THE SUBJECTIVE LIST THEORY OF WELL-BEING

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A subjective list theory of well-being is one that accepts both pluralism (the view that there is more than one basic good) and subjectivism (the view, roughly, that every basic good involves our favourable attitudes). Such theories have been neglected in discussions of welfare. I argue that this is a mistake. I introduce a subjective list theory called disjunctive desire satisfactionism, and I argue that it is superior to two prominent monistic subjectivist views: desire satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism. In the course of making this argument, I introduce a problem for desire satisfactionism: it cannot accommodate the fact that whenever someone experiences an attitudinal pleasure, his welfare is (other things equal) higher during the pleasure. Finally, I argue that any subjectivist about welfare should find disjunctive desire satisfactionism highly attractive.

Keywords: well-being, welfare, desire satisfactionism, subjectivism, pluralism, objective list theory.

1. Introduction

Parfit once claimed that hedonism, desire satisfaction theories, and objective list theories are the only main kinds of theory of well-being [1984: 493]. Many would add a fourth contender: perfectionism, the view that you are well off to the extent that you exercise characteristically human capacities. Some might distinguish pleasure from happiness and propose a fifth view, on which your welfare is proportional to your happiness. But few would urge further additions to this taxonomy. The consensus is that these are the views that must be mentioned in any broad survey of the philosophy of welfare.

This consensus is mistaken. There is a neglected kind of theory that should be taken as seriously as the ones already mentioned: subjective list theories. I begin by explaining what such theories say. Then I present a particular theory of this type—disjunctive desire satisfactionism—and argue that it is superior to certain prominent views. In particular, I argue that those who accept desire satisfactionism or subjective desire satisfactionism should endorse this view instead, and that any subjectivist about welfare should find it highly attractive.

2. What Subjective List Theories Say

Subjective list theories are best understood by comparing them with objective list theories. Parfit, who introduced the term, claims that an objective list theory is one on which ‘certain things are good or bad for people,
whether or not these people would want to have the good things, or to avoid
the bad things’ [1984: 499]. As an example of such a theory, he imagines a
view on which ‘being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true
beauty’ are good for us, whether we want them or not [ibid.].

Like all other theories of welfare, objective list theories purport to name
the basic goods—the kinds that are basically good for us, rather than merely
derivatively good for us (i.e. good for us solely in virtue of being appropri-
ately related to other things that are good for us).1 Hedonism says that plea-
sure is the only basic good. Desire satisfactionism says that getting what you
desire is the only basic good.2 Although it is sometimes suggested that, on
certain conceptions of pleasure, hedonism might count as an objective list
theory with a very short list, I follow the common practice of understanding
objective list theories as positing a plurality of basic goods. In other words, I
take such theories to be committed to the following thesis:

**Pluralism:** There is more than one basic good.

An objective list theory is not merely a pluralistic one, however. As Parfit
says, it is also one on which certain things are good for us, whether or not
we would want them. Although he puts this point in terms of desire, we
should interpret him as referring more broadly to favourable attitudes,
whether conative (e.g. desire) or cognitive (e.g. evaluative belief). On this
reading, he is saying that objective list theories accept the following claim:

**Objectivism:** At least one basic good is basically good for us, regardless of
whether we would have a favourable attitude toward it.3

I understand an objective list theory to be any theory that accepts pluralism
and objectivism. I believe that this is what Parfit had in mind, and what
most philosophers mean when they refer to such theories (see, e.g., Arneson
[1999] and Rice [2013]).

A subjective list theory is one that accepts pluralism but replaces objectiv-
ism with its antithesis:

**Subjectivism:** Every basic good is one toward which we would have a favour-
able attitude.

Subjectivism captures a thought that many find plausible: nothing can
intrinsically enhance your welfare unless it would engage you or ‘resonate’
with you under the right conditions. If some part of your life leaves you
cold, then it cannot be basically good for you [Railton 2003: 47]. Since any-
thing you desire is something toward which you have a favourable attitude,

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1There are at least two ways in which something’s value might be derivative: it might lead to something else
that’s good, or it might have parts that are good. I do not speak, as Feldman [2000] does, of ‘basic intrinsic
value’, because I want to leave it open that a thing’s basic value might not be fixed by its intrinsic properties.
2Most desire satisfactionists say that only your intrinsic (i.e. final) desires count. Since none of my arguments
turns on this, I will elide this detail.
3This formulation will undergo refinement later, as will the formulation of subjectivism that I give next.
desire satisfactionism is a subjectivist view. However, because desire satisfactionism accepts **monism**, the view that there is exactly one basic good, it is not a subjective list theory.

The distinction between monism and pluralism is orthogonal to that between objectivism and subjectivism. Each of the four possible combinations of these views is coherent. Of these combinations, the two that are discussed most frequently are pluralistic objectivist theories (i.e. objective list theories) and monistic subjectivist theories (e.g. desire satisfactionism). Monistic objectivist theories, such as perfectionism, are sometimes discussed, too. But pluralistic subjectivist theories (i.e. subjective list theories) have been neglected. To my knowledge, no one has advocated a view that clearly is a subjective list theory. Nor has anyone argued that there are good reasons to combine pluralism and subjectivism. These are serious omissions. For, as I will argue, there is a subjective list theory that is superior to certain prominent views and that all subjectivists should find attractive.

