Perfectly Balanced Lives and the Value of Conscious Experience

Theories of welfare or well-being attempt to identify the features of lives, and of segments thereof, in virtue of which they go well or badly for the people living them. They typically purport to do this by identifying the things that are, in the sense of 'good for' and 'bad for' that is conceptually tied to well-being, good or bad for people in the most basic or fundamental way: the basic goods and bads. According to hedonism, for example, pleasure is the only basic good and displeasure the only basic bad. According to the desire-satisfaction theory, the satisfaction and frustration of one's desires are the only basic good and bad, respectively. According to objective list theories, there are a plurality of basic goods—pleasure, friendship, knowledge, achievement, and virtue are the standard examples—at least some of which are objective in the sense of not being necessarily tied to the satisfaction of one's desires or other pro-attitudes.[1]

In this paper, I will argue that conscious experience is a basic good: every conscious experience is basically good for the person who experiences it—good for her in its own right, and not merely in the derivative sense of being appropriately related to something else that is good for her—simply in virtue of being a conscious experience of hers. Although experiences are, other things being equal, more basically good for their subjects if they are pleasant, even experiences that are not pleasant are basically good. Indeed, the same is true of experiences that not only fail to be pleasant but are not distinguished in any other way (e.g., by being interesting or novel). Even the plainest and simplest experience is, I will maintain, basically good for the person who has it: other things being equal, it makes the person who has it better off. And although unpleasant experiences are, in virtue of their unpleasantness, basically bad for the people who have them, they are also basically good for those people simply in virtue of being conscious experiences of theirs.

My argument's starting point is a puzzle that has thus far been neglected, so it should be of interest even to those it doesn't convince. If it succeeds, then all of the major theories of well-being are, at least as they have standardly been developed, mistaken. Well-being is easier to come by than any of those theories recognizes: we accrue it at every waking moment, simply in virtue of being conscious.

[1] For an overview of the contemporary philosophical literature on welfare or well-being, see Lin (2022a) and (2022b).

1. The Thesis

My thesis is that conscious experience is a basic prudential good. Let me clarify what this means.

Conscious experiences are just ones with a phenomenal character: ones that there is something it's like to have. The clearest examples of such experiences are sensory ones, like the visual experience of a red rose, the olfactory experience of freshly ground coffee, and the tactile experience of a cold metal banister in the palm of one's hand. Plausibly, but not uncontroversially, some conscious experiences are not sensory, or at least not merely so: if there is something it's like to infer something via *modus ponens*, or to wonder whether something is true, then there are conscious experiences corresponding to these cognitive activities. Since an experience can have a phenomenal character even if it lies in the background or at the periphery of one's awareness, conscious experiences needn't be the focus of one's attention. If there is a sense of 'experience' on which, by definition, all experiences have a phenomenal character, then my thesis ascribes value to all experiences in this sense.

The kind of value that my thesis ascribes to all conscious experiences is *prudential value*—value *for* the people whose experiences they are. Among the particular things that are, in this sense, good for a person, some things are good for her only in the derivative sense of being related in the right way to something else that is good or bad for her (e.g., by causing or having the power to cause something that is good for her, by preventing or having the power to prevent something that is bad for her, by being composed of things that are good for her, or by being evidence of something that is good for her). When something is good for someone in its own right, and not merely in that derivative sense, it has *basic* prudential value for her (i.e., is *basically good* for her). Like most theorists, I assume that a person's amount of well-being is determined by how basically good or bad for her everything is, in such a way that the more basic prudential value (disvalue) she accrues, the better (worse) off she is, other things being equal. I will be arguing that every conscious experience has basic prudential value for the person who has it.

A basic good is not just a kind all of whose members are basically good for the people who possess them. Even though hedonists hold that every kind of pleasure—intellectual, gustatory, musical, and so on—is a kind all of whose members are basically good for the people who experience them, they accord the status of a basic good only to pleasure. This is because they maintain that every pleasure

is basically good for the person who experiences it simply in virtue of being a pleasure of hers, and not in virtue of being a pleasure of any particular kind. A kind is a *basic good* if and only if (i) all of its members are basically good for the people who possess them and (ii) the property that makes all of its members basically good for the people who possess them is just the property that makes them members of that kind. More informally: a kind *K* is a basic good if and only if, *in virtue of being K*s, all *K*s are basically good for the people who possess them.[2] Thus, I will be arguing not merely that every conscious experience is basically good for the person who has it, but that every such experience has that status simply in virtue of being a conscious experience.

2. The Argument

My argument is an inference to the best explanation. We should believe that conscious experience is a basic good because this thesis best explains our puzzling inclination to judge that certain lives in which, by all appearances, the basically good and bad things balance each other out are nonetheless good overall for the people living them. To put the point less psychologistically: we should believe that thesis because it best explains why, despite seeming to contain good and bad things in amounts that are perfectly counterbalanced, certain lives are good on balance for the people living them.

2.1 The Puzzle of Perfectly Balanced Lives

What conditions you think a life must satisfy in order for the basically good and bad things in it to be perfectly counterbalanced will, of course, depend on your theoretical inclinations. Let me begin by describing a life that hedonists would regard as balanced in this way.

Consider a life that is hedonically perfectly balanced, in that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the pleasures and displeasures it contains, such that each pleasure is exactly as pleasant as the corresponding displeasure is unpleasant and the total amount of pleasure is exactly the same as the total amount of displeasure.[3] The pleasure that the subject of this life feels upon the birth of his first child is, for example, counterbalanced by the equally strong displeasure that he feels when he is unjustly fired from his job; the pleasure that he gets from a night of drinking is counterbalanced by

[2] Lin (2016), pp. 332-34.
[3] I use 'displeasure' to refer to the opposite of pleasure because some unpleasant experiences (e.g., ones of fear, anxiety, or nausea) are not pains properly so-called: see Heathwood (2007), pp. 40-44.

the equally strong displeasure that he feels when he is hungover the next day. Since hedonism says that pleasure and displeasure are the only basic good and bad, respectively, that the basic value of a pleasure is just how pleasant it is, and that the basic disvalue of a displeasure is just how unpleasant it is, it implies that this life contains exactly as much basic value as it does basic disvalue and is thus, on balance, neutral—neither good nor bad—for its subject. But this seems incorrect. In the absence of further information that might, for some, defeat this intuition, the life seems good on balance for the person living it. Supposing that the pleasures and displeasures in it are evenly distributed, so that no part of it is on balance more or less pleasant than any other, it appears that the person would be worse off dying earlier than dying later. Indeed, at least if we assume that the value of existing can, for an actually-existing person, be compared to that of never existing, it appears that he is better off than he would have been if he had never existed. Of course, it would be easy enough for a hedonist to see what her theory implies about lives that are hedonically perfectly balanced and to deny, on that basis, that the life I described is on balance good. But what is true according to the theory that someone accepts can sometimes diverge from what seems true to her. Even if you are inclined to accept hedonism and thus to think that the life contains basic value and disvalue in equal amounts, you are likely to feel the pull of the intuition that this life is good on balance for the person living it.

