

Welfare Subjects

Philosophical debates about welfare or well-being have traditionally focused on the relative merits of different theories of well-being, such as hedonism, the desire theory, and the objective list theory. In recent years, however, philosophers have increasingly discussed which entities are welfare subjects and which of them each theory of well-being applies to: there are now debates, for example, about whether only sentient beings are welfare subjects¹ and whether the same theory is true of all welfare subjects.² These recent debates have occurred in the absence of a consensus about the definition of the expression in terms of which they are framed. Although all parties agree that ‘welfare subject’ expresses the concept of an entity that is in some sense capable of well-being, there are two *prima facie* plausible ways to make this meaning precise, each with some adherents in the literature. I will argue that, because one of these definitions leaves us poorly equipped to explain which entities are welfare subjects, and because it cannot plausibly accommodate certain comparative judgments about welfare, we should prefer the other definition. In doing so, I will also explain why, although they are not welfare subjects, even inanimate objects can have a level of welfare.

1. Two Definitions

To my knowledge, the expression ‘welfare subject’ was introduced by Wayne Sumner, who claims, in *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, that although it is clear that children and cats are welfare subjects, it is unclear whether paramecia or plants are and clear that inanimate objects aren’t.³ His explanation of why the term applies to cats sheds light on what he means by it: “It is perfectly natural for me to say that my cat is doing well, that having an ear infection is bad for her, that she has benefited from a change of diet, and so on. In making these judgements it certainly seems to me that I am applying exactly the same concept of welfare to my cat that I habitually apply to my friends.”⁴ Although he never defines the expression, he does eventually gloss it as meaning “an individual with a distinct welfare.”⁵ It appears, then, that he would define a welfare subject either as an entity with a welfare, one to which the concept of welfare applies, one that can be benefited or harmed, one that can be

¹ Bradford (2023); Lee (2025).

² Lin (2018); Masny (2026).

³ Sumner (1996), pp. 15-16, 22.

⁴ Sumner (1996), p. 14.

⁵ Sumner (1996), p. 43.

doing well or badly, or one that can possess things that are good or bad for it in the “prudential” sense that is conceptually tied to well-being.⁶ Theorists who have adopted the term from Sumner have followed him in using it with this meaning or constellation of meanings in mind.

There are at least two *prima facie* plausible ways of making this meaning more precise. On the first, the term distinguishes the entities that are capable of possessing (or otherwise being appropriately related to)⁷ things that are good or bad for them from those incapable of doing this:

Narrow Definition S is a welfare subject =_{df} S is capable of possessing something that has prudential value or disvalue for it.

Eden Lin endorses this definition.⁸ So does Gwen Bradford when she glosses welfare subjects as “bearers of welfare goods and bads,” provided that she has in mind entities capable of bearing such goods and bads, and not just ones that actually do so.⁹ Because an entity is positive or negative in welfare (i.e., is faring well or badly on balance) only if it possesses something that is good or bad for it, only entities that satisfy the narrow definition are capable of being positive or negative in welfare. Every entity capable of being positive or negative in welfare is a welfare subject narrowly defined.¹⁰

On the second way of precisifying the meaning of ‘welfare subject’, the expression distinguishes the entities that are capable of having an amount of well-being from those incapable of having any such amount—not even a neutral or zero amount:

Broad Definition S is a welfare subject =_{df} S is capable of having an amount of well-being (even if only a neutral or zero amount).

⁶ For a discussion of the conceptual connections between well-being and prudential value and disvalue, see Lin (2022). In this paper, I use ‘good for’ and ‘bad for’ only in this prudential sense.

⁷ These relations might include, e.g., *instantiating* (if virtue is good), *participating in* (if friendship is good), or *desiring* (if the obtaining objects of our desires are good). For brevity’s sake, I will use ‘possessing’ to cover all the relevant relations.

⁸ Lin (2021), p. 876.

⁹ Bradford (2023), p. 906.

¹⁰ We can imagine an entity that can possess things that are good or bad for it, but only in such amounts that the value for it of the good things is exactly counterbalanced by the disvalue for it of the bad things: see Lee (2025), p. 13. This entity would satisfy the narrow definition even though it couldn’t be positive or negative in welfare. Those who prefer to exclude it from the class of welfare subjects could accept a variant on the narrow definition on which a welfare subject is an entity capable of being positive or negative in welfare. Everything I will say in support of the narrow definition would apply, with minor modifications, to this variant on it.

