
- Raibley, J. R. 2011. Happiness is not well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13(6): 1105–1129.
- Redelmeier, D. and D. Kahneman. 1996. Patients’ memories of painful medical treatments: real-time and retrospective evaluations of two minimally invasive procedures. *Pain* 66: 3–8.
- Schreiber, C. and D. Kahneman. 2000. Determinants of the remembered utility of aversive sounds. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 129(1): 27–42.
- Sen, A. 1987. *Commodities and Capabilities*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Shaver, R. 2010. Egoism. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 201 ed.), ed. E. N. Zalta.
- Stevenson, B. and J. Wolfers. 2008. Economic growth and subjective well-being: Reassessing the Easterlin paradox. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 2008: 1–87.
- Strack, F., M. Argyle, and N. Schwarz. 1991. *Subjective well-being: An interdisciplinary perspective*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.
- Sumner, L. 1996. *Welfare, Happiness & Ethics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.