Now consider a life that is perfectly balanced with respect to desire satisfaction and frustration: there is a one-to-one correspondence between the satisfied and frustrated desires that it contains, so that each satisfied desire is exactly as strong as the corresponding frustrated desire and the total amount of desire satisfaction is equal to the total amount of desire frustration. A weak satisfied desire to eat a hamburger is, for example, counterbalanced by an equally weak frustrated desire not to go to the dentist; a strong satisfied desire for happiness in one's marriage is counterbalanced by an equally strong frustrated desire for a meaningful career. Because desire-satisfaction theorists believe that the amount of basic value in a life is just the amount of desire satisfaction in it and that the amount of basic disvalue in it is just the amount of desire frustration in it, they should deem this life neutral on balance for the person living it. But intuitively, the life is on balance good for that person. Assuming that the desire satisfactions and frustrations are uniformly distributed throughout the life, he would be better off dying later than dying earlier. And assuming that such comparative judgments can be true, he is better off than he would have been if he had never come into existence. Although desire-satisfaction theorists could, of course, see what their theory implies about lives of this sort and judge

accordingly, the life I described is likely to seem good on balance even to them—even though, by their lights, the basic value in it is perfectly counterbalanced by the basic disvalue in it.

Finally, consider the sort of life that an objective list theorist would regard as containing exactly as much basic value as it does basic disvalue. This task is complicated not only by the fact that these theorists disagree about what the basic goods are but by their relative silence concerning the basic bads. For simplicity's sake, let's pretend that objective list theorists agree in according the status of basic goods to pleasure, knowledge, and achievement, and in postulating, for each of these kinds, a corresponding basic bad: displeasure, unjustified belief, and failure.[4] We can then imagine a life in which the amounts of these basic goods and basic bads are such that, by the lights of their theory, the life contains equal amounts of basic value and disvalue—perhaps a life whose subject feels more displeasure than pleasure, but in which the positive balances of knowledge over unjustified belief and of achievement over failure exactly make up for this hedonic deficit. This life is, according to the objective list theory, neutral on balance for the person living it. But intuitively, it is on balance good for that person. Although this judgment is at odds with their view, even objective list theorists will likely feel some inclination to accept it.

Of course, other theories of well-being have been proposed. But for each of these theories, we can construct a life that the theory regards as containing equal amounts of basic value and disvalue. For example, some philosophers agree with hedonists in accepting experientialism—the view that one's amount of well-being supervenes on the phenomenal character of one's experiences—but disagree with them in holding that some properties besides pleasantness (e.g., novelty or interestingness) can make the experiences that have them basically good.[5] We can turn the hedonically balanced life that I described into one that they would regard as containing equal amounts of basic value and disvalue: however much basic value the life contains on account of those other good-making properties of experiences, we can add an amount of displeasure to it whose basic disvalue counterbalances it. A similar move will work in response to hybridized hedonistic theories, on which the basic value of a pleasure depends not only on how pleasant it is but on certain properties of its object (e.g., whether

[4] Whether objective list theorists should, in fact, posit basic bads corresponding to knowledge and achievement if they deem knowledge and achievement basic goods—and, if so, what they should say these basic bads are—is not obvious. See Kagan (2014), pp. 272-84 and, although his focus is not objective list theories, Raibley (2022), pp. 209-11.
[5] Kraut (2018) and Deijl (2019). Although she does not endorse experientialism, Besser (2023) argues that experiences can be basically good in virtue of being interesting.

it is good or true).[6] Subjectivists who maintain that what matters for well-being is not the satisfaction and frustration of one's desires but the realization and frustration of one's values can be presented with a life containing equal amounts of values-realization and values-frustration.[7] And although it is not clear what perfectionists, who hold that the exercise and development of certain central human capacities is basically good for us, should consider basically bad[8], we can imagine a life that contains just enough of it to counterbalance the amount of basic value it contains. I submit that, in each of these cases, it seems that the life is good on balance for the person living it even though, according to the theory in question, it contains exactly as much basic value as it does basic disvalue. In each case, it will appear, to many of those inclined to accept the relevant theory, that the life is good on balance despite containing equal amounts of basic value and disvalue.

My point is not that these cases disprove these theories of well-being—though, if my argument is successful, all of these theories will turn out to be false. My point is rather that, regardless of which of the going theories of well-being we favor, we are inclined to judge that certain lives in which the basic value of the good things seems exactly counterbalanced by the basic disvalue of the bad things are nonetheless good on balance for the people living them. This inclination is puzzling and cries out for an explanation, since it appears to be a conceptual truth that a person's amount of well-being is determined by the amounts of basic prudential value and disvalue in her life in such a way that she is positive in well-being (i.e., has a life that is on balance good for her) just if she accrues more basic value than disvalue and is neutral in well-being (i.e., has a life that is on balance neither good nor bad for her) just if she accrues equal amounts of them. This is the puzzle of perfectly balanced lives.

2.2 A Solution

One response to the puzzle would be to reject that apparent conceptual truth. I see no appealing way to do this, however. We could maintain that basic disvalue detracts from well-being less than basic value enhances it, so that a person is positive in well-being when she accrues equal amounts of both and is neutral in well-being when the basic disvalue in her life exceeds, by a certain amount, the basic value in it. But that view is incoherent: part of what we mean when we claim that a particular good thing (e.g., a pleasure) has an amount of basic value equal to the amount of basic disvalue had

[6] Feldman (2004), ch. 5; Kagan (2009).
[7] Tiberius (2018).
[8] See Bradford (2021) for one proposal.

by a particular bad thing (e.g., a displeasure) is that the two things make contributions to well-being of the same size, but in opposite directions. More radically, we could deny that there are facts about how good or bad people's lives are overall and thus deny that a person can be positive, neutral, or negative in well-being. On this view, there are no such things as overall levels or amounts of welfare that can be represented by single numbers: at best, a person's well-being can be given by an ordered pair of numbers, one representing the amount of basic value in her life and the other the amount of basic disvalue in it, and there is no way to derive from this pair a judgment about whether things are going well, badly, or neither well nor badly for the person overall. But this view has the implausible implication that even a life overflowing with whatever is basically good and containing hardly any basically bad things is not, on balance, good for the person living it. It also implies, implausibly, that a life full of basic badness and wholly devoid of basic goodness is not, on balance, bad. And since the inclination that we want to explain is an inclination to judge that certain lives are good overall, this proposal doesn't solve, but instead rejects, the puzzle.[9]

A second response to the puzzle would be to conclude that, despite appearances, nothing is basically bad for us. When we took ourselves to be imagining lives containing equal amounts of basic value and disvalue, we were actually imagining lives containing some basic value but no basic disvalue—and, *a fortiori*, more basic value than disvalue. It is no wonder, then, that these lives struck us as good on balance for the people living them: this is how they must be if they contain more basic value than disvalue. This proposal is implausible, however. It implies that, from the point of view of well-being or self-interest, lives should be ranked solely in accordance with how much basic value they contain, so that one life is better than another if and only if it contains more basic value than the other does and two lives are equally good if and only if they contain equal amounts of basic value. But surely, one of two lives that contain the same amount of basic value can be worse than the other in virtue of containing a large quantity of agony.[10] Indeed, a life can be worse than another even if it contains more basic value than the other does if it contains a sufficiently large quantity of agony. Moreover, this proposal is incompatible with the datum that a person can be negative in welfare—that a life