Uriah Kriegel accepts this definition on the grounds that zombies, which he believes are not welfare subjects, differ importantly from what he calls mombies: people with “full and stormy experiential [lives] the net experiential value of [each of] which happens to be exactly zero.” Mombies qualify as welfare subjects on both definitions because they are positive in welfare at some times and negative in welfare at others even though each of them has a lifetime welfare of zero. Nevertheless, Kriegel thinks that contrasting mombies with zombies motivates the broad definition by showing that we must distinguish having a zero welfare level from having no welfare level at all. The life of an entity that isn’t a welfare subject (e.g., a zombie) is not worth living in a deeper sense than a mombie’s is, he claims. “The value of a mombie’s life to the mombie is zero; but the zombie’s life has *no* value to the zombie, not even the value 0.”¹¹ Willem van der Deijl, who also contrasts having a zero welfare level with having no welfare level at all, endorses the broad definition when he equates the task of identifying the welfare subjects with that of “say[ing] to which individuals we can ascribe levels of wellbeing.”¹² Andrew Lee also endorses this definition: he claims that since “having welfare level zero is distinct from lacking a welfare level altogether,” there can be welfare subjects “that cannot accrue any welfare goods/bads” and therefore cannot be positive or negative in well-being.¹³

Since the broad definition assumes that having a zero amount of well-being is distinct from having none at all, we cannot assess it without understanding the difference between these two conditions. There are many contexts in which to say that something has no F is just to say that it has zero F . If I say that I felt no pain during the past minute and that I received no letters yesterday, what I mean is that I felt zero pain and received zero letters: after all, I am saying something that implies that I felt less pain, and received fewer letters, than I would have if I had felt any positive amount of pain or received any positive number of letters. In other contexts, however, it is important to distinguish having no F at all from having a zero amount of F . To say that the number 7 has no elevation is not to say that it has an elevation of zero, for that would imply that it has an elevation roughly one mile lower than that of Denver. Instead, it is to say that it is nowhere on the scale of elevations—not even at the zero point—so that it cannot be compared elevation-wise with anything. Likewise, to say

¹¹ Kriegel (forthcoming), pp. 10, 18. I will criticize this rationale for the broad definition in section 4.3.

¹² Deijl (2021), pp. 189, 194.

¹³ Lee (2022), p. 208n5. Lee (2025) assumes a variant on the broad definition that appeals to the possession of welfare levels rather than the capacity to possess them: ‘welfare subject’, on this view, means ‘entity that has an amount of well-being (even if only a neutral or zero amount)’. Because it is unclear that an entity could be capable of having a welfare level without actually having one, it is unclear that the two versions of the broad definition classify any cases differently. Since the difference between the two versions makes no difference to anything that Lee or I say, I will focus on the version that I presented above.

that the color red has no pitch is not to locate it at a neutral or zero point on the scale of pitches that can be compared to the one occupied, say, by high C: it is to deny that it occupies any point on that scale, and thus to deny that it can be compared pitch-wise with anything. As these examples show, one crucial difference between occupying the zero point on a scale and occupying no point on it at all is that, in the former case but not in the latter, one can enter into comparisons with respect to that scale. An entity can have more, less, or the same amount of F as another entity does only if it has *some* amount (even if only zero) of F . One point on a scale can be compared only with another point on it: it cannot be compared with nothing at all. Thus, if an entity not only isn't positive or negative in welfare but has no amount of welfare at all, not even zero, then it cannot be compared with respect to welfare with anything: it cannot be better or worse off than, or equally well off as, anything. For these reasons, the narrow and broad definitions disagree about whether entities that are not welfare subjects can enter into welfare comparisons. Whereas the broad definition says that they cannot because they cannot have any amounts of well-being, the narrow definition says that whether they can depends on whether they can have a zero amount of well-being.

I understand both definitions to be employing a notion of capacity that is more robust than mere metaphysical or even nomological possibility—one grounded in the relevant entities' psychological or physical constitutions. You are incapable, in this sense, of flying without mechanical assistance even if there is a possible world at which you have grown and learned how to use wings. Thus, for example, if hedonism is the correct theory of welfare, then the narrow definition accords the status of welfare subjects only to entities whose constitutions enable them to feel pleasure or pain: if an entity is not so constituted but there is a possible world where it is, then it is not a welfare subject even though there is a possible world where it is one. Neither of the definitions takes a stance on whether the capacity that it invokes can be had contingently. On each definition, whether welfare subjecthood can be had contingently turns on whether the relevant capacity can be had contingently.

Since 'welfare subject' is a technical term rather than an expression from ordinary language, we can't adjudicate between the narrow and broad definitions on the basis of how well they fit pretheoretical intuitions about its application. Instead, we must ask whether either definition affords us theoretical advantages that the other does not. I will present two independent reasons of this sort to prefer the narrow definition.