3. Two Clarifications

Before I present the subjective list theory that I will commend, two clarifications are in order.

First, I have partly defined subjective list theories in terms of their acceptance of pluralism. But it might seem that the very same theory can count as pluralistic or as monistic. Desire satisfactionism seems monistic when it is glossed as the view that getting what you want is the only basic good. But wouldn’t it be equally acceptable to describe it as a pluralistic theory, on the ground that you want (and get) many different things? If I want friendship, knowledge, and fame, can’t we think of the view as saying that, in my case, there are three basic goods? If so, it would seem that desire satisfactionism is a subjective list theory, and that such theories have not really been neglected.

To see why desire satisfactionism is a monistic view, recall that a basic good is a **kind** that is basically good for us. Since the basically good particulars are events or states of affairs (such as your eating a hamburger at noon or your living in New Jersey throughout 2014), a basic good is a basically good kind of event or state. To say that a kind is basically good is not merely to say that all of its members are, however. After all, the hedonist maintains that pleasure is the only basic good, but she claims that there are other kinds (e.g. gustatory pleasure), all of whose members are basically good. Rather, a kind **K** is basically good just if every member of **K** is basically good **because it is a K**. When the hedonist says that pleasure is a basic good, she is claiming that every particular pleasure is basically good **because it is a pleasure**—not because it is a pleasure of a particular kind (e.g. gustatory) or a token of any other kind. To identify a basic good is therefore to identify a potential **explanation** of why any particular event is basically good. If monism is true, then there is a single explanation of why any basically good event has that

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4Thus, strictly speaking, hedonism says that pleasure events—events consisting of your feeling a pleasure—are the only basic good. For simplicity, I will continue to speak of pleasures instead of pleasure events.
property. If pluralism is true, then there are as many possible explanations as there are basic goods.

Why is desire satisfactionism a monistic theory even though I might desire three kinds of thing (e.g. friendship, knowledge, and fame)? Because it says that, no matter how many particular events are basically good for me, they all have that status for the same reason: because I desire them. By contrast, a pluralistic theory that identified friendship, knowledge, and fame as basic goods would say that there are at least three potential explanations of an event’s basic goodness for me—one corresponding to each basic good.\(^5\)

The second clarification concerns objectivism and subjectivism. I glossed objectivism as the view that at least one basic good is basically good for us regardless of whether we would have a favourable attitude toward it. By contrast, I said, subjectivism says that every basic good is one toward which we would have a favourable attitude. These formulations need refinement.

One problem is that these formulations risk classifying some paradigmatically subjectivist theories as objectivist. Desire satisfactionism is such a theory. It implies that no event is basically good for you unless you desire it, so it denies that any particular event is basically good for you regardless of whether you would have a favourable attitude toward it. But it is unclear that it says that no kind of event is a basic good regardless of whether you would have a favourable attitude toward it. Any token of the kind things you desire is something you desire, but do you therefore count as desiring that kind? If not, then desire satisfactionism is an objectivist view on the formulation I gave. We should therefore reformulate objectivism and subjectivism in terms of favourable attitudes toward tokens of basic goods.\(^6\)

There is another problem. On one way of formulating desire satisfactionism, it says that the objects of your desires are the only basic good. Call this the ‘object’ formulation. On another formulation, it says that desire satisfactions—states of the form \(p \land \text{you desire } p\)—are the only basic good. This ‘combo’ formulation is equivalent to the ‘object’ one, except that it incorporates into the basic good itself what the ‘object’ view regards as a background condition [Bradley 2014: 235]. The ‘combo’ version of desire satisfactionism is subjectivist;\(^7\) but it doesn’t say that nothing is a basic good unless you would have a favourable attitude toward its tokens, for it says that any event of the form \(p \land \text{you desire } p\) is basically good, regardless of whether you desire that compound event. So we must reformulate subjectivism and objectivism to correctly classify such ‘combo’ subjectivist views. We must allow a view to count as subjectivist in virtue of the fact that the tokens of the basic goods that it identifies consist (at least in part, and in the right way) in your having a favourable attitude toward something.

Why do we need the stipulation that the tokens consist in the right way in your having a favourable attitude toward something? The reason is that

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\(^5\) I elaborate on this point in Lin [forthcoming].

\(^6\) I assume that, if you have a favourable attitude toward a kind, you count as having that attitude toward all of that kind’s tokens.

\(^7\) If you doubt this, note that ‘object’ and ‘combo’ desire satisfactionism agree that, whenever something is basically good for you, the complete explanation of this is that some state of affairs that you desire obtains. They disagree only about where to draw the line around the thing that is basically good: is your desire inside, or is it outside, the thing?
many kinds whose tokens consist at least in part in your having a favourable attitude toward something could not intuitively be regarded as basic goods by a subjectivist theory [ibid: 235–6]. For example, the view that desire states—states of the form you desire p—are the only basic good is intuitively not subjectivist. For, on this view, you can be very high in welfare simply because your life is replete with intense and long-lasting desires, all of which you know to be frustrated. Since this view implies that your life could be terrific even though it leaves you cold, the view is not subjectivist. Thus, desire states are not constituted in the right way by your having a favourable attitude toward something. The same goes for the view that virtuous desire states—states of the form you desire p & p merits desire—are the only basic good. For this view implies that, even if your life contains nothing that resonates with you, it could be very high in welfare simply because you have many virtuous desires, all of which you know to be frustrated. No one has given an account of what it takes for an event to be constituted by favourable attitudes in the right way; but clear cases can be recognized. As I said, desire satisfactions are so constituted: a life replete with desire satisfactions cannot be devoid of things that resonate with you. So are events of the form you believe p & you desire p, which Chris Heathwood calls subjective desire satisfactions [2006: 548]. If you had a life in which you desired many things intensely and in which you believed that you had all of these things, that life could not leave you cold. A view on which such events were the only basic good would be subjectivist.