[9] Notice, too, that there aren't good reasons, independent of our desire to solve this puzzle, to reject the claim that a person is positive in welfare just if she accrues more basic value than disvalue and neutral in welfare if she accrues equal quantities of them. Although some might be tempted to think otherwise, the hypothesis that the "shape" of a life (e.g., whether it improves or worsens over time) can directly affect how good it is—a hypothesis most notably defended by Velleman (2000)—doesn't contradict that claim. Because the fact that a life has a given shape can itself be basically good or bad for the person living it, the direct evaluative significance of a life's shape, if it has any, can be accounted for in the total amounts of basic value and disvalue that this person accrues. See Bradley (2009), pp. 6-7 and Lin (2019), p. 20 n15.
[10] For an illustration of this point, see Raibley (2022), pp. 202-05.

can, at a particular time or when considered as a whole, be on balance bad for the person living it. Although the lives that we imagined seem better on balance than any of the going theories imply, and although they might therefore suggest that people are generally better off than any of those theories claim they are, they do not suggest that lives cannot be on balance bad. Clearly, a life that contains nothing of basic value but is filled to the brim with agony is bad on balance for the person living it. Indeed, assuming again that how well off an actual person is can be compared to how well off he would have been if he had never existed, it seems clear that such a life is worse than no life at all. To deny this would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

A third response claims that, because the basic goods have, on a per unit basis, more basic value than the corresponding basic bads have basic disvalue, the lives that we imagined are, appearances notwithstanding, ones containing more basic value than disvalue. On this proposal, a pleasure has more basic value than a displeasure of the same size (i.e., one that is as unpleasant as the pleasure is pleasant) has basic disvalue, and the satisfaction of a desire of a given strength is more basically good than the frustration of a desire of that strength is basically bad. Although the lives that we imagined are descriptively perfectly balanced, in that they contain equal quantities of basically good and bad things, they are evaluatively unbalanced: they contain a greater quantity of basic value than basic disvalue. We are tempted by the incoherent position that these lives are both evaluatively perfectly balanced and good overall because we mistakenly assume that any descriptively balanced life must also be evaluatively balanced.

To my knowledge, no one has defended the view that the basic goods are, in this sense, more good than the basic bads are bad. Since it is at least somewhat plausible, and since our puzzle does provide some motivation for it, one of my subsidiary goals is to invite consideration of this view. I do not consider it the best explanation of our datum, however. For one thing, while I will end up endorsing something like it when it comes to a certain range of pleasures and displeasures, what this view says about desire satisfaction and frustration strikes me as incorrect: supposing that desire satisfaction is a basic good and desire frustration a basic bad, it seems that if I have a desire of a given strength for a certain state of affairs, it would be just as basically good for me if that state of affairs were to obtain as it would be basically bad for me if it were not. For another, the view cannot explain why objective list theorists have the relevant inclination. Since we cannot use the same units to measure two basic goods (e.g., pleasure and knowledge), two basic bads (e.g., displeasure and unjustified belief), or non-

corresponding basic goods and bads (e.g., knowledge and displeasure), the life that I described with those theorists in mind—one containing more displeasure than pleasure, but more knowledge than unjustified belief and more achievement than failure—cannot be descriptively balanced. The only sense in which it could contain the same quantity of basically good things as it does basically bad things is if the total amount of basic value instantiated by the basically good things it contains is the same as the total amount of basic disvalue instantiated by the basically bad things it contains. It can, in other words, be balanced only evaluatively, not descriptively. Thus, if objective list theorists are inclined to judge that this life is good overall even though it is perfectly balanced, they cannot be conflating descriptive and evaluative balance. What they are inclined to judge is that, although the life contains the basic goods and bads in amounts that make it true that it contains exactly as much basic value as it does basic disvalue, it is on balance a good life.

A better explanation of the datum says that there is some basic good, overlooked by all of the going theories of well-being, whose presence in the lives that we have imagined renders them good overall by making it true that they contain more basic value than basic disvalue. We are dimly aware of the value of this good, which is why we are inclined to deem the relevant lives good overall. But since we are aware of its value only dimly, and since its value is ignored by all of the going theories, we neglect it when tallying the amounts of basic value and disvalue in the lives: instead, we defer to our preferred theory's judgment that the lives contain basic value and disvalue in equal quantities. Once we recognize this basic good, we can resolve the tension in our views by holding that, because the basic value that the relevant lives get from whatever other basic goods they contain is supplemented by the basic value of this good, these lives contain more basic value than disvalue and are thus on balance good.

Since we said nearly nothing about the relevant lives besides the fact that they are perfectly balanced with respect to the basic goods and bads that the going theories recognize, this explanation will work only if the good in question is one that people accrue by default, more or less regardless of what is going on in their lives. It must, in other words, be one that we assume to be present whenever we imagine a life that contains some combination of good and bad things. And since the relevant lives strike us as evaluatively balanced, it must be something that initially strikes us as merely neutral, not good. Among the kinds that meet these desiderata, I can think of only three that could, with any plausibility, turn out to be basic goods: existence, life, and conscious experience.

The hypothesis that existence is a basic good can be confidently dismissed. It is wildly implausible that everything that exists benefits, and is other things equal positive in welfare, simply on account of existing. Inanimate objects exist, but nothing is basically good for them, and things cannot go well for them: they either have a welfare level of zero or no such level at all. Since there are many existing things for which existence is not a basic good, it would be strange and inexplicable if it were a basic good for people. After all, it's not as though we exist more fully than inanimate objects do; and even if we did, it's unclear how this would explain why our existence is basically good for us even though theirs isn't basically good for them. Nor is existence better suited to our natures than it is to theirs, in a manner that might explain this. Even if we are open in principle to the idea that a kind can be a basic good for some entities but not others, we should reject, because it is inexplicable, the view that existence is a basic good for people but not for inanimate objects.[11] Of course, one salient difference between people and inanimate objects is that, in the case of the former but not the latter, existence at least typically makes the acquisition of basic goods possible. But this shows only that existence is good for people, but not for inanimate objects, in the derivative sense of at least typically making the acquisition of basic goods possible. It does not suggest that it is basically good for people.

