Enumeration and Explanation in Theories of Welfare

In recent years, it has become commonplace to distinguish enumerative theories of welfare from explanatory ones. An *enumerative* theory lists the things that are good for you. An *explanatory* theory explains why anything that is good for you has that property.¹ Hedonism and objective list theories have been said to be merely enumerative—i.e., enumerative but not explanatory. For although they list the things that are good for you (e.g., pleasure), they don’t explain why any of these things are good for you. On the other hand, desire satisfactionism has been said to be merely explanatory—i.e., explanatory but not enumerative. For although it says that anything that is good for you has that property *because* you desire it, it doesn’t list the things that you desire.² It has been argued that the enumerative/explanatory distinction carves things at their joints, and that it should be the basis of new and better ways of classifying theories of welfare.³

In this paper, I argue that this way of thinking about theories of welfare is mistaken. Enumerative claims should be distinguished from explanatory ones, but it is a mistake to think that any of the major theories of welfare is merely enumerative or merely explanatory. When properly understood, every such theory is both enumerative and explanatory.

1. Why All Major Theories Are Explanatory

Let us begin by considering the way in which desire satisfactionism is explanatory. Once we have identified what desire satisfactionism purports to explain, we will be in a position to see that every other major theory of welfare purports to explain the same thing. It will therefore be evident that hedonism and objective list theories are not merely enumerative.

Every theory of welfare purports to tell us how to identify the particular facts, events, or obtaining states of affairs⁴ that are non-derivatively or basically good for you—i.e., good for you, but not solely in

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² Fletcher (2013), pp. 206-09. While he acknowledges that a theory can be both enumerative and explanatory, he denies that any of the three aforementioned theories is like this.
³ Fletcher (2013), pp. 209, 219; Woodard (2013), pp. 790-93. Although Woodard says that hedonism is “on the face of it, a purely enumerative view,” he doesn’t accept Fletcher’s classification of desire satisfactionism and objective list theories.
⁴ I will assume that facts are the bearers of basic goodness, but nothing turns on this assumption.
virtue of being appropriately related to other particulars that are good for you. Suppose that you are eating a peach, and that you want to be eating a peach. Desire satisfactionism says that the fact *that you are eating a peach* is basically good for you because you want to be eating a peach: your desire to be eating a peach is what *makes* that fact basically good for you. This example illustrates a general truth about the theory: it says that a particular fact is basically good for you if and only if and because it satisfies one of your desires. Thus, desire satisfactionism is an explanatory theory in the following sense: it purports to explain why any particular fact that is basically good for you has that status.

Some desire satisfactionists formulate their view a bit differently. Instead of saying that the objects of your desires are basically good for you if they obtain, they say that the facts that are basically good for you are compound facts consisting of your desiring an object and that object’s obtaining—i.e., facts of the form \( p \& \text{you desire } p \). This version of the view identifies different facts as basically good for you, and it offers a different explanation of the basic goodness for you of these facts: a particular fact is basically good for you if and only if and because it is a fact of the form \( p \& \text{you desire } p \). But it is explanatory in the same sense that the other version of the view is: it purports to explain the basic goodness for you of any fact that is basically good for you.

Now that we have seen what desire satisfactionism purports to explain, let us consider whether any of the other major theories of welfare purports to explain the same thing. First, consider hedonism. Suppose that you are eating a peach, and that this is causing you to feel a particular episode, \( E \), of gustatory pleasure. Hedonism says that the fact *that you are feeling* \( E \) is basically good for you because \( E \) is an episode of pleasure: what makes this fact basically good for you is the fact that it consists in your feeling an episode of pleasure. More generally, hedonism says that a particular fact is basically good for you if and only if and because it is a fact consisting in your feeling an episode of pleasure—i.e., a fact of the form *that you are feeling* \( X \), where \( X \) is a pleasure. This is why the facts *that you are eating a peach and that your lower back is aching* are not basically good for you: they lack the feature in virtue of which any fact that is basically good for you has that status. Thus, hedonism purports to explain exactly what desire satisfactionism purports to explain: why some facts, and not others, are basically good for you. It is therefore explanatory in the same sense that desire satisfactionism is.

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5 Many desire satisfactionists would offer a more complex explanation (e.g., one appealing to intrinsic desires, or to the desires you would have if you were fully informed). Such details are not relevant for my purposes, so I will elide them.