Here, then, are the formulations of objectivism and subjectivism that I will assume:

**Objectivism**: At least one basic good is basically good for us (i) regardless of whether we would have a favourable attitude toward its tokens, and (ii) regardless of whether its tokens consist (at least in part, and in the right way) in our having a favourable attitude toward something.8

**Subjectivism**: Every basic good is such that either (i) we would have a favourable attitude toward its tokens or (ii) its tokens consist (at least in part, and in the right way) in our having a favourable attitude toward something.9

An objective list theory is a pluralistic theory that accepts Objectivism*. A subjective list theory is a pluralistic theory that accepts Subjectivism*.

### 4. Disjunctive Desire Satisfactionism

I will now introduce a particular subjective list theory, and I will argue that it is superior to two prominent monistic and subjectivist views: desire

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8Thus, if pleasure is not necessarily connected (in the right way) to favourable attitudes, then hedonism turns out to be an objectivist view. See, e.g., Bradley [2014: 223].

9Just as different versions of subjectivism disagree about which favourable attitude is relevant to basic goodness, they disagree about the circumstances in which you must have the relevant attitude. We needn’t get into this for our purposes, so I will speak vaguely of whether you would have the favourable attitude (i.e. whether you would have it in the right circumstances—be they your actual circumstances, ones in which the token of the basic good obtains, ones in which you have full information, or other circumstances).
satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism. I will then argue that all subjectivists should find this theory highly attractive.

The majority view among subjectivists is that the favourable attitude that is relevant to basic goodness is desire. But there is disagreement among those who accept this view. Desire satisfactionists claim that desire satisfactions—states of the form $p & you desire p$—are the sole basic good, whereas subjective desire satisfactionists accord that status to subjective desire satisfactions—states of the form $you believe p & you desire p$. You can think of these two views as disagreeing about how to precisify the basic subjectivist thought. Desire satisfactionists think that what matters is whether your life really contains things that engage you or resonate with you, whereas subjective desire satisfactionists think that what matters is whether it seems to you that it does. Notice, though, that one could view this debate about what the sole basic good is as one in which each party has identified one basic good. Indeed, one could regard each of them as having identified exactly half of the basic goods.

My subjective list theory says that there are exactly two basic goods: desire satisfaction and subjective desire satisfaction. This view, which we can call disjunctive desire satisfactionism, is pluralistic because it says that there is more than one basic good. It is a subjectivist view (of the ‘combo’ kind) because it says that every basic good’s tokens are appropriately constituted by your having a favourable attitude (viz. desire) toward something. So it is a subjective list theory.

I haven’t yet explained how disjunctive desire satisfactionism determines a person’s level of well-being. To determine how well off someone is, we need to know not only what the basic goods are, but what the basic bads are. We also need to know how to determine the basic prudential value of any token of a basic good or bad—i.e. how basically good or bad for a person any such token is. For a person’s level of welfare is fixed by the basic prudential values for him of all of the particular events that occur. Disjunctive desire satisfactionism results from combining desire satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism, so let me explain what those views say.

According to desire satisfactionism, desire frustrations—states of the form $\sim p & you desire p$—are the only basic bad. A desire frustration is basically bad for you in proportion to how intense the frustrated desire is and to how long the desire frustration obtains. Similarly, a desire satisfaction is basically good for you in proportion to how intense the satisfied desire is and to how long the desire satisfaction obtains. Since desire satisfactions and frustrations are the only events that are basically good or bad for you, your level of welfare is determined by the basic prudential values of all of your desire satisfactions and frustrations.

The subjective desire satisfactionist tells a similar story. He claims that a subjective desire satisfaction is basically good for you in proportion to how long it obtains and to how intense the desire is. Subjective desire frustrations—events of the form $you believe \sim p & you desire p$—are the only basic bad, and a token of this type is basically bad for you in proportion to how long it
obtains and to how intense the desire is. Your level of well-being is fixed by the basic prudential values of all of your subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations.