2. Explaining Which Entities Are Welfare Subjects

The first reason we should prefer the narrow definition is that, unlike the broad definition, it is compatible with a natural and attractive picture of how the facts about which entities are welfare subjects are explained by those about the true theory or theories of well-being.

It is standardly assumed that theories of well-being purport to explain how well off people are by identifying the basic goods and bads. For example, hedonism claims that pleasure and pain are the only basic good and bad, respectively, whereas the objective list theory accords the status of basic goods to a plurality of kinds, such as friendship, achievement, and knowledge. On the picture that I have in mind, the most fundamental facts about welfare, at least at the normative ethical level, are ones about which kinds are basic goods and bads and how basically good or bad instances of these kinds are. When paired with facts about which entities are capable of possessing instances of these kinds, these facts straightforwardly explain which entities are welfare subjects: an entity is a welfare subject if and only if (and if so, in virtue of the fact that) it is capable of having an instance of at least one kind that is a basic good or bad. If hedonism is true, for example, then it explains why all and only creatures capable of experiencing pleasure or pain are welfare subjects. And inanimate objects aren't welfare subjects on any plausible theory of well-being because they are incapable of possessing instances of any kinds that plausibly are basic goods or bads.¹⁴

The picture is simplest if we assume, as I just did, that there is only one true theory of welfare. But it remains natural and attractive, though it is more complicated, if there are multiple true theories, each of them true of a different class of entities. Suppose that there are two true theories. The first, which is true of entities capable of valuing things, holds that the fulfillment of one's values is the only basic good and the frustration of one's values the only basic bad. The second, which is true of entities not capable of valuing things, holds that pleasure is the only basic good and pain the only basic bad.¹⁵ In that case, the picture that I am describing holds that the fundamental facts about welfare are (i) that value-fulfillment and value-frustration are the only basic good and bad, respectively, for valuers and (ii) that pleasure and pain are the only basic good and bad, respectively, for non-valuers. It also holds

¹⁴ Bradford (2023, pp. 919-20) notes the plausibility of this picture.

¹⁵ Philosophers who defend theories on which value-fulfillment occupies the central role, such as Raibley (2010), Dorsey (2017), and Tiberius (2018), typically intend their theories to apply only to valuers and admit that some other theory or theories are true of non-valuers.

that an entity is a welfare subject if and only if (and if so, because) it is capable of having an instance of at least one kind that is a basic good or bad for it. Thus, if these two theories are the true theories, then their truth explains why the class of welfare subjects is the union of the class of entities capable of having fulfilled or frustrated values and the class of entities capable of feeling pleasure or pain. As before, which entities are welfare subjects is explained by which kinds are basic goods or bads on the true theories, along with the facts about which entities are capable of possessing instances of them.

The narrow definition is compatible with this picture. An entity is capable of possessing things that are good or bad for it if and only if it is capable of possessing instances of at least one kind that is a basic good or bad for it. Thus, the entities that this picture identifies as welfare subjects are precisely those that satisfy the narrow definition.

By contrast, we cannot accept this picture if we accept the broad definition. This is because, on this definition, an entity that cannot have any instance of any kind that is a basic good or bad could be a welfare subject in virtue of being able to have a zero amount of well-being: the capacity to possess an instance of a basic good or bad is sufficient but not necessary for being a welfare subject, since a distinct capacity that doesn't entail it (*viz.*, the capacity to have a zero welfare level) is also sufficient. If the broad definition is true, then the fact that rocks aren't welfare subjects isn't fully explained by the fact that they cannot possess instances of pleasure, pain, or any other kinds that could plausibly be basic goods or bads. Since this incapacity of theirs is compatible with their having a zero welfare level, the fact that they aren't welfare subjects is also partly explained by the fact that they cannot have even a zero welfare level. More generally, the reason why the class of welfare subjects is no larger than it is isn't just that nothing outside it can possess any instances of any basic goods or bads: it's also that nothing outside it can have even a zero welfare level. This view about why the entities that are welfare subjects, and no others, have that status is less explanatory than the picture available to the narrow definition. For the fact that certain entities cannot have even a zero amount of welfare itself stands in need of explanation, and it is not obvious what could explain it. Since it is better to define a term in a way that makes it easy to explain why it has the extension that it does, we have reason to prefer the narrow definition.¹⁶

¹⁶ By all appearances, Kriegel (forthcoming, pp. 18-19) accepts the natural and appealing explanatory picture that I have defended. But he seems not to notice its incompatibility with the broad definition, which he also accepts.