The suggestion that life is a basic good is more plausible, since it might seem that things can go well or badly for any living thing. There is disagreement, however, about whether things can go well or badly for living things that lack the capacity for consciousness (e.g., plants) in the evaluative sense that is relevant to well-being.[12] If they cannot—perhaps because things can go well or badly for them only in a descriptive sense "concerning what aids or supports a living thing's physiological condition as a member of a certain biological species"[13]—then life is not a basic good for non-conscious living things, and an argument similar to the one I gave concerning existence suggests that it isn't a basic good for people either. Some might also find it implausible that, because it is basically good simply to be alive, it is better for a person to survive in a state of permanent unconsciousness than to die.[14] I am inclined to deny that life is a basic good, but I needn't insist on this. For although it was natural to imagine the apparently balanced lives as being led by living human beings, our inclination to judge

[11] In Lin (2018), I give similar arguments for welfare invariabilism, the view that the same theory of welfare is true of all welfare subjects. But the present argument concerning the basic value of existence can be accepted even by those who reject invariabilism.
[12] Kraut (2007); Rosati (2008); Lin (2021), pp. 876-77; Bradford (2023); Kriegel (forthcoming), p. 2.
[13] Rosati (2008), p. 224.
[14] Nagel (1979), p. 2.

that they are good on balance survives the stipulation that their subjects are conscious, non-living beings (e.g., disembodied souls, robots, or artificial intelligences). Thus, even if life is a basic good, this cannot explain our datum in the full range of cases.[15, 16]

By contrast, the view that conscious experience is a basic good can explain our intuition that the relevant lives are good on balance regardless of whether we suppose their subjects to be conscious human beings, as we initially assumed, or conscious non-living beings: either way, the subjects have conscious experiences at every waking moment, and the basic value that they accrue from them can tip the otherwise perfectly balanced scales toward the positive. Moreover, unlike the hypothesis that existence is a basic good, this view isn't so implausible that we should dismiss it in spite of its ability to explain our intuition. When I compare a brief life containing only a simple conscious experience that is not only hedonically neutral but undistinguished in every other way (e.g., the sight of a patch of orange) with an equally brief life spent in a state of unconsciousness, it does seem to me that the first life is somewhat better than the second. This intuition is not strong enough to establish, on its own, the view that conscious experience is a basic good. But it does show that this view has enough plausibility that its ability to explain our datum gives us reason to accept it. Indeed, the fact that the first life is not obviously better than the second is an asset rather than a liability in the context of my argument. For if the basic goodness of conscious experience were intuitively obvious, we wouldn't have neglected it when tallying the basic value and disvalue in the lives we imagined.

We can test this solution to our puzzle by asking ourselves whether we retain the inclination that gave rise to it even when we suppose that conscious experience is a basic good. If each of the many experiences in a life is basically good, then the life has a significant amount of basic value simply in virtue of containing those experiences. This implies that, in order for the life to contain exactly as much basic value as basic disvalue, the amount of basic value that it derives from *other* basic goods must be significantly smaller than the amount of basic disvalue it owes to the basic bads. A life that is perfectly evaluatively balanced will not be one that contains equal amounts of desire satisfaction

[15] If we understand health to be a condition that every living thing possesses to some positive degree while it is alive, then some might think that its basic goodness could explain our datum. But since health is a biological condition, and one that only living beings can instantiate, all of the points that I just made about life would also apply to health.
[16] Some might think that there is a sense in which a conscious disembodied soul, robot, or artificial intelligence would be alive: after all, the permanent destruction of such an entity might be said to kill it (i.e., terminate its life). It seems to me, however, that to be alive in this non-biological sense is just to have conscious experiences, in which case the proposal that life so understood is a basic good is equivalent to the one that I consider next.

and desire frustration, or one that contains the goods and bads commonly postulated by objective list theorists in quantities such that the basic value of those goods equals the basic disvalue of those bads. Instead, it will be one containing significantly more desire frustration than desire satisfaction, or one containing the usual objective-list goods and bads in quantities such that the disvalue of those bads significantly exceeds the value of those goods. When we imagine a life like this and hold firmly in mind the stipulation that the conscious experiences in it are worth exactly the difference between the basic disvalue of the bads it contains and the basic value of the other goods it contains, do we still feel a puzzling inclination to deem the lives good on balance? It seems to me that we do not.

We do feel such an inclination when we imagine lives containing *slightly* more desire frustration than desire satisfaction, or slightly more basic disvalue than basic value from the standard objective-list goods and bads. But this coheres perfectly with the hypothesis that conscious experience is a basic good, since the total amount of basic value due to the countless experiences in a life surely exceeds such a slight surplus of basic disvalue. Indeed, the fact that we feel this inclination when considering lives of this sort is more grist for my mill. I could have argued that we should believe that conscious experience is a basic good because this best explains our puzzling inclination to judge that certain lives in which, by all appearances, the basically bad things slightly outweigh the basically good things are nonetheless good overall.

I submit that the basic goodness of conscious experience is the most plausible explanation of our datum and that we should therefore believe that conscious experience is a basic good. Of course, as is typical with inferences to the best explanation, this argument is provisional: I haven't considered every possible explanation, and we must be prepared to revise our views if a better one emerges.

3. Objections and Replies

3.1 The Value of Pleasure and the Disvalue of Displeasure

One might worry that my thesis contradicts the plain fact that pleasure is good and displeasure bad. But this would involve a misunderstanding.

Since every pleasure is a conscious experience, my thesis entails that every pleasure is basically good for the person who experiences it. Moreover, it is consistent with the plausible claim, which I accept, that since an experience is, other things equal, more basically good the more pleasant it is, pleasures are, other things equal, more basically good than experiences that are not pleasant. Perhaps my thesis contradicts the explanatory component of the claim, accepted by hedonists and standard objective list theorists, that pleasure is a basic good—i.e., that every pleasure is basically good for the person who experiences it *in virtue of being a pleasure of hers*. After all, my thesis might suggest that pleasures are basically good not in virtue of being pleasures but just in virtue of being conscious experiences, in which case pleasantness is a only property of experiences that amplifies their basic value, not one that makes them basically good.[17] If that's correct, then on my view, pleasure is only a sub-category of the basic good of conscious experience, not a basic good in its own right. But this deviation from hedonist orthodoxy wouldn't be at odds with any plain truths about the value of pleasure.

My thesis is also compatible with the plausible claim that every displeasure is basically bad for the person who experiences it. This is because the same thing can simultaneously have basic value and basic disvalue, with the relative amounts of the two determining whether it is basically good or bad on balance. On some objective list theories, a cruel pleasure is both basically good (in virtue of being pleasant) and basically bad (in virtue of being an instance of vice). On one way of understanding the desire-satisfaction theory[18], it implies that if a person desires both p and $\sim p$ (as often happens when people are conflicted about some prospect), then p can be both basically good for him in virtue of satisfying the first desire and basically bad for him in virtue of frustrating the second. I maintain that every displeasure has some basic badness in virtue of its unpleasantness and some basic goodness in virtue of being a conscious experience. This is why, at least at low or moderate intensities[19], I accept something close to the aforementioned view that pleasures have more basic value than displeasures of the same size have basic disvalue: because the basic disvalue of a displeasure is, to some degree,

[17] Hedonists don't hold that gustatory pleasures are basically good in virtue of being gustatory pleasures or that auditory pleasures are basically good in virtue of being auditory pleasures. They hold that pleasures of all kinds are basically good simply in virtue of being pleasures, and this is why they deem pleasure a basic good without postulating as many basic goods as there are kinds of pleasure. Similarly, it might be that if conscious experience is a basic good, then conscious experiences of particular kinds (e.g., pleasures) are not basically good in virtue of being conscious experiences of those kinds: instead, conscious experiences of all kinds are basically good simply in virtue of being conscious experiences. In that case, the property of being a conscious experience would be one that makes anything that instantiates it basically good, but the property of being a pleasure wouldn't be. Although I find this picture plausible, I cannot defend it here. You can accept the thesis of this paper even if you reject that picture: you can maintain that conscious experience and pleasure are both basic goods.

