

Time and Well-Being

We commonly make judgments about people’s *well-being*, *welfare*, or *quality of life*: how well or badly things are going for them, or how good or bad their lives or parts thereof are on balance—not in some impersonal or absolute sense, but for them. Many of these judgments assume that things can go well or badly for a person at particular times and get better or worse for her over time: a person’s well-being can, for example, decrease with the onset of an illness and increase when she recovers, so that things go worse for her during the illness than they do before or after. Because well-being is a temporal phenomenon, philosophical theories of it should do more than explain what makes entire lives go well for the people living them. They should also explain (i) in virtue of what people have the amounts of well-being that they do at particular times and (ii) how a person’s lifetime amount of well-being is related to how well off she is at different times. I will consider how the main theories of well-being might approach the first task before turning, near the end of the article, to the second.

1. Experientialist Theories

It is standardly assumed that theories of well-being attempt to explain how well off people are by giving us a method for identifying the particular things that are intrinsically, directly, or *basically* good or bad for them—good or bad for them, and not just in the derivative sense of causing, evidencing, or being in some other way suitably related to other things that are good or bad for them. According to *experientialist* theories, the only things that are basically good or bad for you are your experiences: those mental episodes of yours that are consciously felt, in the sense that there is something it is like for you to undergo them. Different theories of this sort will identify different kinds of experiences as basically good and bad. The most prominent experientialist theory, *hedonism*, claims that all and only pleasant experiences (“pleasures”) are basically good and that all and only unpleasant experiences (“pains” or “displeasures”) are basically bad. On this theory, you are well off in proportion to how pleasant your experiences are on balance—i.e., to the degree that you experience more pleasantness than unpleasantness (Feldman 2004: ch. 4; Crisp 2006: ch. 4; Heathwood 2006; Bradley 2009: ch. 1).

Statements of experientialist theories typically leave implicit the temporal relationship between the experiences that they deem basically good or bad and the well-being that these experiences ground

or explain. But there appears to be only one plausible view about this relationship, and one that is surely accepted by all experientialists: that a person’s level of well-being at a particular time depends only on the properties of the experiences that she is feeling at that time. This view follows from two plausible assumptions. The first is that the time at which any experience of yours is basically good or bad for you is just the time at which you experience it (Bradley 2009: 18). The second is a temporally explicit version of the platitude that a person’s welfare level is determined by how basically good or bad for her everything is (Lin 2017: 164):

Standard Assumption A person’s amount of well-being at any particular time t is determined by how basically good or bad for her at t everything is.

Since it is an open question whether something that occurs or is the case at one time can be basically good or bad for a person at another, the standard assumption does not imply that a person’s amount of well-being at one time cannot be determined in part by what occurs or is the case at other times. But if, as experientialism says, your experiences are the only things that are basically good or bad for you, and if the times at which they are so are just those at which you have them, then the only things that are basically good or bad for you at any time t are the experiences that you have at t . It follows via the standard assumption that your amount of well-being at t is fixed solely by the properties of the experiences that you are having at t . According to hedonism, for example, your welfare level at a given moment or interval is proportional to how pleasant on balance the experiences that you are having at that moment or interval are.

2. Subjective Theories

Things are considerably more complicated with *subjective* theories of well-being, according to which a person’s amount of welfare is determined by what pro-attitudes she has, how strong each of them is, and which of them are satisfied. The paradigmatic subjective theory is the *desire-satisfaction* theory, on which what is basically good for you is the satisfaction of your desires and what is basically bad for you is their frustration—where a desire for p is satisfied if p obtains and frustrated otherwise.¹ While some versions of this theory impose restrictions on the desires whose satisfaction or frustration are

¹ The theory is sometimes portrayed as holding instead that what is basically good for you are the things that you desire, but this won’t matter for our purposes. See Lin 2022 for a discussion of the difference between the two formulations.

relevant to well-being (Goldman 2018: ch. 4), our purposes will be served if we focus on a simple, unrestricted version of the theory. With respect to the temporal issues with which we are concerned, what is true of this theory will also, when suitably modified, apply not only to more complex forms of the desire theory but also to subjective theories that focus on the fulfillment of values instead of the satisfaction of desires (Tiberius 2018; Dorsey 2021).