A proponent of the broad definition might reply that, on that definition, we can give a different but equally good explanation of which entities are welfare subjects. However, I struggle to see what such an explanation might be. It can't be that the things that are welfare subjects have that status in virtue of being capable of having a welfare level. After all, on the broad definition, all it means to say that something is a welfare subject is that it is capable of having a welfare level, so this explanation would be circular. And while it wouldn't be circular to claim, as Lee does¹⁷, that the things that are welfare subjects have that status in virtue of being capable of phenomenal consciousness, this claim would itself stand in need of explanation. It's easy enough to see what could explain why entities incapable of phenomenal consciousness are incapable of being positive or negative in welfare: perhaps some theory on which all of the basic goods and bads require phenomenal consciousness (e.g., hedonism), is true. But what could explain why entities incapable of phenomenal consciousness are incapable of having even zero welfare?¹⁸ Until proponents of the broad definition tell us how we can explain which entities are welfare subjects in their sense, we have reason to prefer the narrow definition.

3. Welfare Comparisons with Inanimate Objects

The second reason we should prefer the narrow definition is that, unlike the broad definition, it can accommodate certain comparative judgments about well-being without excessively enlarging the extension of 'welfare subject'. These judgments are controversial, and I don't expect to convince everyone that they are true. But if they are so much as epistemically possible (i.e., true for all we know), they give us reason to prefer to narrow definition.

Imagine a paradigmatically excellent life, overflowing with all of the basic goods postulated by your preferred theory of welfare and nearly devoid of any of the basic bads postulated by that theory, and compare that life to the existence of a rock. Surely, that life goes better for the person living it than the rock's existence does for the rock. Now, compare the rock's existence with a paradigmatically terrible life, one of uninterrupted torture and agony. Surely, this life goes worse for the person living it than the rock's existence does for the rock. If you doubt these comparative judgments, perhaps because they might involve a category mistake, contrast them with the judgments that Denver has a

¹⁷ Lee (2025).

¹⁸ Lee (2025) gives no explanation, and his view may be that none is possible: he is inclined to treat as basic the view that something is a welfare subject (broadly defined) just if and because it is capable of phenomenal consciousness (p. 4). I will say more about his paper in section 5.

higher elevation than the number 7 and that high C has a higher pitch than the color red. The latter judgments plainly do involve a category mistake, and we feel no inclination to accept them. But the former judgments are much more plausible and do not feel absurd in the way that the latter ones do. Moreover, the following judgments are also intuitively appealing:

- (1) There is a larger difference in welfare between the excellent life and the terrible life than there is between either of these lives and the existence of the rock.
- (2) There is a smaller difference in welfare between the excellent life and an otherwise exactly similar life that contains slightly less pleasure than there is between either of these lives and the existence of the rock.
- (3) There is a smaller difference in welfare between the terrible life and an otherwise exactly similar life that contains slightly less pain than there is between either of these lives and the existence of the rock.

But clearly, these judgments cannot be true unless a person can be better or worse off than a rock. If there couldn't be any differences in welfare between a person and a rock, then we couldn't compare the size of a difference in welfare between a person and a rock with that of a difference in welfare between two people. Because it is intuitively plausible that we can compare such sizes, it is plausible that a person can be better or worse off than a rock. Once again, it is instructive to contrast this case with one in which the relevant comparisons clearly are impossible. It is not plausible at all that there is a smaller difference in elevation between Denver and Salt Lake City than there is between either of these cities and the number 7. The absurdity of this claim, and of any other comparative claim concerning the size of the difference in elevation between anything and the number 7, corroborates the fact that the number 7 cannot be compared with anything with respect to elevation.

Some might suspect that this argument begs the question, since each of (1) – (3) obviously entails its conclusion and is thus a premise that no one who is committed to rejecting that conclusion would be willing to accept. But the fact that an argument employs such a premise doesn't make it question-begging, at least not in any objectionable sense. Every obviously valid argument has premises that together obviously entail its conclusion and whose conjunction would thus be rejected by anyone committed to rejecting its conclusion. This doesn't mean that a valid argument can avoid begging the question in an objectionable way only by being non-obviously valid. For example, the claim that

a good life spent in the real world is better than an experientially indistinguishable life spent in an experience machine obviously entails the falsity of standard quantitative hedonism. However, it isn’t objectionably question-begging to reject that theory because one accepts that claim.¹⁹ An argument can provide evidence for its conclusion—it can provide good reasons for accepting it—even if it is predictably unable to convince people who are committed to rejecting its conclusion. Someone who is unsure whether people can be better or worse off than rocks, and even someone initially inclined to think that they cannot be, might realize on reflection that (1) – (3) are plausible and conclude on this basis that people can indeed be better or worse off than rocks. There would be nothing amiss about reasoning in this way.