I have just invoked the notion of the duration of a (subjective) desire satisfaction or frustration. How should we understand this notion, given that there are cases in which \( p \) is true, you desire \( p \), and you believe \( p \) at different times?\(^{11}\) On Monday (and no other days), you desire to be rich. On Tuesday (and no other days), you believe yourself to be rich. On Wednesday (and no other days), you are rich. What are the temporal boundaries of your desire satisfaction and subjective desire satisfaction?\(^{12}\) Different versions of desire satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism give different answers. But, on the versions of those views that I find most plausible, difficult cases of this sort do not arise. For those versions incorporate a temporal concurrency requirement: they understand a (subjective) desire satisfaction or frustration to be a conjunctive state of affairs both of whose conjuncts obtain simultaneously [Heathwood 2006: 542, 548]. A desire satisfaction is a state of affairs consisting of \( p \)'s being true simultaneously with your desiring it, so the duration of a desire satisfaction is just that of the temporal overlap between your desire for \( p \) and \( p \)'s truth. Likewise, mutatis mutandis, for desire frustrations and for subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations. Thus, the case just described contains no desire satisfaction or subjective desire satisfaction, so there is no hard question about their durations. The fact that the basic prudential value of a (subjective) desire satisfaction or frustration depends on its duration doesn’t create special difficulties, since it is in principle straightforward to determine the temporal overlap between your desire for \( p \), your belief that \( p \), and \( p \)'s truth (or falsity).

In effect, disjunctive desire satisfactionism combines desire satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism. It claims the following:

1. There are two basic goods: desire satisfaction and subjective desire satisfaction.

2. There are two basic bads: desire frustration and subjective desire frustration.

3. A particular desire satisfaction or subjective desire satisfaction is basically good for you in proportion to its duration and to the intensity of its constituent desire.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\)For simplicity, I am treating propositions as if their truth values can change over time. If you think propositions are either eternally true or eternally false, you can translate my talk of the time at which a proposition is true into talk of the time at which its truthmaker obtains.

\(^{12}\)I thank an anonymous referee for raising this question.

\(^{13}\)I don’t mean this to imply that if a desire satisfaction and a subjective desire satisfaction involve the same desire and have the same duration, then they must have the same value. The relevant proportion might be different for desire satisfaction than it is for subjective desire satisfaction. That is, desire satisfaction might, in general, be given more (or less) weight than subjective desire satisfaction—even though any two desire satisfactions of the same duration and involving desires of the same intensity will have the same value (and likewise for any two such subjective desire satisfactions). Different ways of specifying the proportions would yield different versions of the view, between which I remain neutral. (Similar remarks apply to desire frustration and subjective desire frustration.) I thank an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.
A particular desire frustration or subjective desire frustration is basically bad for you in proportion to its duration and to the intensity of its constituent desire.

Your level of welfare over an interval of time is determined by the basic prudential values of all of your desire satisfactions, desire frustrations, subjective desire satisfactions, and subjective desire frustrations that obtain during that interval.

For the sake of specificity, we can assume that, like my preferred versions of the two theories that it combines, disjunctive desire satisfactionism accepts a temporal concurrence requirement. But, as I’ll explain, my argument won’t rely on this assumption.

It might seem unmotivated or ad hoc to combine two theories in this way. But disjunctive desire satisfactionism is no hodgepodge: its list of basic goods and bads is unified around the idea that your level of welfare is determined by the facts about what you desire. The basic thought is simple: it is good for you to get what you want, good for you to think you’re getting what you want, and even better to have both. Moreover, there is a clear motivation for disjunctive desire satisfactionism: as I will now argue, it is better than both of the views that constitute it because it evades significant problems faced by those views while retaining the views’ virtues.

5. Why Disjunctive Desire Satisfactionism Is Better Than Its Two Halves

Let’s consider the problem with subjective desire satisfactionism first. I call two people, X and Y, duplicates with respect to their subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations if, for any subjective desire satisfaction (frustration) of X’s, there is a subjective desire satisfaction (frustration) of Y’s that lasts exactly as long and whose constituent desire is exactly as intense—and vice versa. Subjective desire satisfactionism implies that any two people who are duplicates in this sense are equal in welfare. But it seems to me that this is false. Imagine, to take a familiar case, that X has a good life in the real world, but that Y is in an experience machine his entire life and is fed a perfect simulation of X’s experiences. X has friends and family members who love him, a career in which he achieves great things, and so on. Y has none of these things. Many would share my intuition that, even if X and Y are duplicates with respect to their subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations, X is at least somewhat higher in lifetime well-being than Y. This intuition is incompatible with subjective desire satisfactionism.

Disjunctive desire satisfactionism does not have this problem. It says that a person’s welfare is determined not just by the values of her subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations, but also by those of her desire satisfactions and frustrations. X and Y are not duplicates with respect to the latter, even if they are duplicates with respect to the former. They both have desires about things other than their experiences: they want to be loved, to achieve

14I thank an anonymous referee for raising this worry.
certain goals in the real world, and so on. But many more of these desires are satisfied in X’s case than in Y’s: while X really is loved, for example, it merely seems to Y that he is loved, when in fact he isn’t. The theory therefore implies that X’s lifetime well-being is higher than Y’s.

Of course, desire satisfactionism implies this on its own: we don’t need disjunctive desire satisfactionism to secure this result. Why not just accept the former view, then? The answer is that it faces a distinct (but equally serious) problem that the latter view evades.