6 Thus, the fact *that you are eating a peach and you want to be eating a peach* is basically good for you, while the fact *that you are doing your taxes* is not, precisely because the former is, and the latter isn’t, a fact of the form \( p \& \text{you desire } p \).
The same is true of objective list theories. Consider a theory on which pleasure and knowledge are both basic goods. On this view, the fact that you are feeling $E$ is basically good for you in virtue of the fact that it consists in your feeling an episode of pleasure. Moreover, if you know the Pythagorean Theorem, then the fact that you know the Pythagorean Theorem is basically good for you because it a fact consisting of your knowing something—i.e., a fact of the form that you know that $p$. On an objective list theory, each basic good on the list corresponds to an explanation of the basic goodness for you of particular facts. The fact that your lower back is aching is not basically good for you because it does not have any of the good-making features that correspond to the entries on the list.

Admittedly, hedonism doesn’t explain why consisting in your feeling a pleasure is a property that makes facts basically good for you, or why it is the only such property. Thus, it fails to explain why pleasure is basically good for you, or why it is the only kind that is basically good for you. (More pedantically: it fails to explain why facts consisting in your feeling a pleasure is a kind that is basically good for you, or why it is the only kind that has that status.) Similar remarks would apply to objective list theories. Presumably, this is why some have denied that these theories are explanatory. But notice that the corresponding parts of desire satisfactionism are also left unexplained: the view says that facts that satisfy one of your desires is the only kind of fact that is basically good for you, and that satisfying one of your desires is the only property that makes facts basically good for you, but it doesn’t explain why either of these claims is true. Desire satisfactionism is nonetheless explanatory because it purports to explain why any particular fact that is basically good for you has that status. Since hedonism and objective list theories also purport to explain this, they are explanatory too.

I have argued that hedonism and objective list theories are explanatory with respect to the particular facts that are basically good for you. The same is true of all other major theories of welfare. Every such theory purports to tell us how to identify the facts that are basically good for you precisely by telling us what explains why any fact that is basically good for you has that status. Thus, none of the major theories is merely enumerative (i.e., enumerative but not explanatory).

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7 Fletcher (2013) appears to give no argument for the claim that hedonism and objective list theories are not explanatory: he asserts that they are enumerative (p. 206), and after noting that a theory can be both enumerative and explanatory, he excludes them from this category, thereby classifying them as merely enumerative (p. 209). I conjecture that the reason he and others so classify them is that these theories do not explain why pleasure, or the entries on the list, are good for you. Fletcher (2013, p. 218) agrees: he says that “if we ask the desire-fulfilment theorist why something is good for us if and only if, and because, we desire it, it’s not clear what non-trivial explanation they could give of this fact.”
2. Why All Major Theories Are Enumerative

Let us now consider the way in which hedonism and objective list theories are enumerative. Once we have seen what these views purport to enumerate, it will become evident that all major theories (including desire satisfactionism) are enumerative in the same way.

Hedonism and objective list theories do not enumerate particular facts that are basically good for you (e.g., that you are feeling $E_i$ at $t_i$). They merely give us a procedure for identifying these facts by telling us what the good-making properties are. With respect to the particular facts that are basically good for you, they are no more enumerative than desire satisfactionism is. What they enumerate are the *kinds* that are basically good for you: pleasure, in the case of hedonism, and a plurality of kinds in the case of objective list theories. More precisely, they enumerate the kinds of fact that are basically good for you (e.g., *facts consisting in your feeling a pleasure*, in the case of hedonism). Each of these kinds corresponds to a good-making property—a property that makes any fact that possesses it basically good for you. Thus, hedonism and objective list theories also enumerate good-making properties. According to hedonism, there is only one such property: *consisting in your feeling a pleasure*. According to objective list theories, there are as many such properties as there are entries on the list.

It should be evident that desire satisfactionism is enumerative in the same way: it lists the obtaining *objects of your desires* as the only kind of fact that is basically good for you, and it lists *satisfying one of your desires* as the sole good-making property. The same is true of all other major theories of welfare. As I have argued, every such theory identifies (and thus enumerates) at least one good-making property. Since every such property corresponds to a kind of fact that is basically good for you, every major theory enumerates at least one such kind. Thus, none of the major theories is merely explanatory.