The desire-satisfaction theory faces a question that doesn't arise for experientialist theories: how must a desire and its object (i.e., what the person who has the desire thereby wants) be temporally related for the satisfaction of the desire to be basically good for the person who has it? In some cases, a person wants something but no longer wants it when she later gets it. In others, a person fails to want something while it is happening but later wants it to have happened. In which of these types of cases, if any, is the satisfaction of the person's desire basically good for her? According to *concurrentism about benefit*, a desire must temporally overlap with its object in order for its satisfaction to be basically good for the person who has the desire, so there is no basic benefit in any of these cases (Heathwood 2005: 490). This view has some intuitive appeal: it seems, for example, that you would be made no better off if you were given some things that you strongly wanted as a child but have long failed to want. It also suggests an appealingly simple view that we might call *concurrentism about timing*: the times at which the satisfaction of a desire of yours is basically good for you are those at which the desire overlaps with its object. When it is conjoined with the standard assumption, this view implies that a person's well-being at t depends only on what desires she has at t , how strong those desires are at t , and which of those desires are satisfied at t because their objects obtain at t .

Concurrentism about benefit may be less appealing than it initially seems, however. A child's desire to be a firefighter is surely conditional on its own persistence: it is a desire to be a firefighter while still wanting to be one, and thus a desire that would count as satisfied only if she were a firefighter while still wanting this (McDaniel and Bradley 2008: 291). Since the adult that the child turns into no longer wants to be a firefighter and won't want this even if she becomes one, we wouldn't satisfy her childhood desire even if we were to turn her into a firefighter. We need to focus on cases in which merely past desires that were not conditional in this way can now be satisfied: for example, one in which a nobleman once had an idealistic, future-directed desire to give away his land even if, at the later time at which he can do this, he no longer wants to do so (Parfit 1984: 327). If it isn't clear that the present satisfaction of merely past desires is not basically good in such cases, then perhaps we

can plausibly reject concurrentism about benefit. In any case, a number of theorists do reject this view (Bradley 2009: 22-25; Baber 2010: 254-57; Dorsey 2021: 193-95). Indeed, it is widely assumed that the satisfaction of a desire can be basically good no matter how the desire is temporally related to its object. This position, *eternalism about benefit*, leaves open several views about the time at which the satisfaction of a desire is basically good, each with different implications about how a person’s level of welfare at a time is fixed.

According to the *time of desire* view, the time at which the satisfaction of a desire of yours is basically good for you is the time at which you have the desire. When paired with the standard assumption, this view implies that a person’s well-being at a time t depends only on what desires she has at t , how strong those desires are at t , and which of those desires are satisfied—not necessarily at t , but at any time. Thus, if you once had or will have a desire for something that is happening right now but you lack any such desire now, then the satisfaction of this past or future desire contributes nothing to your well-being now. But if you now have a desire that once was or will someday be satisfied, this contributes to your present welfare even if its object doesn’t obtain now. This view been defended on the grounds that it captures a synchronic version of the “resonance constraint” that motivates subjective theories: nothing can be basically good for you at a time t unless you desire it at t (Dorsey 2021: 193, 195). It, or at least what it implies about future-directed desires, has also been argued to be a natural extension of plausible judgments about cases in which people now have satisfied desires for present, temporally extended events (Bruckner 2013). However, some find counterintuitive its implication that you could benefit now from the eventual satisfaction of desires that you now have about the future (Bradley 2016: 6-7; Lin 2017: 167-68).

According to the *time of object* view, the time at which the satisfaction of a desire of yours is basically good for you is the time at which the object of the desire obtains. This implies, when conjoined with the standard assumption, that a person’s well-being at a time t depends only on the strengths of the desires that she has—either before, after, or at t —and which of those desires are satisfied at t . So, if you once had or will have a desire for something that is happening now, the present satisfaction of this past or future desire benefits you now even if you lack this desire now. But if you now have a desire that once was or will someday be satisfied but isn’t satisfied now, this contributes nothing to your present well-being. Unlike the time of desire view, this view doesn’t imply that the eventual satisfaction of a future-directed desire that you now have benefits you now. But since people can

desire things that predate or postdate their lives, it has the counterintuitive implication that you can be positive in well-being at times before or after your life (Bradley 2009: 27). It could, of course, be amended so that it holds that nothing can be basically good or bad for someone at a time at which she doesn't exist, but one might worry that this would be *ad hoc* (Bradley 2016: 8-9).