Before I discuss this problem, let me mention a different reason why one might prefer disjunctive desire satisfactionism to desire satisfactionism—a reason I don’t find decisive. Imagine a man who intensely desires that his wife be faithful to him, but whose wife is not faithful. It might seem that if he falsely believes that she is faithful, he is at least somewhat better off than he would be if he didn’t believe this. Disjunctive desire satisfactionism can easily explain this: if the man believes that his wife is faithful, he has an intense subjective desire satisfaction that he would otherwise lack. By contrast, it might seem that desire satisfactionism cannot explain this, since, regardless of whether he believes that his wife is faithful, his desire that she be faithful is frustrated. In my view, this case isn’t decisive. For it is plausible that if the man believes his wife to be faithful, he is in a mental state that he desires to be in, whereas if he lacks this belief he is in a mental state (viz. either uncertainty about his wife’s faithfulness or belief that she is unfaithful) in which he desires not to be. Thus, the desire satisfactionist can say that the man has a better balance of desire satisfaction over frustration, and thus a higher level of welfare, in the scenario in which he falsely believes his wife to be faithful.

If you think that the man is better off by having the false belief and you also find unpersuasive the response that I gave on behalf of the desire satisfactionist, then you should already think that, just as disjunctive desire satisfactionism evades a problem faced by subjective desire satisfactionism, it evades a problem faced by desire satisfactionism. However, if you don’t think that he’s better off or you are persuaded by the response I gave, you need further reason to believe that disjunctive desire satisfactionism is preferable to desire satisfactionism. In that case, I give you the following problem for desire satisfactionism, which I call the Attitudinal Pleasure Problem.

Some pleasures are not pleasant sensations but are instead attitudinal pleasures—pleasures taken in a proposition or state of affairs (see, e.g., Feldman [2004: 55–66]). When you take pleasure in the thought that the end of the semester is two days away, your pleasure is not sensory: it is a mental episode consisting (at least in part) of a positive attitude toward the proposition that the end of the semester is two days away. Now, regardless of whether attitudinal pleasures are themselves basically good for us, they are clearly connected with well-being in the following way: every attitudinal pleasure coincides temporally with a pro tanto increase in welfare on the part of the person feeling it. That is, every attitudinal pleasure is such that, other things equal, your welfare goes up when you begin to feel it, remains

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\[15\] Some would deny that this is true of sadistic or otherwise objectionable pleasures. Although I disagree with those people, they can simply read what I say as being implicitly restricted to unobjectionable attitudinal pleasures.
higher for the duration of the pleasure, and then goes back down when you stop feeling it. Think about what happens when you are pleased that your candidate has won the election, or when you take pleasure in the thought that you will soon be on vacation: other things equal, your welfare is higher exactly during the interval when the pleasure occurs.

Although one potential explanation of the fact that attitudinal pleasures coincide temporally with pro tanto welfare boosts is that they are themselves basically good for us, that is not the only possible explanation. I am merely making the claim about temporal coincidence, not endorsing the view that any pleasures are themselves basically good.

The Attitudinal Pleasure Problem for desire satisfactionism is that it cannot accommodate this fact about the temporal coincidence of attitudinal pleasures and pro tanto increases in welfare. That’s because you can feel an attitudinal pleasure throughout an interval of time (and undergo a pro tanto welfare boost over that interval) even though none of your desires is satisfied during that interval. This is obviously true if attitudinal pleasure is not necessarily connected to desire: if you can be pleased about something at a time when you are not desiring anything, then you can be pleased about something at a time when you do not have any satisfied desires. Surprisingly, however, this is also true even if, as I will now argue, attitudinal pleasure is necessarily connected to desire.

To see that this is so, distinguish between two ways in which attitudinal pleasure might be necessarily connected to desire:

- **Desire the Object:** If (at t) you are feeling an attitudinal pleasure whose object is p, then you desire p (at t).
- **Desire the Pleasure:** If (at t) you are feeling an attitudinal pleasure whose object is p, then you desire (at t) to be feeling that very attitudinal pleasure.

Desire the Object is true. As I said earlier, when you are pleased that the end of the semester is two days away, your attitudinal pleasure is a mental episode consisting (at least in part) in a positive attitude toward the proposition that the end of the semester is two days away. This positive attitude is conative rather than cognitive, and it is a first-order attitude. But that is just to say that it is a desire, in the thin sense of ‘desire’ standardly used in discussions of well-being: you desire something, in this sense, whenever you are motivated to obtain it, you like it, you are ‘into it’, or you are ‘pro’ it [Heathwood 2006: 559]. So, you can’t be pleased that p unless you desire p. (If you have no desire to be eating haggis, you can’t be pleased to be eating it.)