[18] Namely, the "object" way, on which the objects of our desires are basically good for us if they obtain: see Lin (2022c).

[19] See note 21.

counterbalanced by its basic value but a pleasure—at least if it isn't morally vicious or objectionable for some other reason—has no basic disvalue that counterbalances its basic value, a pleasure is on balance more basically good than a displeasure of the same size is on balance basically bad.

Many displeasures are *all-things-considered* bad for the people who experience them: they make those people worse off overall than they would have been if they hadn't experienced them.[20] My thesis can accommodate this fact, too. Even if all displeasures are to some extent basically good, many of them are on balance basically bad: they have more basic disvalue than basic value. This means that, unless they cause sufficiently good things or prevent sufficiently bad things, they make their subjects worse off overall. Indeed, even an experience that isn't unpleasant can be all-things-considered bad for the person who feels it in virtue of having consequences that are bad enough for her. So, my thesis is compatible with the fact that some conscious experiences, even ones that are not unpleasant, make their subjects worse off overall. It does not imply that every conscious experience makes the person who experiences it better off overall than she would have been if she hadn't experienced it.

Can a displeasure have more basic value than basic disvalue, so that it is on balance basically good? My argument so far doesn't commit me to a positive answer: since so many of our experiences are not displeasures, we could solve our puzzle in the way that I have proposed even if we claimed that no displeasure, however mild, can be less basically bad than it is basically good. I incline toward a positive answer, however. For when I compare a brief life containing only a mild displeasure (e.g., a slight feeling of muscle soreness) with an equally brief life spent in a state of unconsciousness, the first life strikes me as better than the second. If you balk at this, you can hold that displeasures are always on balance basically bad. Indeed, if you recoil even at the idea that displeasures are basically good to any degree, you can hold that what is basically good is not conscious experience as such, but non-unpleasant conscious experience. But I prefer the original view, and I find it a better solution to our puzzle, because it is simpler and less *ad hoc*.

A different worry relating to the badness of displeasure targets both my thesis and my argument for it. When we imagine a hedonically perfectly balanced life that contains sufficiently intense and long-lasting displeasures (e.g., the agony of being tortured for a year), we may feel inclined to deem it bad rather than good on balance. This might appear to cast doubt on the datum on which I based my

[20] Heathwood (2005), pp. 491-93.

argument. It might also appear to threaten my thesis, since it might seem that such a life would be good on balance if all of the conscious experiences in it were basically good.

I never claimed, however, that *every* hedonically perfectly balanced life is one that we are inclined to deem good on balance. I claimed only that we are inclined to deem good on balance *certain* lives in which the amounts of basic value and disvalue are apparently the same, and when I invited you to imagine a hedonically perfectly balanced life, I gave examples that encouraged you to picture a life about which we do have the relevant inclination—one in which the displeasures are never that bad. Even if we have the intuition that the agony-containing life is bad overall, we are inclined to deem good on balance many other lives in which the amounts of basic value and disvalue appear to be perfectly counterbalanced. This puzzling inclination is the basis for my argument. The intuition that the agony-containing life is bad on balance does not undermine my thesis, either. For if sufficiently large displeasures are more basically bad than pleasures of the same size are basically good, then the amount of basic value that the life derives from conscious experience may well be smaller than the difference between the amount of basic disvalue that it derives from displeasure and the amount of basic value that it derives from pleasure.[21]

3.2 Hidden Pleasures and Hidden Desires

It is plausible that many of our pleasures occur so far from the focus of our attention that we don't, or at least barely, notice them.[22] If you are engrossed in a book while at an especially stately library, the elegance of your surroundings might cause you some pleasure as it appears in your peripheral vision. If you are taking a walk, a barely perceptible floral scent might make your experience slightly more pleasant even though it remains in the background of your awareness. Pleasures of this sort, which are largely hidden from the people who experience them, might also be hidden from us when

[21] I claimed earlier that, at low or moderate intensities, displeasures are on balance less basically bad than pleasures of the same size are on balance basically good: for example, if a mild displeasure has 3 units of basic disvalue in virtue of being unpleasant and 1 unit of basic value in virtue of being a conscious experience, and if an equally mild pleasure has 3 units of basic value in virtue of being pleasant, 1 unit of basic value in virtue of being a conscious experience, and no basic disvalue, then the displeasure's net amount of basic disvalue is 2 whereas the pleasure's net amount of basic value is 4. The reverse may be true at sufficiently high intensities if, as we are supposing, sufficiently large displeasures are more basically bad than equally large pleasures are basically good. If an episode of agony has 20 units of basic disvalue and 1 unit of basic value, and if an episode of ecstasy that is as pleasant as the agony is unpleasant has only 10 units of basic value and no basic disvalue, then the agony's net amount of basic disvalue is 19 while the ecstasy's net amount of basic value is 10.

[22] Heathwood (2018) calls these pleasures of which we are weakly unaware.

we try to imagine perfectly balanced lives. Some might think that this undermines my argument by showing that any theory on which pleasures are basically good can solve our puzzle: the seemingly perfectly balanced lives that we imagined are good on balance for the people living them because they contain far more pleasure, and thus far more basic value due to pleasure, than we had noticed.

But what is true of pleasure in this regard is equally true of displeasure. If the floor of your living room constantly has dozens of toys strewn across it, the sight of this mess might cause you some displeasure every time you encounter it, even though you have gotten so used to it that you hardly ever notice it anymore. And who hasn't had the experience of realizing, only when it finally stops, that they have been slightly bothered for the past couple of hours by an irritating sound? I see no reason to think that hidden displeasures are less common than hidden pleasures. Indeed, when I try to pay close attention to my experience and to notice parts of it that I had previously not noticed, I discover unpleasant experiences (e.g., feelings of unease, tension, or stress) arguably more often than I do pleasant ones. If we neglected hidden pleasures when we tried to imagine perfectly balanced lives, we surely also neglected hidden displeasures: if we must add to those lives a large quantity of basic value due to the former, then we must also add a large quantity of basic disvalue due to the latter. I doubt that these additions will reveal those lives to contain more basic value than disvalue. To break the symmetry, we must identify a previously unnoticed amount of basic value that isn't accompanied by a similarly large, or even larger, previously unnoticed amount of basic disvalue.[23]

It might be more promising to run an objection of this sort using desires instead of pleasures. Most of us have certain very general desires that are easily, and typically constantly, satisfied: we want to be alive, for example, and we want to be conscious (in the dispositional sense of being capable of having conscious experiences). On a natural way of understanding strength of desire, these desires are very strong: we would nearly always choose to satisfy these desires if faced with the choice of satisfying them or satisfying other desires. These desires are so general and so pervasive and easily satisfied that they might escape our notice when we try to imagine a perfectly balanced life. And, although there might in general be as many hidden frustrated desires as there are hidden satisfied ones, it might seem that there are no hidden desires that are as strong as these ones but typically constantly frustrated. Some might therefore think that any theory on which the satisfaction of one's