The upshot of this argument is that a person’s life can go better or worse for her than an inanimate object’s existence does for that object. Admittedly, it would be odd to go around saying that you are better off than rocks, chairs, and other inanimate objects. But something can be true even though it would be odd to say. Usually, people are so much better off than inanimate objects are that this isn’t worth saying. There is “no comparison” between your existence and that of a rock in the same sense that there is “no comparison” between a meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant and a stale cracker: the former is so much better than the latter that the act of comparing them misleads by suggesting that they are close enough in quality to be worth comparing. If we imagine a life that is just barely good on balance for the person living it, it seems less odd to say, because it is more worth saying, that it is better than the existence of a rock. There is some residual oddness, but it isn’t probative: it would also sound odd to say that this life is better than that of a cat, even though this can surely be true. We are just not used to comparing, and thus find it odd to compare, our welfare with that of non-human entities. Moreover, a large part of the point of making welfare comparisons is to provide guidance for efforts to improve the condition of those who are worse off. Because we have no way of making inanimate objects better off than they are, it is unclear why we would bother noting how they compare in welfare to people. For reasons like these, the oddness, in most contexts, of welfare comparisons with inanimate objects doesn’t show that such comparisons cannot be true. Indeed, this oddness dissipates considerably once we appreciate the aforementioned reasons for thinking that such comparisons can indeed be true.

¹⁹ Lin (2016), pp. 324-27.

We can accommodate the judgment that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects by ascribing a neutral or zero amount of well-being to those objects. The person with the excellent life is better off than the rock because, being positive in welfare, he has a larger amount of well-being; the person with the terrible life is worse off than the rock because, being negative in welfare, he has a smaller amount of well-being. The claim that inanimate objects can have a level of well-being—namely, zero—isn’t implausible, since the ability to have a neutral or zero welfare level doesn’t entail the ability to possess things that are good or bad for one, to be positive or negative in welfare, or to be made better or worse off.

On the narrow definition, according to which welfare subjects are entities capable of possessing things that are good or bad for them, we can endorse all of these claims without maintaining that inanimate objects are welfare subjects, since these objects not only do not possess but are *incapable* of possessing such things.²⁰ But on the broad definition, on which the capacity to have even a neutral or zero amount of welfare suffices for being a welfare subject, we cannot ascribe a neutral or zero amount of well-being to such objects without considering them welfare subjects. Indeed, the broad definition implies that people cannot be better or worse off than such objects unless those objects are welfare subjects. After all, as I noted earlier, the point of distinguishing a zero amount of welfare from no amount of it, as the broad definition does, is to deny that entities that have no amount of it can enter into welfare comparisons. If we posit amounts of welfare, as that definition does, then we must hold that one entity is better off than another if and only if the first entity’s amount of welfare is larger than the second’s. Clearly, an amount of welfare cannot be larger or smaller than *no* amount (as contrasted with a zero amount) of it. Thus, the broad definition implies that if the rock is not a welfare subject, then its existence is not worse than the excellent life and not better than the terrible one. More generally, it allows us to recognize that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects only if we consider such objects welfare subjects. But this would contradict the consensus among theorists that inanimate objects aren’t welfare subjects and so greatly enlarge the extension of ‘welfare subject’ that it would lack moral significance. If the term lumps rocks and people together and ascribes to people nothing more than a capacity had by rocks, then the distinction between welfare subjects and other entities matters less, morally speaking, than a distinction within the class

²⁰ Because I mean by ‘capacity’ something more robust than metaphysical or even nomological possibility (see section 1), this would be true even if there were possible worlds where inanimate objects are capable of possessing such things (e.g., because they can feel pleasure and pain). On the narrow definition, such objects’ *actual* incapacity to possess such things entails that they are not actually welfare subjects.

of welfare subjects that separates rocks from people. The term is more useful if it marks the latter distinction, as it does on the narrow definition. Therefore, if people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects, as I have argued, then we should prefer the narrow definition because only it can accommodate this fact without deeming such objects welfare subjects.