16An anonymous referee observes that, on such a thin sense of ‘desire’, Desire the Object might appear to be a concealed tautology of the form ‘If P, then P.’ Liking p seems conceptually equivalent to being pleased that p. So, assuming that desiring something in the thin sense is conceptually equivalent to liking it, Desire the Object amounts to the claim that if you are pleased that p then you are pleased that p. I concede that liking p may be equivalent to being pleased that p, but I deny that desiring something in the thin sense is equivalent to liking it. Rather, to desire something in that sense is to stand in a certain non-cognitive pro-attitude toward it—the attitude you continue to have toward Obama’s having won the election when you go from hoping that he won (before you hear the results), to wishing that he had won (when you hear false reports that he lost), to liking that he won (when you discover the true results). Since desiring p is not sufficient for being pleased that p, Desire the Object isn’t a concealed tautology of the form ‘If P, then P.’ Admittedly, Desire the Object may be analytic. But it is surely no objection to an argument that one of its premises is analytic.
Notice, though, that Desire the Object does not imply Desire the Pleasure. Even if you can’t take pleasure in the thought that the end of the semester is two days away unless you want it to be two days away, it doesn’t follow that you can’t take pleasure in this thought without desiring to be experiencing that very pleasure. Indeed, Desire the Pleasure is false. Admittedly, you sometimes are pleased that \( p \) while simultaneously desiring to be feeling that very attitudinal pleasure. You might be pleased that your friend won a prize for which you also competed, and want to be pleased about this (because it shows that you are not envious). This is a special case, though. You can be pleased that \( p \) without simultaneously desiring to be feeling that very attitudinal pleasure. If you are pleased that your friend lost a contest that you also lost, and you know this to be a sign of envy, you might have a strong desire \( \text{not} \) to be feeling this attitudinal pleasure. We needn’t suppose that, simply because you are feeling this pleasure, you must also have a desire to be feeling it—a desire that conflicts with your desire not to feel it. Although you are ‘pro’ or ‘into’ the fact that your friend lost, you needn’t be ‘pro’ the fact that you are pleased that he lost: you needn’t be ambivalent or conflicted in your opposition to your envious pleasure. There is no reason to think that, whenever you are pleased that \( p \), you must desire to be feeling that very pleasure—any more than there is reason to think that, whenever you are in love with someone, you must be attracted not only to that person but also to your being in love with that person. Any temptation to endorse Desire the Pleasure likely comes from a failure to distinguish it from Desire the Object.

The falsity of Desire the Pleasure implies that you can be pleased that \( p \) without desiring to be feeling your attitudinal pleasure that \( p \). Moreover, you can feel an attitudinal pleasure even if you don’t have a general desire for pleasure: even an ascetic can, in spite of himself, be pleased that something is the case. Now, imagine that you are taking pleasure in the thought that the end of the semester is two days away when there are, in fact, two weeks left. If Desire the Object is true, you have a desire that the end of the semester is two days away. But since it isn’t two days away, this desire is not satisfied. Moreover, since you needn’t have a general desire for pleasure or a desire for this particular pleasure, you needn’t have a satisfied desire for pleasure or for this particular pleasure. There is no reason to suppose that you must have some other satisfied desire at the time of your attitudinal pleasure. So, surely, you could be feeling this pleasure even though none of your desires is satisfied during the interval of the pleasure. But even if you are feeling this pleasure at a time when you have no satisfied desires, this pleasure coincides with a pro tanto increase in your welfare—an increase that cannot be due to any desire satisfaction. Thus, desire satisfactionism can’t accommodate the fact that all attitudinal pleasures coincide with increases in welfare.\(^{17}\) (Notice that the truth of Desire the Object was not necessary for this argument. Only the falsity of Desire the Pleasure was necessary for it.)

\(^{17}\)I’ve assumed that if a desire satisfaction of yours is basically good, the time at which it is basically good is the time at which it occurs. But this assumption is dispensable. Imagine a very short-lived subject, none of whose desires is ever satisfied. Even this subject could feel an attitudinal pleasure with a false object. If he felt such a pleasure, he would undergo an increase in welfare at the same time.
It won’t do to object that attitudinal pleasures with false objects don’t coincide temporally with pro tanto welfare boosts. They do. The temptation to think otherwise results from conflating a subject’s welfare during a pleasure with his welfare in the long run. If you take pleasure in the false thought that the end of the semester is two days away, then your false belief might lower your welfare in the long run by causing you to fail to prepare lectures for the two weeks of the semester that actually remain. But this doesn’t change the fact that your welfare is (other things equal) higher during the pleasure. Cases in which the false belief has no bad consequences confirm this. If you are taking attitudinal pleasure in the thought that some celebrity has behaved in the outrageous way in which the tabloids claim that he has behaved, you are (other things equal) better off during this pleasure even if, unbeknownst to you, the tabloid stories are false. Attitudinal pleasures with false objects are no exception to the rule that attitudinal pleasures coincide with welfare boosts. When you feel such a pleasure at a time when none of your desires is satisfied, the increase in welfare that you undergo during the pleasure cannot be due to a desire satisfaction.

I have been assuming that desire satisfactionism can accommodate the fact that all attitudinal pleasures coincide temporally with pro tanto increases in welfare only if there is a guarantee that, whenever you feel such a pleasure, some desire of yours is satisfied. But there is another, rather subtle, possibility: perhaps your welfare is higher at times when you feel attitudinal pleasure, not because you get more basic goodness during those times, but because you get less basic badness. If this were true, a desire satisfactionist could claim that, whenever you feel an attitudinal pleasure, either fewer of your desires are frustrated or your frustrated desires are less intense. This claim is not credible, however. It is clear that, when you get a welfare boost while feeling an attitudinal pleasure, the boost is due to your getting more basic goodness, not less basic badness. After all, you can feel such a pleasure (and get such a boost) in the middle of an interval in which nothing is basically bad for you. This would not be possible if these welfare boosts were due to diminutions in basic badness instead of to increases in basic goodness. My assumption was therefore correct: desire satisfactionism can accommodate the temporal coincidence of attitudinal pleasures and welfare boosts only if there is a guarantee that, whenever you feel such a pleasure, some desire of yours is satisfied. As I have just argued, there is no such guarantee.