[23] It is plausible that there are fewer hidden *pains*, properly so-called, than there are hidden pleasures. As I explained in note 3, however, many unpleasant experiences are not pains properly so-called. If there is a basic bad that is the opposite of pleasure, it is surely unpleasant experience (i.e., displeasure) rather than pain.

desires is basically good can solve our puzzle: the lives that we imagined are good on balance for the people living them because they contain more desire satisfaction, and thus more basic value due to desire satisfaction, than we had noticed.[24]

It's not clear to me, however, that there are no constantly frustrated desires corresponding to, and similar in strength to, the aforementioned satisfied desires. As is evidenced by our attitudes toward our inevitable deaths (even if they don't occur prematurely), most of us want to live forever. We also want this for our loved ones. Indeed, we want to live forever with them: we want nothing ever to separate us. Who's to say that we get less desire frustration from these desires than we get desire satisfaction from the ones mentioned above? Besides, although it was convenient to elide this for simplicity's sake, any plausible desire-satisfaction theory of well-being will place some restrictions on the kinds of desires whose satisfaction and frustration are basically good and bad for us, respectively. The standard restriction counts intrinsic desires while excluding merely instrumental ones, whereas a more recent proposal counts desires in the genuine-attraction sense (i.e., those that we have toward things that we view with enthusiasm or pleasure) while excluding desires in the merely behavioral sense (i.e., those that we count as having in virtue of being disposed to behave in ways that we think will satisfy them).[25] It's doubtful that the desire to be alive or the desire to be conscious would be ruled in on either of these views. Plausibly, we want to be alive and to be conscious only because we take these conditions to be instrumental to our getting what we really want out of life. And although we are disposed to act in ways that we think will keep us alive and conscious, near-death experiences aside, we rarely view the fact that we are alive or conscious with enthusiasm or pleasure.

Besides, we can avoid both the objection from hidden pleasures and the one from hidden desires by focusing on an artificially simple case. Imagine a psychologically primitive creature whose stream of consciousness is so narrow, as it were, that it can be conscious of only one thing at a time and thus cannot have any pleasures that it doesn't clearly notice. Suppose, moreover, that this creature can have only two kinds of desire: desires to be having experiences that it is currently having, and desires not to be having experiences that it is currently having. The creature lives for ten days. On each odd-numbered day, it feels a mild pleasure throughout the day while weakly desiring to be feeling it; on each even-numbered day, it feels an equally mild displeasure throughout the day while desiring, just

[24] See Yu (2022) for a different application of the strategy of postulating hidden desires.
[25] Heathwood (2019).

as weakly, not to be feeling it. The creature has no other pleasures, displeasures, or desires. Clearly, this life is perfectly balanced, both with respect to the pleasure and displeasure it contains and with respect to the desire satisfaction and frustration it contains: we can't credibly be accused of having failed to notice some pleasure or desire satisfaction that makes it true that the life contains more basic value than disvalue. Nevertheless, the life seems good on balance for the creature, and it is likely to do so even to many hedonists and desire-satisfaction theorists. Thus, to solve our puzzle, we must do more than recognize the basic goodness of pleasure or desire satisfaction.

3.3 The Single-Life Repugnant Conclusion

If even *bare* conscious experiences—ones that are neither pleasant, unpleasant, or distinguished in any other way—are basically good, then it might seem that for any hundred-year-long life in which a person has, at each moment, a very high (though finite) level of welfare, there could be some much longer life that is better overall for the person whose life it is, even though the only basically good things it contains are bare conscious experiences and the person is, at each moment, barely positive in welfare in virtue of having such an experience. The implausibility of this version of the Single-Life Repugnant Conclusion[26] might move you to deny that conscious experience is a basic good.

An analogous objection could be raised against any theory on which basic value comes in sufficiently small quantities, however. Hedonism and standard objective list theories say that mild pleasures are only slightly basically good. Thus, they seem to imply that, for any hundred-year-long life in which a person has, at each moment, a very high (though finite) level of welfare, there could be some much longer life that is better overall for the person whose life it is, even though the only basically good things it contains are mild pleasures and the person is, at each moment, barely positive in welfare in virtue of experiencing such a pleasure. The desire-satisfaction theory says that the satisfaction of weak desires is only slightly basically good. It therefore seems to imply that, for any hundred-year-long life of the aforementioned kind, there could be some much longer life that is better overall for the person whose life it is, even though the only basically good things it contains are satisfactions of weak desires and the person is, at each moment, barely positive in welfare in virtue of having such a satisfied desire. Each of these views is rightly considered a serious contender despite the fact that it threatens to imply a version of the Single-Life Repugnant Conclusion. Perhaps the value of things

[26] Parfit (1986), pp. 160-61.

that are only slightly basically good aggregates in such a way that there is a limit, lower than the value of any excellent hundred-year-long life, that their combined value cannot exceed regardless of how many such things there are.[27] This would be true, for example, if the marginal value of things that are only slightly basically good were to diminish sufficiently rapidly. Or perhaps our intuitive rejection of the Conclusion is mistaken, an artifact of our inability to imagine extremely long lives in any detail. It may be, for example, that a trillion-year-long life in which the person is slightly positive in welfare at each moment presents itself to our imaginations no differently than does a thousand-year-long life of this sort. If so, then perhaps we cannot trust the intuitive basis for our judgment that the value of an excellent hundred-year-long life couldn't be exceeded by that of any life, no matter how long, in which the person is slightly positive in welfare at each moment. Whatever the best response to the Conclusion turns out to be, I can avail myself of it.

3.4 Symmetry and Structural Oddity

In a recent paper whose aim is to call attention to the question of whether conscious experience is a basic good and to suggest that it isn't, Andrew Lee writes that since some experiences are good and others bad, "[t]he question… is why we should think that consciousness itself is intrinsically valuable in spite of the axiological symmetry between its determinates."[28]

As I think even Lee might agree, however, this worry can be answered. First, notice that the relevant determinates of conscious experience are not truly symmetrical on my view. Whereas pleasures are basically good but not bad, displeasures are both basically good and bad. And while unpleasantness is a property that makes experiences basically bad, pleasantness is, at least arguably, merely one that amplifies their basic value, not one that makes them basically good.[29] Lee's question, as it applies to my view, is why we should think that a determinate of a good-making property is a bad-making property. It would be odd, he suggests, for someone who believes that knowledge is a basic good to believe that a particular kind of knowledge is a basic bad. Isn't it likewise odd to hold that conscious experience is a basic good and that unpleasant conscious experience is a basic bad? However, as he notes, there is some precedent for views with this structure: some hold that whereas achievement is a basic good, achievements of bad aims are, as such, basically bad. More importantly, since views

[27] Kraut (2018), pp. 20-21; Lin (2025b), pp. 644-46.
[28] Lee (2019), p. 661.
[29] See note 17.

with this structure are perfectly coherent, we shouldn't be deterred by their apparent oddity if we have compelling reasons to accept such a view. Lee seems to concede that the view that conscious experience is a basic good and unpleasant conscious experience a basic bad could be acceptable in spite of its seemingly odd structure if a sufficiently compelling case were made for it. I have tried to make such a case.