Some readers might not be entirely convinced by my argument that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects. Notice, though, that even the *epistemic possibility* of that claim renders the narrow definition preferable. The narrow definition doesn't force us to maintain that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects: it is consistent with the view that such objects can't have any welfare levels (not even zero) and thus that such comparative judgments cannot be true. Thus, even if you doubt that such judgments can be true, this is no reason to prefer the broad definition to the narrow one, since you can say that such objects can't have even zero welfare regardless of which definition you accept. By contrast, even if you are not entirely convinced that such judgments can be true, you have reason to prefer the narrow definition on the grounds that it is at least epistemically possible that they can be true. If you can't rule out the possibility that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects, then you can't rule out the possibility that the broad definition, unlike the narrow one, implies that such objects are welfare subjects and thus excessively enlarges the class of welfare subjects. Even if I haven't established that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects, I hope to have shown that, for all we know, they can be.²¹ Since, other things being equal, we should prefer definitions that allow us to plausibly accommodate hypotheses that could turn out to be true, this is a reason to prefer the narrow definition.

I must emphasize that this argument and the previous one are independent of each other. Even if which entities are welfare subjects is as explicable on the broad definition as on the narrow one, we could have reason to prefer the narrow definition because only it can accommodate the fact (or at least the epistemic possibility) that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects without deeming such objects welfare subjects. And even if welfare comparisons with inanimate objects give us no reason to prefer the narrow definition, we could have reason to prefer it because it makes it easier than the broad definition does to explain which entities are welfare subjects.

²¹ Importantly, the reason we can't rule out the claim that people can be better or worse off than inanimate objects isn't just that there's some chance that such objects can possess things that are good or bad for them (e.g., because they can feel pleasure or pain). We can't rule out that claim even if we assume that inanimate objects can't possess such things.

4. Objections and Replies

4.1 *The Capacity for Zero Welfare*

Both of my arguments assumed that, from the fact that something cannot possess anything that is good or bad for it and thus cannot be positive or negative in welfare, it doesn't follow that it cannot have a zero or neutral welfare level. To the extent that they have addressed this issue, defenders of the broad definition agree.²² However, you might question this assumption on the general grounds that an entity cannot have a zero amount of something (as contrasted with no amount of it) unless it can have a positive or negative amount of it.

That principle is false, however. An entity incapable of feeling pleasure is one incapable of having a positive amount of it—or a negative amount of it, whatever that might mean. But such an entity can and does have a zero amount of pleasure. For if it had no amount of pleasure, then the large amount of pleasure had by a person who is in ecstasy wouldn't be greater than its amount of pleasure, and it wouldn't be true, as it surely is, that such a person feels *more* pleasure than it does. There is nothing strange about the view that some things can possess only zero amounts of pleasure, since this merely implies that some things can't have any pleasure but can have less of it than is had by anything that has some pleasure.²³ More generally, there is nothing strange about the view that one can have a zero amount of something (e.g., welfare) even though one can't have a positive or negative amount of it.

4.2 *Comparing Good Lives with Non-Existence*

It is plausible that a person with a good life is better off than he would be if he didn't exist. Some might think, however, that such a person would have no welfare level at all if he didn't exist. This might suggest, contrary to my second argument, that even the broad definition can consider people better or worse off than inanimate objects without deeming such objects welfare subjects. For if a person can be better off than he would be if he had no welfare level, then he can presumably be better or worse off than an inanimate object that has no welfare level.

²² Lee (2022), p. 208n5; Lee (2025), pp. 9, 11.

²³ The claim that rocks have zero amounts of pleasure might, for some, have the feeling of a category mistake. Given what I have just argued, I take this to show only that one can easily be misled into thinking that a true claim involves a category mistake—a fact that bolsters my second argument.

If people with good lives are indeed better off than they would be if they didn’t exist, however, this can only be because they would have a lower welfare level (namely, zero) if they didn’t exist. For as I explained earlier, one point on a scale can be compared only with another point on it, even if only the neutral or zero point: it cannot be compared with nothing at all. This is why we cannot compare the elevation of Denver with that of the number 7 or the pitch of high C with that of the color red. Thus, if there are welfare levels, then someone is better off in one scenario than in another just in case his welfare level is higher in the one than in the other, and someone is better off at one time than at another just in case his welfare level is higher at the one than at the other. I am not aware of any good reasons for rejecting this view, which is endorsed both by (i) theorists who hold that we *can’t* be better off existing than not existing because non-existent people have no welfare levels and by (ii) theorists who hold that we *can* be better off existing than not existing and, accordingly, that non-existent people have a welfare level (namely, zero). And although I can’t rehearse them here, I find convincing Ben Bradley’s arguments for the claim that actually existing people would have zero welfare if they didn’t exist.²⁴ Thus, I don’t think my second argument is undermined by the intuition that people with good lives are better off than they would be if they didn’t exist. Those who are convinced that no person would have any welfare level if he didn’t exist should reject that intuition.