To summarize, here is the Attitudinal Pleasure Problem. Every attitudinal pleasure coincides temporally with pro tanto welfare boost for the person feeling it. This is true even of attitudinal pleasures whose objects are false. But you can feel such a pleasure during an interval of time when none of your desires is satisfied. Therefore, desire satisfactions cannot account for the fact that all attitudinal pleasures coincide with welfare boosts. Desire frustrations cannot account for this fact either, since you can feel such a pleasure in the middle of an interval in which nothing is basically bad for you. Thus, desire satisfactionism is incompatible with the fact that all attitudinal pleasures coincide with increases in welfare.18

18In Lin [2014], I invoke a variant on this problem to argue for pluralism.
Have I begged the question against desire satisfactionism? No. A desire satisfactionist could, of course, deny that attitudinal pleasures always coincide with welfare boosts. But such a denial is not part of the spirit or motivation of his view. In fact, desire satisfactionism is supposed to capture everything that hedonism intuitively gets right while avoiding what it gets wrong. Desire satisfactionists assume that they can account for the apparent basic goodness of all pleasures by identifying necessary connections between pleasure and desire. The fact that they cannot do this is an unwelcome surprise to them, not a feature that they antecedently believed their view to have. Moreover, to deny that all attitudinal pleasures coincide with welfare boosts is to deny something highly intuitive that appears to be revealed by the phenomenology of pleasure: it seems impossible to have an experience that feels exactly as a pleasure does without simultaneously undergoing a pro tanto increase in welfare. A committed desire satisfactionist could respond to my argument by denying its main premise, but this would amount to biting a bullet.

Disjunctive desire satisfactionism avoids the Attitudinal Pleasure Problem because attitudinal pleasure is necessarily connected to subjective desire satisfaction in such a way that, whenever you are pleased that something is the case, you are the subject of a subjective desire satisfaction. Recall that Desire the Object is true: if you are pleased that \( p \), then you desire \( p \). The following claim is also true:

**Believe the Object:** If (at \( t \)) you are feeling an attitudinal pleasure whose object is \( p \), then you believe \( p \) (at \( t \)).

If you don’t believe that you’ve won the lottery, then you can’t be pleased that you won: at best, you can hope that you won, wish that you had won, or be pleased that you might have won [Feldman 2004: 59]. Given Desire the Object and Believe the Object, disjunctive desire satisfactionism implies that, whenever you are pleased that \( p \), something is basically good for you—namely, a subjective desire satisfaction whose object is \( p \). This accounts for

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19I thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.
20An anonymous referee objects that, according to Feldman [2004], attitudinal pleasures needn’t feel like anything at all. If this claim about attitudinal pleasures is correct, then the putative fact that all such pleasures coincide with welfare boosts can hardly be revealed by the phenomenology of such pleasures, and it is misleading to speak (as I have) of feeling attitudinal pleasure. I doubt, however, that Feldman really believes that attitudinal pleasures needn’t feel like anything at all—as opposed to merely believing that such pleasures needn’t involve any sensory feelings. (See Feldman [ibid.: 55—7].) Moreover, even if he does believe this, I claim that this belief is false. There is something it is like to take attitudinal pleasure in something: it feels good. A being without phenomenal consciousness couldn’t take attitudinal pleasure in anything. Nor could it be the case that one life contains more attitudinal pleasure than an experientially identical life. Indeed, the plausibility of the hedonist’s claim that all pleasures are basically good depends largely on the fact that all pleasures feel good. However, even if you disagree with me about this, you can still agree for other reasons that all attitudinal pleasures coincide with welfare boosts, and you can still accept my argument (replacing my talk of feeling attitudinal pleasures with talk of undergoing them).
21Heathwood [2006: 557] claims that an attitudinal pleasure whose object is \( p \) is analysable as a subjective desire satisfaction whose object is \( p \). Although this analysis implies Desire the Object and Believe the Object, you needn’t accept it to accept those two claims.
22I assume that the time at which one of your subjective desire satisfactions is basically good for you is just the time at which it occurs. This is overwhelmingly plausible, and no one has disputed this. Unless there is some reason to think otherwise, it is reasonable to assume that the time at which an event is basically good for you (if it is) is just the time at which it occurs.
the fact that all attitudinal pleasures coincide with pro tanto increases in welfare.

Of course, subjective desire satisfactionism can also accommodate this fact. But, as we’ve already seen, it faces a different problem: it implies that any two people who are duplicates with respect to their subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations have the same level of welfare. Disjunctive desire satisfactionism evades the Attitudinal Pleasure Problem. It also evades the aforementioned problem for subjective desire satisfactionism. Although each of those two views is simpler than disjunctive desire satisfactionism, this is outweighed by the fact that they each have counterintuitive implications that it lacks. On the whole, disjunctive desire satisfactionism is superior to both of those views. The proponents of those monistic, subjectivist, views should become subjective list theorists: they should switch to disjunctive desire satisfactionism.23