3.5 The Resonance Constraint

Although it may turn out that pleasures, by their nature, are either (i) the objects of desires or other pro-attitudes that the subjects who experience them have (or would have if they were fully informed, fully rational, or otherwise suitably idealized) or (ii) at least partly constituted by such pro-attitudes[30], this doesn't seem true of conscious experiences in general. Surely, a conscious experience can be had by a person who lacks any pro-attitudes toward it and who would lack any such attitudes toward it even if she were suitably idealized, and it can fail to be even partly constituted by such an actual or hypothetical pro-attitude. If this is correct, then my thesis violates the *resonance constraint*, on which nothing is basically good for a person unless it resonates with her, in the sense that it is appropriately connected to the pro-attitudes that she has or would have if she were suitably idealized.[31] But since the constraint is controversial, and since some of the leading views (e.g., objective list theories and perfectionism) also violate it, it would hardly be fair to dismiss my thesis on these grounds. Indeed, my argument doubles as a new argument against the constraint. A life can be good on balance for the person living it even though the total amount of basic value that it contains on account of things that resonate with her is no greater than the total amount of basic disvalue that it contains. Since a life can be good on balance only if it contains more basic value than disvalue, it must be possible for something to be basically good for a person even though it doesn't resonate with her.

3.6 Overlap and Double-Counting

It is natural to individuate conscious experiences in such a way that there is massive overlap between them: the experience of viewing a sunset while feeling a gentle breeze on one's skin overlaps with its constituent visual and tactile experiences, each of which is composed of, and overlaps with, shorter

[30] Feldman (2004), ch. 4; Heathwood (2006); Heathwood (2007); Lin (2020).
[31] Railton (1986), p. 9.

experiences within the same sensory modality. But if there is overlap of this sort, then my claim that every conscious experience is basically good commits us to double-counting: the value of every bit of conscious experience will be counted not only when it is considered on its own, but every time it figures in a larger experience. The result will be a massive overestimation of the amount of basic value that a person accrues from her conscious experiences. I hope it has been clear all along that, in claiming that every conscious experience is basically good, my aim has not been to endorse this kind of double-counting but to reject the hypothesis that such an experience can fail to be basically good because it lacks or possesses a property (e.g., pleasantness, unpleasantness) that only some conscious experiences have. But it is admittedly awkward that my claim commits us to double-counting when it is paired with the aforementioned natural picture of how such experiences are individuated.

However, this is a general problem for any theory on which (i) all members of a particular kind are basically good and (ii) it is natural to individuate members of that kind in such a manner that there is massive overlap between them. Since it is natural to suppose that every temporally extended pleasure consists of many shorter pleasures, it is a problem for the hedonist, who claims that every pleasure is basically good. Since it is natural to suppose that knowledge of p & q is composed of knowledge of p and knowledge of q, it is a problem for those objective list theorists who hold that every instance of knowledge is basically good. Since the exercise of central human capacities does not appear to come only in discrete, non-overlapping chunks, it is a problem for perfectionists, too. Proponents of any such theory face the challenge of formulating their view in a way that avoids double-counting. One option would be to individuate members of the relevant kind in a way that doesn't involve overlap.[32] Another would be to postulate minimal, non-overlapping members of the kind (e.g., pleasures too short to be composed of other pleasures[33]) and to hold that, in claiming that the kind is a basic good, we are claiming only that all of those minimal, non-overlapping members of it are basically good in virtue of belonging to that kind. I don't know how best to solve this problem, but my view is not threatened by it any more than these other theories are.

3.7 Intuitive Disagreement

[32] In the case of conscious experiences, we could endorse a diachronic version of the "no experiential parts" view, on which an experience cannot have other experiences as parts. See Masrour, Brook, and Raymont (forthcoming), sections 2.1.3 and 2.2.
[33] Feldman (2004), pp. 173-74.

Some will fail to share my intuition that a brief life containing only a bare conscious experience is better than an equally brief life spent in a state of unconsciousness.[34] Even more will fail to share my intuition that a brief life containing a sufficiently mild displeasure is better than an equally brief life spent in a state of unconsciousness.[35] Neither of these intuitions is crucial to my argument, however. I invoked the first intuition only to make the point, which you can agree with even if you don't share that intuition, that my thesis is not so implausible that it should be dismissed in spite of how nicely it explains our datum. I invoked the second one only to explain why I am sympathetic to a claim that you are free to reject even if you accept my thesis: that a displeasure can have more basic value than disvalue. My case for the basic goodness of conscious experience is not that it is intuitive, but that it provides the best solution to the puzzle of perfectly balanced lives. Even those who don't find the view intuitive must contend with this argument.

The more serious worry is that some might fail to have, or to recognize in others, any inclination to deem good on balance the apparently perfectly balanced lives that I described. Those who don't see the puzzle that I see will, of course, feel no pressure to accept my solution to it. I suspect that some who seem to fall into this camp are just too good at remaining consistent with their preferred theory of well-being: they have the relevant inclination, immediately recognize its incompatibility with their theory, and suppress or dismiss it for that reason. But although consistency is a virtue, we shouldn't allow it to blind us to what seems true: if it seems to you that a particular life is good on balance for the person living it, then you must take this intuition into account even if it is plainly incompatible with your preferred theory. Of course, I can't pretend to know that everyone who seems to lack the relevant inclination actually has it, if only briefly. My sense, however, is that people typically do have it. I can only hope that this sense is correct.

3.8 Accommodation and Dismissal

Even if you have the inclination or intuition on which my argument is based, and even if you agree that the best way to accommodate it is to accept the basic goodness of conscious experience, you might wonder why we should accommodate it instead of dismissing it. After all, appearances can be deceiving: it's not as though everything that seems true is true. Why, then, should we try to capture

[34] Lee (2019), pp. 663; Smithies (forthcoming), pp. 10-11.
[35] Lee (2019), pp. 664-65; Smithies (forthcoming), pp. 9-10.

the apparent fact that the lives I described are good on balance for the people living them instead of accepting that, appearances notwithstanding, they aren't?

But since similar worries could be raised against any use of intuition in ethical theory, and since it is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to defend a general position in moral epistemology, the real question is whether the particular intuition to which I have appealed is more suspicious or more likely to be misleading than those on which we standardly rely. I see no reason to believe that it is. If we could accommodate it only on pain of incoherence—if, for example, the only way to capture it were to affirm that a life can be good, on balance, for the person living it even though the amounts of basic value and disvalue in it are genuinely equal and not just apparently so—then we might be justified in concluding that it must be misleading. As I have argued, however, we can accommodate it without incoherence and without even accepting any coherent but plainly unacceptable views (e.g., that nothing is basically bad for us): all we need to do is recognize the basic goodness of conscious experience. And although it is possible that this intuition is more vulnerable to debunking than other evaluative intuitions are, we have yet to be given any reason to think that this is true.