On the *later time* view (also called *asymmetrism*), the time at which the satisfaction of a desire of yours is basically good for you is whichever time, between the time of desire and the time of object, is later (Lin 2017). Thus, this view agrees with the time of desire view about past-directed desires and with the time of object view about future-directed desires: it implies that if you now want something that happened in the past, then you benefit now, but if you now want something that won't happen until a future time, then you won't benefit until then. In light of the standard assumption, it implies that a person's present well-being depends on (i) how strong the past-directed desires she *now* has are and which of them were *once* satisfied, (ii) how strong the future-directed desires she *once* had were and which of them are *now* satisfied, and (iii) how strong the present-directed desires she now has are and which of them are now satisfied. This view is motivated by the thought that, since your having a desire is one necessary condition on your benefiting from its satisfaction, and since the obtaining of that desire's object is another, you cannot benefit from the satisfaction of a desire until the earliest time at which both conditions have been met. Like the time of object view, however, it needs to be revised to avoid implying that, because a future-directed desire you had while alive is satisfied after you die, you can be positive in welfare after your death. It has also been argued to have implausible implications about the magnitudes of benefits (Forcehimes 2019).

The *later desire* view (Bradley 2016: 10) results from conjoining to the time of desire view the claim that there is a time at which the satisfaction of a desire of yours is basically good for you only if the desire is past- or present-directed. Thus, it implies that your present well-being is fixed by the past- or present-directed desires that you now have, how strong they are, and which of them are or were once satisfied. This view can be regarded as an amendment of the time of desire view that removes what some find most implausible about it: its implication that the eventual satisfaction of a desire you now have can make you better off now. But some might balk at the idea that the satisfaction of future-directed desires can be, at most, atemporally basically good (i.e., basically good, but not at any times).

According to *fusionism*, the time at which the satisfaction of a desire of yours is basically good for you (if the desire and its object do not temporally overlap) is neither the time of desire nor the time of object but the combination or fusion of those times (Purves 2017). If you want at one time to climb a mountain and you later climb it when you no longer want to do so, for example, then although this benefits you neither when you climb it nor when you want to do this, it benefits you at the (possibly discontinuous) fusion of those two times. The main argument for this view is that, unlike the time of desire, time of object, later time, and later desire views, it respects the principle that how well off you are at a time depends only on what is the case at that time (Purves 2017: 804-05). But this principle is not obviously true, and some might object to the view’s implication that a desire satisfaction can make you better off at a combination of two times without making you better off at either of those times. In any case, given the standard assumption, fusionism implies that a person’s well-being at a time t depends on (i) what desires she has at t^* , how strong they are, and which of them are satisfied at t^{**} , for any distinct times t^* and t^{**} such that t is the fusion of t^* and t^{**} , and (ii) what desires she has at t , how strong those desires are, and which of those desires are satisfied at t .

So far we have focused, as most theorists have, on the time at which the satisfaction of a person’s desire is basically good for her. But since a person’s amount of well-being at a time depends in part on how basically *bad* for her at that time everything is, desire-satisfaction theorists must also tell us when the frustration of a person’s desires is basically bad for her. Here, the time of desire and later desire views have an edge over their competitors. For it is clear that the former would say that the time at which the frustration of a desire of yours is basically bad for you is the time of the desire, and it is clear that the latter would make a version of this claim that is restricted to past- or present-directed desires. By contrast, there are cases in which it is unclear what the other views would say. Each of those views would presumably appeal to a negative analogue of the time of object (i.e., the “time of frustration”): the time of object view would say that the time at which the frustration of a desire of yours is basically bad for you is the time of frustration, the later time view would say that this is true when future-directed desires are at issue, and fusionism would invoke fusions of times of desire and times of frustration. But in many instances of desire frustration, there is no clear time of frustration: if you want to climb Mount Everest at some point before you die but you never do this, when exactly is your desire frustrated (Bradley 2009: 24)? Because the time of desire and later desire views never invoke the time of frustration, they have clear implications even about cases like these.

3. Objective Theories

Objective theories of well-being are ones on which something can be basically good for someone even if it doesn't satisfy, and isn't necessarily tied to the satisfaction of, a pro-attitude of hers. There are two main categories of objective theory: *perfectionist* theories and *objective list theories*. According to the former, what is basically good for someone is the exercise or development of capacities that are, in some sense, essential to her nature (Hurka 1993; Murphy 2001). According to the latter, there are a plurality of basic goods, at least some of which are objective in the sense of not being necessarily connected to the satisfaction of pro-attitudes (Arneson 1999; Hurka 2011; Rice 2013; Hooker 2015).