What about Fred Feldman’s deprivationist account of the badness of death, on which death is bad for the person who dies because it deprives him of the well-being that he would have accumulated if he had lived longer?²⁵ This account can explain why death is bad for the person who dies without assuming that a person has a welfare level after he goes out of existence, so it might appear to show that a person can be better off existing than not existing even if he would have no welfare level at all if he didn’t exist. This appearance would be mistaken, though. On this account, the sense in which a person’s death, at a given time, can be bad for him is the following: the person’s *lifetime* amount of welfare can be lower, given that he dies at that time, than his *lifetime* amount of welfare would have been if he hadn’t died at that time.²⁶ Since this involves a comparison of lifetime welfare levels across scenarios, it obviously doesn’t suggest that a person can be better off in one scenario than in another even if he has no welfare level in one of the scenarios. It is true that this account doesn’t assume that a person can have a welfare level at times after he goes out of existence. But nor does it claim that a

²⁴ Bradley (2009), pp. 98-111; Bradley (2013), pp. 45-48.

²⁵ Feldman (1991).

²⁶ Feldman (1991), pp. 209, 215-16.

person can be worse off *at a time after he goes out existence* than he would have been at that very time if he had existed then (or than he was at an earlier time at which he existed).²⁷ A person can be worse off at a time after he ceases to exist than he would have been at that time if he had still existed then (or than he was at an earlier time at which he existed) only if he has a welfare level—even if only zero—at the later time. Since Feldman’s account makes no intertemporal comparisons of this sort, it poses no threat to this claim.²⁸

4.3 Zombies and Mombies

If, as Kriegel holds²⁹, zombies are incapable of possessing any things that are good or bad for them, then the narrow definition agrees with him that zombies, unlike mombies, aren’t welfare subjects. But Kriegel accepts the broad definition on the grounds that zombies’ lives are not worth living in a deeper sense than mombies’ lives: what explains this, he thinks, is the fact that zombies have no amounts of welfare (not even zero).³⁰ This is no reason to accept the broad definition, however. We can claim that zombies have no amounts of welfare, not even zero, even on the narrow definition. More importantly, we needn’t claim that zombies have no amounts of welfare to explain why their lives are not worth living in a deeper sense than mombies’: that difference is explained by the fact that zombies, unlike mombies, are incapable of possessing any things that are good for them and thus incapable of being positive in well-being. The life of an entity incapable of being positive in welfare is not worth living in a deeper, more robust sense than that of an entity that has a lifetime welfare of zero even though it is sometimes positive in welfare. The availability of this explanation is good news for Kriegel, since he seems to think that we would be worse off if we were zombified³¹, and this cannot be true if zombies have no welfare level at all.

4.4 Comparisons to Similar Terms

²⁷ Feldman (1991), pp. 219-20.

²⁸ Bradley (2009) defends a deprivationist account of the badness of death which, unlike Feldman’s, can say that a person can be worse off at a time when he no longer exists than he would have been at that time if he still existed (or than he was at an earlier time when he still existed). But his account can say this precisely because it claims that people have a welfare level (viz., zero) at times after they cease to exist. See Bradley (2009), ch. 3.

²⁹ Kriegel (forthcoming), pp. 14-17, 19, 23.

³⁰ Kriegel (forthcoming), pp. 10, 18.

³¹ Kriegel (forthcoming), pp. 1-2, 7, 23.

Some might resist the narrow definition because they expect terms of the form ‘F subject’ to mean ‘entity capable of having an amount of F (even if only zero)’. But consider ‘moral subject’: to say that something is a moral subject is not to say that it is capable of having an amount (even if only zero) of morality, whatever that might mean. Furthermore, consider how it would make sense to define ‘hedonic subject’, if this term were in use. As I argued earlier³², since a person who is in ecstasy feels *more* pleasure than an inanimate object does, such objects feel *zero* pleasure (rather than no amount of it). It would hardly be convincing to insist that, since it sounds odd to say that something that has an amount of F nonetheless fails to qualify as an F subject, we must define ‘hedonic subject’ in such a manner that inanimate objects fall in its extension—even if we have good reasons, analogous to the ones I have given, for taking it to mean ‘entity capable of feeling a positive amount of pleasure or pain’. As a technical term, ‘welfare subject’ should suit our theoretical purposes. We shouldn’t let general hunches about what terms of the form ‘F subject’ should mean dictate how we define it.