3. Diagnosis and Implications

I have argued that every major theory of welfare is both enumerative and explanatory: every such theory *enumerates* a certain number of good-making properties and uses these properties to *explain*...
why certain facts, and not others, are basically good for you. The temptation to think otherwise appears to be due to failure to keep in mind the distinction between particulars and kinds. Consider the claim that hedonism and objective list theories enumerate the things that are good for you, but do not explain why these things are good for you. This claim is true if ‘things’ refers to kinds, but false if it refers to particular facts. Now, consider the claim that desire satisfactionism explains why anything that is good for you is good for you, but doesn’t enumerate anything that is good for you. This claim is true if ‘anything’ refers to particular facts, but false if it refers to kinds.

If this is correct, then it is a mistake to think that the distinction between merely enumerative and merely explanatory theories should be the basis for new and improved ways of classifying theories of welfare. Fletcher defines an objective list theory as any merely enumerative theory that is distinct from hedonism. But since there are no merely enumerative theories among the major theories of welfare, this view falsely implies that no major theory is an objective list theory. Woodard proposes to highlight the distinction between enumeration and explanation via “the inelegant but apparently inescapable method of proposing two separate classifications: one for enumerative theories and one for explanatory theories.” But since all of the major theories are both enumerative and explanatory, none of them will fit into just one of these classifications.

4. Objections and Replies

4.1 The Possibility of Merely Enumerative Views

Couldn’t someone believe that all and only facts consisting in your feeling a pleasure are basically good for you, while remaining agnostic about what explains the basic goodness for you of these facts? Couldn’t someone endorse an objective list theory’s predictions about which facts are basically good for you without identifying any good-making properties? Yes, but this is no objection to my thesis, which concerns the major theories of welfare as they are standardly understood. I do not

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12 Woodard (2013, p. 788) says that he will “refer to any philosophical claim, position, or view about [welfare], no matter how well developed, as a ‘theory of welfare’. He might therefore say that each of the major theories of welfare consists of an enumerative theory and an explanatory theory, and that these constituent theories are the ones that his taxonomies are meant to classify. I would not object to this view, since it would not suggest that any of the major theories can, when taken as a whole, be classified as merely enumerative or merely explanatory.
claim that it is impossible to believe anything about welfare without thereby believing something explanatory. My claim is that every major theory in the literature is, as it is standardly understood, in the business of explaining why the particular facts that are basically good for you have that status.\(^{13}\)

Besides, notice that someone could believe that all and only facts that satisfy one of your desires are basically good for you, while remaining agnostic about why this is so.\(^{14}\) This doesn’t show that desire satisfactionism, as it is standardly conceived, is not explanatory.

A related objection can be given a similar reply. Couldn’t someone believe that the facts that are basically good for you are just those consisting in your feeling a pleasure, while believing that the sole good-making property is something other than *consisting in your feeling a pleasure*? Yes: she might think, for example, that facts consisting in your feeling a pleasure are the only ones that please God, and that *pleasing God* is the sole good-making property. But such a person would not be a proponent of hedonism as it is standardly understood.\(^{15}\) More importantly, this possibility does not contravene my claim that hedonism, so understood, makes both enumerative and explanatory claims.

4.2 *Is Desire Satisfactionism More Explanatory?*

My view is that hedonism offers the following explanation of why the facts consisting in your feeling a pleasure are the ones that are basically good for you: they all consist in your feeling a pleasure, and *consisting in your feeling a pleasure* is the only property that makes facts basically good for you. It might seem to you that this explanation is trivial, and thus that desire satisfactionism is *more* explanatory than hedonism. Similar considerations might lead you to believe that desire satisfactionism is *more* explanatory than objective list theories.

But hedonism’s explanatory claim only sounds trivial when it is put in just those terms. Consider the vast array of facts that in some way involve you. A small minority of these facts are basically good for you, according to hedonism. Why are exactly those facts basically good for you? Because they consist in your feeling a pleasure, and *consisting in your feeling a pleasure* is the only property that makes facts basically good for you. This is a genuine explanation. The desire satisfactionist’s is no better.

\(^{13}\) I am inclined to think that a *theory* of some subject matter (as opposed to a mere *claim* about it) must purport to explain something, but I won’t insist on this here, and my argument doesn’t require this assumption.

\(^{14}\) For a similar point, see Woodard (2013), p. 791.