There hasn't been much explicit discussion of how objective theories determine a person's amount of well-being at a particular time. In the case of perfectionism, though, things seem straightforward. The capacities whose exercise perfectionists deem basically good are ones such as rationality (both theoretical and practical), the sorts of physical capacities involved in athletic activity, and the sorts of social and emotional capacities involved in interpersonal relations (Bradford 2016: 127). The exercise or development of any such capacity appears to lack the property that gave rise to such a wide range of theoretical options in the case of desire satisfaction: the ability to occur or obtain in virtue of the occurrence or obtaining of parts that do not temporally overlap. Thus, there seems to be no reason to deviate from the natural view that the time at which such an exercise or development is basically good is just the time at which it occurs. When conjoined with the standard assumption, this view implies that a person's well-being at a time t depends only on the facts about her development or exercise of the relevant capacities at t .

Things are less straightforward with objective list theories because of the wide variety of kinds that they can identify as basic goods. Experiential goods such as pleasure can be handled as simply by an objective list theory as they can be by experientialist theories such as hedonism. If an objective list theory deems basically good a subjective kind such as the satisfaction of one's desires, the realization of one's values, or the achievement of one's goals (Keller 2004), however, then it will inherit the array of possible views that are available to subjectivists and the task of choosing among them.

4. Hybrid Theories

Hybrid theories combine elements from two or more theories in such a way that each condition that one of the latter theories deems necessary and sufficient for basic goodness or badness is regarded as merely necessary. A hybrid of hedonism and perfectionism would hold, for example, that whereas neither pleasure nor the development or exercise of one’s essential capacities is basically good in the absence of the other, their combination is basically good (Kraut 2007). A hybrid of hedonism and an objective list theory would maintain that there is a list of goods such that, although it is not basically good for you to get instances of these goods that you do not enjoy or to feel pleasure whose source or object is not one of these goods, it is basically good for you to get and enjoy goods from this list (Parfit 1984: 501-02; Kagan 2009).

Although nothing determinate can be said about how hybrid theories, as a class, calculate a person’s well-being at a particular time, we can consider how the most commonly proposed hybrid theories do this. As the examples above suggest, one most commonly encounters hybrids of hedonism and other theories. These hybrid theories are commonly understood as requiring that the hedonic and other components of the basic good occur simultaneously, in which case they presumably hold that the time at which an instance of the good is basically good for you is just the time at which all of its components occur. If, however, such a theory deems basically good the combination of a pleasure and an object of it that obtains earlier or later than it, then it will need to choose from an array of views analogous to those available to the desire-satisfaction theory. The same is true of the second most common type of hybrid theory, on which what is basically good is the satisfaction of desires for objects that are worthy of desire (Kraut 1994: 44).

5. Lifetime Well-Being and the Shape of a Life

We have thus far been considering how the main theories of well-being might account for how well off people are at particular times. But given that there are not only facts about people’s amounts of well-being at particular times but facts about how well their entire lives go, we should also ask how the two kinds of facts are related.

One oft-discussed view about this relation, known in the literature as the *additive* view, claims that a person’s lifetime amount of well-being (i.e., how good or bad, on balance, her entire life or existence is for her) is just the sum of the amounts of welfare that she has at each moment in time. Suppose

we depict a person’s well-being over time on a two-dimensional graph, using the x-axis to represent time and the y-axis to represent well-being. Assuming that the person is never negative in well-being (and thus that her amount of momentary well-being is never depicted by a point below the x-axis), this view implies that if we take the curve that represents her momentary well-being over time and calculate the area between that curve and the x-axis, we will have calculated her lifetime well-being.

Some theorists reject the additive view on the grounds that it neglects the evaluative significance of the shape of a life (Slote 1982; Velleman 1991; Glasgow 2013). ‘Shape’ can mean two things in this discussion. First, it can refer to the distribution over time of a person’s momentary well-being—the shape of the curve that represents her well-being over time on a graph of the kind just described. In that case, the objection is that because some such distributions (e.g., upward-sloping ones, in which momentary well-being increases over time) are, other things being equal, better to have than others (e.g., downward-sloping ones, in which it decreases over time), one person’s entire life can go better for him than another’s does for her even though they have the same sum of momentary well-being (Velleman 1991: 49-51, 53). Second, ‘shape’ can designate relations among events in a life that go beyond, and are not entirely reflected in, the distribution over time of the momentary well-being in the life (e.g., the relation that holds between a goal and the efforts that resulted in its achievement). In that case, the objection is that one person’s entire life can go better for him than another’s does for her because their lives are differently shaped in this sense—even though they have not only the same sum of momentary well-being but the same graph of momentary well-being over time. For example, the first life might be better than the second because, whereas the former’s upward trend in momentary well-being results from its subject’s perseverance and his successful execution of his plans, the latter’s exactly similar trend is due only to its subject’s good luck (Velleman 1991: 53-57).