4. Connections

A few philosophers have endorsed, or can plausibly be read as endorsing, the view that conscious experience is a basic good. My argument better supports that view than their remarks do, however.

In a recent book, David Chalmers reports being inclined to think that

> all value arises, one way or another, from consciousness. Conscious states themselves (say, happiness and pleasure) are valuable. What is valued by conscious creatures (say, knowledge and freedom) is valuable. And relations among conscious creatures (say, communication and friendship) are valuable. One might say that consciousness has value, and relations to consciousness add value.[36]

It's unclear that he means to affirm the basic goodness of conscious experience as such, as opposed to that of particular kinds of conscious experience, such as happiness and pleasure. But even if he

[36] Chalmers (2022), pp. 329-30.

does, he doesn't argue for that position. He does argue that, because it is intuitively impermissible to kill a large number of them in order to save one human being, Vulcans—creatures capable of having conscious experiences but incapable of experiencing "happiness, suffering, pleasure, pain, or any other positive or negative affective states"—have moral status and thus the capacity for well-being.[37] If all creatures meeting this definition of a Vulcan, even ones with no mental capacities other than the ability to have bare conscious experiences, are capable of well-being, then conscious experience is surely a basic good. But Chalmers doesn't clearly establish that all such creatures are capable of well-being, since the Vulcans that he describes, and about whom he elicits the relevant intuitions, are "more extreme version[s] of… Mr. Spock on *Star Trek*" who, though perhaps indifferent to whether they go on living, "value and pursue… goals," have "rich" conscious lives, and possess a degree of psychological sophistication comparable to ours.[38] These sophisticated Vulcans can be capable of well-being even if conscious experience isn't a basic good, since plenty of other things that they can possess, such as knowledge and achievement, could turn out to be basic goods.

Uriah Kriegel argues that, even if you knew that your future would be slightly more unpleasant than pleasant, it would be "perfectly rational," from a purely self-interested point of view, to refuse to be irreversibly turned into a zombie and thus stripped of the capacity for conscious experience. This, he says, "suggests… that *experience as such* is something that brings value to our life—over and above the *character* of our experience as pleasant or unpleasant."[39] But if, as many theorists (including Kriegel) plausibly maintain, the capacity for consciousness is necessary for well-being[40], then the rationality of refusing zombification can just as well be explained by the existence of any other basic good distinct from pleasure. If some such basic good exists, then it can make your future good for you on balance despite that future's net unpleasantness. By contrast, turning into a zombie would ensure that your future would not be good for you on balance, since it would eliminate your capacity for well-being. Thus, although the rationality of refusing zombification may suggest that conscious experience is a basic good, it doesn't do more than suggest it.

Perhaps the best-known endorsement of the basic goodness of conscious experience is provided by Thomas Nagel, who writes:

[37] Chalmers (2022), pp. 343-44.
[38] Chalmers (2022), pp. 343-44.
[39] Kriegel (forthcoming), p. 7.
[40] Deijl (2021), pp. 191-93; Lin (2021), pp. 876-77; Kriegel (forthcoming), pp. 1-3.

> There are elements which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added…, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral:* it is emphatically positive. Therefore life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its contents.[41]

But the argument here, if there is one, is merely an appeal to the intuition that conscious experience is basically good. Although I do find that claim intuitively plausible, I have argued that much more than this can be said for it.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that conscious experience is a basic prudential good. If this is right, then since none of the standard theories of well-being recognize this, all of those theories are false. Some existing views can be modified to accommodate my thesis: experientialists who are not hedonists can maintain that the property of conscious experiences that makes them basically good is just the property of being conscious experiences, and objective list theorists can add conscious experience to their lists of basic goods. But since hedonism insists that only pleasures are basically good, no form of it can survive the success of my argument.[42] And because there is no necessary connection between conscious experience and the satisfaction of one's pro-attitudes, the same is true of subjective views such as the desire-satisfaction theory and the value-fulfillment theory. Because conscious experience is an objective good, the correct theory of well-being, whatever it turns out to be, is an objective theory.[43]

My argument also suggests that the capacity for conscious experience is sufficient for the capacity for well-being and thus that all conscious creatures, even those incapable of pleasure or displeasure, are welfare subjects. It is true that, when we are tasked with imagining lives in which the good and

[41] Nagel (1979), p. 2.
[42] One virtue of invoking this argument against hedonism is that, unlike the familiar 'experience machine' argument (see, e.g., Lin (2016b)), it does not reject experientialism and may thus be more persuasive to hedonists.
[43] This is as good a place as any to admit that my argument in this paper undermines the one I gave in Lin (2014) for pluralism about well-being, the view that there is either more than one basic good or more than one basic bad. That argument crucially neglected the possibility that conscious experience is a basic good.

bad things are perfectly balanced, we most naturally imagine ones whose subjects are, or at least have the capacities of, cognitively typical human adults. Even the artificially simple life that I later described involved a subject capable of pleasure, displeasure, and desire. Thus, strictly speaking, my argument shows only that conscious experience is a basic good for subjects with at least some of those capacities: there is room in logical space for the view that although conscious experience is a basic good for them, it isn't a basic good for other entities, such as creatures capable only of bare conscious experiences. However, absent a reason to want to occupy this position in logical space, it is reasonable to conclude that conscious experience is a basic good for all entities capable of having it. So, although my argument doesn't suggest that only conscious creatures are welfare subjects, it does suggest that all of them are.[44]

Of course, my argument will not convince everyone. But I hope my paper has something to offer even to those who are unpersuaded. Regardless of which of the standard theories of well-being we are inclined to favor, we have a puzzling inclination to deem good on balance certain lives in which the basically good and bad things appear to be perfectly counterbalanced. This puzzle of perfectly balanced lives is worthy of consideration even by those who reject my solution to it.

Although I have focused on prudential value, I suspect that my argument could be modified to show that conscious experience has basic *impersonal* value—that it is, in its own right and not merely in a derivative sense, good *simpliciter* or good "from the point of view of the universe." For I suspect that we are inclined to regard certain lives or worlds in which the good and bad things appear precisely counterbalanced as being, on balance, good "from the point of view of the universe." And the basic impersonal value of conscious experience is, I suspect, what best explains this.[45] This argument may, however, be less necessary in the case of impersonal value than it is in that of prudential value. For although it might initially seem doubtful that all conscious experiences are basically good for their subjects, the corresponding claim about impersonal value is more intuitively appealing.[46]

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[44] For this reason among others, my argument is in opposition to the one given by Smithies (forthcoming) in his article in this volume.

[45] If everything that has basic prudential value for someone also has basic impersonal value, then my argument needs no modification to show that conscious experience has basic impersonal value. But I see no reason to suppose that the two kinds of value are necessarily connected in this way: see Lin (2025a).

[46] I thank Richard Yetter Chappell, Justin D'Arms, Fred Feldman, Chris Heathwood, Uriah Kriegel, Declan Smithies, students in my graduate seminar on well-being, and participants at the Ethics of Consciousness conference, the 17th Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, and the Well-Being Working Group.

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