\(^{15}\) Crisp (2006, p. 103) agrees: he writes that such a view “seems… not to capture the spirit of the hedonist tradition.”
Indeed, we can make it sound trivial if we put it the right way. Why are the facts that satisfy one of your desires exactly the ones that are basically good for you? Because they all satisfy one of your desires, and \textit{satisfying one of your desires} is the only property that makes facts basically good for you.

There’s another reason why you might take desire satisfactionism to be more explanatory than the other views we have considered. A desire satisfactionist could claim, with some plausibility, that for something to be basically good for you \textit{just is} for it to satisfy one of your desires. This reductive view might then be invoked to explain why \textit{satisfying one of your desires} is the only good-making property. By contrast, an objective list theory couldn’t plausibly claim that for something to be basically good for you \textit{just is} for it to have one of the plurality of good-making properties that it enumerates: after all, it is implausible that the correct analysis of basic goodness for you is disjunctive.

These considerations do not undermine my argument, however. To begin with, the reductive view that I described is no part of desire satisfactionism as it is standardly understood. Moore attempted to identify the properties that make things good \textit{simpliciter} without thereby contradicting his claim that goodness \textit{simpliciter} is unanalyzable. Similarly, desire satisfactionists purport to identify the sole property that makes particular facts basically good for you without thereby committing themselves to any analysis of basic goodness for you.\footnote{Lin (forthcoming) says that he considers subjectivism—the family of views to which desire satisfactionism belongs—to be a view that “concerns which things have the property of basic goodness for you (and why), not what this property \textit{is}.” He adds that a subjectivist could claim that basic goodness for you is an irreducibly normative, non-natural property (p. 2). Similarly, Dorsey (2012, pp. 440-41) says that subjectivists needn’t be committed to any analysis of basic goodness for you. Moreover, none of the statements of desire satisfactionism in Murphy (1999), Heathwood (2005), Heathwood (2006), Bradley (2009), Lukas (2010), Heathwood (2011), Fletcher (2016), or Bruckner (2016) implies a reductive account of basic goodness for you.} Thus, while desire satisfactionism can be combined with a desire-based analysis of basic goodness for you, and while this \textit{combination} is more explanatory than any theory of welfare is on its own, this doesn’t establish that desire satisfactionism is \textit{itself} more explanatory than any other theory.

Besides, hedonists can plausibly claim that for something to be basically good for you \textit{just is} for it to be a fact consisting in your feeling a pleasure. If desire satisfactionism has an explanatory edge on account of its compatibility with a desire-based analysis of basic goodness for you, then hedonism has an exactly similar explanatory advantage. The foregoing considerations therefore cannot show that desire satisfactionism is more explanatory than objective list theories and \textit{hedonism}.\footnote{Lin (forthcoming) says that he considers subjectivism—the family of views to which desire satisfactionism belongs—to be a view that “concerns which things have the property of basic goodness for you (and why), not what this property \textit{is}.” He adds that a subjectivist could claim that basic goodness for you is an irreducibly normative, non-natural property (p. 2). Similarly, Dorsey (2012, pp. 440-41) says that subjectivists needn’t be committed to any analysis of basic goodness for you. Moreover, none of the statements of desire satisfactionism in Murphy (1999), Heathwood (2005), Heathwood (2006), Bradley (2009), Lukas (2010), Heathwood (2011), Fletcher (2016), or Bruckner (2016) implies a reductive account of basic goodness for you.}
Finally, suppose that desire satisfactionism were, for some reason, more explanatory than hedonism and objective list theories are. This comparative claim would not entail that hedonism and objective list theories are not explanatory. My thesis—that all major theories of welfare are enumerative and explanatory—would still be true.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the following claims are true of each of the major theories of welfare (including hedonism, desire satisfactionism, and objective list theories):

(1) It purports to enumerate the kinds that are basically good for you, as well as the good-making properties—the properties that make certain particulars basically good for you.
(2) It does not explain why the kinds that are basically good for you (or the good-making properties) have that status.
(3) It does not enumerate the particulars that are basically good for you: instead, it merely provides us with a procedure for identifying those particulars.
(4) It purports to explain why any particular that is basically good for you has that status.

As long as (1) and (4) are true of all major theories of welfare, all such theories are both enumerative and explanatory.17

17 [Acknowledgements.]
Works Cited