Different explanations have been offered for why the shape of a life, in one or the other sense, has an evaluative significance that cannot be accommodated by the additive view. With respect to the first, purely graphical, sense, it has been suggested that the same quantity of momentary well-being makes a larger contribution to your lifetime well-being if you accrue it during the prime of your life than if you do at other times (Slote 1982: 313-17), that the same such quantity makes a larger such contribution the later in your life you accrue it (Slote 1982: 317-19), and that increases (decreases) over time in momentary well-being are themselves basically good (bad) for you (Glasgow 2013: 668-71). With respect to the second, relational, sense, the main proposal is that lives with the same sum

or even the same graph of momentary well-being can embody different types of narratives or stories (e.g., ones of hard-won success, squandered opportunities, or redemption), some of which make for better lives on the whole (Velleman 1991: 54-55). For this reason, the relations that are relevant to shape in this sense are often called “narrative or dramatic” (Velleman 1991: 49).

Defenders of the additive view have argued that our inclination to reject it for shape-related reasons stems from a failure to properly imagine the relevant examples. When we judge that two people with equal sums of momentary well-being nonetheless differ in lifetime well-being because one of them has an uphill curve of momentary well-being and the other a downhill one, we may be neglecting the fact that each of these people will plausibly notice the shape of her curve and take pleasure (in the uphill case) or displeasure (in the downhill one) in it at various points in time. Given the effects on momentary well-being of these pleasures and displeasures, the person with the uphill life actually has a greater sum of momentary well-being than the person with the downhill life does, in which case the judgment that the former is higher in lifetime well-being than the latter is perfectly compatible with the additive view (Feldman 2004: 131-34). Similarly, it could be that we implicitly assume that uphill lives typically contain more successful long-term projects than downhill lives do and that such projects contribute to momentary well-being at various points in time. Thus, when we imagine an uphill life that seemingly contains exactly as much momentary well-being as a downhill life and judge that the former is nonetheless better overall, we might unwittingly be assuming that the former life contains more momentary well-being on account of containing more such projects. If so, then our judgment that the uphill life is better than the downhill one is compatible with the additive view (Dorsey 2015). A different defense of the additive view maintains that if this view were false because of the shape-of-a-life phenomenon, then certain things (e.g., uphill curves of momentary well-being, narrative relations of the right sort) would be atemporally basically good for us: after all, if they were basically good for us at any times, they would contribute to momentary welfare at those times and thus violate the stipulation that the lives that we are comparing (e.g., the uphill and downhill ones) contain equal sums of momentary well-being. If it is implausible that anything could be atemporally basically good, then we shouldn't reject the additive view for shape-related reasons (Campbell 2015).

It should be noted that not all participants in this debate understand the additive view in the same way. Some regard it as concerning momentary well-being as we have understood it—where, because it is an open question whether things that occur or are the case at times other than t can be basically

good or bad for someone at t , it is an open question whether someone’s well-being at a particular moment can be determined in part by what occurs or is the case at other times (Kauppinen 2015: 198-99; Dorsey 2015: 323-29). Others regard it as concerning what we can call *non-relational* or *atomic* well-being—where a person’s level of non-relational or atomic well-being at a time t is determined by how basically good or bad for her at t everything *that occurs or is the case at t is, considered in isolation from what occurs or is the case at other times* (Portmore 2007: 21; Glasgow 2013: 666). The claim that a person’s lifetime well-being is the sum of the amounts of non-relational or atomic well-being that she has at each moment is stronger than the claim that a person’s lifetime well-being is the sum of the amounts of well-being that she has at each moment. For example, the former denies, whereas the latter allows, that the basic goodness that a person presently accrues (according to the time of desire view) from the future satisfaction of a desire that she now has can contribute to her lifetime well-being. Because the rejection of additivity in the stronger sense is compatible with additivity in the weaker sense, there may be less disagreement in this debate than there initially appears.

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Further Reading

Bramble, B. (2018) *The Passing of Temporal Well-Being*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge. (Perhaps the sole defense in the philosophical literature of the view that well-being is not even partly a temporal phenomenon.)

Lin, E. (2022a) “Well-Being, Part I: The Concept of Well-Being,” *Philosophy Compass* 17(2). (An introduction to the concepts of well-being and prudential value that considers several proposed analyses of these concepts.)

Lin, E. (2022b) “Well-Being, Part II: Theories of Well-Being,” *Philosophy Compass* 17(2). (A guide to philosophical theories of well-being, with an emphasis on work done since the turn of the century.)