This result holds even for versions of desire satisfactionism or subjective desire satisfactionism that reject the temporal concurrence requirement. For neither of the problems that I raised for those two views depends on this requirement. Even if you can benefit from believing $p$ at one time and desiring it at another, subjective desire satisfactionism implies that duplicates with respect to subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations are equal in welfare. Even if you can benefit from desiring $p$ at one time and getting it at another, desire satisfactionism implies that some attitudinal pleasures do not coincide with welfare boosts. After all, a short-lived individual, none of whose desires is ever satisfied, could nonetheless feel an attitudinal pleasure with a false object; and if he felt such a pleasure, he would undergo a pro tanto increase in welfare at the same time.24 Moreover, disjunctive desire satisfactionism needn’t accept a concurrence requirement if it is to evade either of those two problems. It evades the first problem simply because duplicates with respect to subjective desire satisfactions and frustrations needn’t also be duplicates with respect to desire satisfactions and frustrations. It evades the second problem simply because it implies that, whenever you simultaneously believe and desire $p$, this is basically good for you.25 Thus, even though my preferred versions of the views I have discussed are concurrentist, my argument shows that disjunctive desire satisfactionism is superior to the two theories it combines even if the temporal concurrence requirement is rejected.

23 My case for disjunctive desire satisfactionism also supports a view on which the two basic goods are desire satisfaction and attitudinal pleasure.
24 I mentioned this in note 17.
25 This doesn’t imply the concurrence requirement, which says that your believing and desiring $p$ is basically good for you only if you believe and desire $p$ simultaneously. Any plausible view on which subjective desire satisfactions are a basic good will admit that they are basically good for you if their conjuncts obtain simultaneously.
6. Conclusion

The foregoing argument isn’t meant to show that disjunctive desire satisfactionism is true. Nor does it purport to show that it is superior to all extant subjectivist views. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to argue for either of those ambitious claims. My aim is not to establish a particular theory of welfare, but instead to argue that a neglected type of theory (subjective list theories) should be taken seriously because one of its instances (disjunctive desire satisfactionism) is highly attractive. With that aim in mind, let me close by arguing for this modest claim: since disjunctive desire satisfactionism is better than desire satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism, subjectivists should regard it as one of the main contenders for the true theory of welfare.

All subjectivists have strong reasons to endorse a view on which the crucial favourable attitude is desire, rather than something more sophisticated, such as higher-order desire, valuing, or evaluative belief. For subjectivism must accommodate the fact that certain psychologically primitive subjects (e.g. newborn infants) can be positive in welfare. Subjectivist views on which the favourable attitude is something more sophisticated than desire have trouble doing this, since those subjects lack such attitudes: a newborn cannot believe anything to be basically good for him, for example. By contrast, those subjects clearly can desire things. It would require a much longer discussion to show that all subjectivists should (i.e. have most reason to) accept a desire-based view. But the foregoing considerations show that subjectivists have strong pro tanto reasons to accept such a view. And, as I said earlier, most subjectivists do accept such a view. Desire satisfactionism and subjective desire satisfactionism are leading views of this type, and deservedly so: they are among the most plausible desire-based views. Since disjunctive desire satisfactionism is superior to both of these views, it is one of the most plausible members of a family of views that all subjectivists have strong reasons to accept. Thus, subjectivists should consider it one of the main contenders for the true theory of welfare.

I conclude that there is a subjective list theory—disjunctive desire satisfactionism—that all subjectivists should find highly appealing. Since subjectivism is a widespread and reasonable view, disjunctive desire satisfactionism

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26I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this.
27For examples of more sophisticated subjectivist views, see Dorsey [2012] and Tiberius and Plakias [2010].
28As an anonymous referee notes, desire satisfactionism has been objected to on the ground that the satisfaction of some desires doesn’t seem good for one—either because the desire seems irrelevant to one’s welfare (e.g. a desire that the number of atoms in the universe is even), or because it would in some sense be bad for one to satisfy it (e.g. a desire to use heroin). But I believe that Heathwood [2005] has answered the objection from intuitively bad desires. Moreover, the irrelevancy problem is not specific to desire-based views: that the number of atoms in the universe is even seems irrelevant to one’s welfare, regardless of whether one desires it, values it, or believes it to be good for one. I therefore do not think that these problems give subjectivists good reasons to reject desire-based views. But even if I am wrong about this, it remains true that subjectivists have strong pro tanto reasons to accept a desire-based view. And this is all that I need for the claim for which I am arguing here. (Furthermore, the fact that desire satisfactionists face the problem of irrelevant desires doesn’t count against my claim that they should switch to disjunctive desire satisfactionism. The latter view is no worse than their view is at handling this problem, but it avoids a serious problem—the Attitudinal Pleasure Problem—that their view cannot handle.)
should be taken seriously, and subjective list theories should not continue to be ignored.29, 30

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29Fletcher [2013] endorses a pluralistic theory with six basic goods: achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, and virtue. Because he claims that ‘all of these goods have pro-attitudes as necessary components’ [ibid.: 216], you might think that his view is a subjective list theory of the ‘combo’ variety. This would be a mistake, however: the goods he enumerates don’t all consist in the right way in your having a favourable attitude toward something. As Hurka [2011: 120–1] would argue and as Fletcher appears to be assuming, one way to exhibit virtue is to be the subject of virtuous desire states—states of the form you desire p & p merits desire. And, as I explained earlier, your life could be replete with virtuous desire states even though everything in your life leaves you cold. The view that virtue is the sole basic good would clearly not be subjectivist, so tokens of virtue are not constituted in the right way by your favourable attitudes. Thus, Fletcher’s view is an objective list theory.

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