5. Lee on the Phenomenal Theory of Welfare Subjects

Partly because it will help illustrate the importance of my arguments—and, more generally, that of explicitly considering how ‘welfare subject’ should be defined—I want to end by discussing a recent paper in which Andrew Lee defends the *phenomenal theory* of welfare subjects: that something is a welfare subject if and only if and because it has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness.³³ Lee sometimes characterizes a welfare subject as “the kind of thing that can be better or worse off,” but his official definition is the broad one.³⁴ With ‘welfare subject’ so defined, the phenomenal theory claims that something is capable of having an amount of well-being (even if only a neutral or zero amount) if and only if and because it has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness.

Lee considers alternatives to the broad definition only briefly and implicitly, after assuming it for the bulk of his paper.³⁵ This is unfortunate, since some of his arguments better fit the narrow definition than the broad one. For example, he claims that the phenomenal theory is supported by the fact that it explains why consciousness is ethically significant (*viz.*, because “consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject”) and why people cease to be welfare subjects when they die (*viz.*, because

³² See section 4.1.

³³ Lee (2025).

³⁴ Recall that I am eliding a minor difference between Lee’s formulation of the broad definition and mine. See note 13.

³⁵ Lee (2025), p. 13. He doesn’t consider or argue against the narrow definition.

death involves the loss of the capacity for phenomenal consciousness).³⁶ If having the capacity to have an amount of well-being (even if only a neutral or zero amount) is all it means to be a welfare subject, however, then it’s unclear that the phenomenal theory really does explain why consciousness is ethically significant because it’s unclear that welfare subjecthood is ethically significant. After all, even an entity whose welfare level is necessarily zero is a welfare subject so defined³⁷, but since such an entity cannot be made better or worse off by anything that anyone does, it’s unclear that such an entity is ethically significant. By contrast, since there are no known cases of entities that cannot be made better or worse off even though they can possess things that are good or bad for them, it is clearer that the phenomenal theory, understood as a theory of welfare subjects narrowly defined, explains why consciousness is ethically significant. Moreover, on Lee’s definition, the claim that we cease to be welfare subjects when we die amounts to the claim that we become incapable of having any amount of welfare, even zero, when we die. Since, as I explained earlier, this claim implies that a person cannot be better off while he is alive than he will be after he dies³⁸, it isn’t clear that it is true. Thus, it’s unclear that the fact that the phenomenal theory explains this claim counts in its favor. By contrast, it is clear that we cease to be welfare subjects narrowly defined when we die (i.e., that we can no longer possess things that are good or bad for us then). The phenomenal theory, understood as a theory of welfare subjects narrowly defined, is supported by the fact that it explains this. Thus, Lee’s case for the phenomenal theory is stronger if ‘welfare subject’ is narrowly defined.

Moreover, my second argument yields a serious objection to the phenomenal theory as Lee intends it. If inanimate objects have zero welfare, then such objects qualify as welfare subjects in the broad sense: they are entities capable of having an amount of well-being. However, such objects are surely incapable of phenomenal consciousness. Thus, it’s false that something is a welfare subject in the broad sense if and only if and because it has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness. When paired with the narrow definition, however, the phenomenal theory avoids this objection. This is another reason to think that it is more plausible as a theory of welfare subjects in the narrow sense.

Lee’s paper is rich and interesting, and although it concerns the first-order question of which entities are welfare subjects (and why) rather than the higher-order question of how ‘welfare subject’ should be defined, it connects with mine in more ways than I have the space to describe. I hope my brief

³⁶ Lee (2025), pp. 4-6.

³⁷ Lee (2025) is explicit about this (e.g., on pp. 9, 11).

³⁸ See section 4.2.

discussion of it illustrates the fruitfulness of explicitly considering how ‘welfare subject’ should be defined, as well as some of the implications of my arguments.

6. Conclusion

Because ‘welfare subject’ is a technical term, the task of defining it is not constrained by pretheoretic intuitions about its meaning. But it can be guided by the fact that, other things equal, it is better to define a term in a way that makes available a natural and attractive picture of how its extension is explained than to do so in a way that leaves it unclear how its extension is explained. It can also be guided by the fact that theorists who use the term intend it to delimit a morally significant class from which they all agree inanimate objects are excluded, as well as by the fact that we shouldn’t rule out comparative judgments about welfare that are true or at least epistemically possible. I have argued on this basis that we should accept the narrow definition of ‘welfare subject’, on which this term expresses the concept of an entity capable of possessing (or otherwise being appropriately related to) things that are good or bad for it. Along the way, I have also explained why it is plausible that inanimate objects can have a level of welfare—namely, zero. Such objects are not welfare subjects because they cannot possess anything that is good or bad for them. But the existence of such an object can nonetheless go worse for it than a good life does and better for it than a bad life does.

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