

## SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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*Abstract.* This paper examines the notion of “subjective well-being” as it is used in literature on subjective measures of well-being. I argue that those who employ the notion differ at least superficially on at least two points: first, about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*, and second, about the constituents of subjective well-being. In an effort to reconcile the differences, I propose an interpretation according to which subjective measures presuppose *preference hedonism*: an account according to which well-being is a matter of desired mental states.

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## 1 Introduction\*

Subjective measures of well-being are measures of well-being based on questions such as: “Taking things all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you’re *very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy* these days?” (Gurin, Veroff, and Feld, 1960, p. 411, italics in original).<sup>1</sup> Subjects may be prompted to give a number between 1 and 7, where 1 represents “In general, I consider myself not a very happy person” and 7 “In general, I consider myself a very happy person” (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999, p. 151). In the past, they were asked whether they satisfied descriptions such as: “Cheerful, gay spirits most of the time. Occasionally bothered by something but can usually laugh it off,” “Ups and downs, now happy about things, now depressed. About balanced in the long run,” and “Life often seems so worthless that there is little to keep one going. Nothing matters very much, there has been so much of hurt that laughter would be empty mockery” (Watson, 1930, p. 81). Answers to such questions are used to construct numerical measures of both individual well-being (the well-being of persons) and social well-being (the well-being of groups).

Subjective measures of well-being have become the subject of heated discussion in the academy and beyond. One reason is that they are frequently presented as substitutes for, or complements to, traditional income-based economic welfare measures and to indicators inspired by the capability approach (Kesebir and Diener, 2008). Indeed, to encourage the use of subjective measures for

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<sup>1</sup> For overviews of subjective measures of well-being, see e.g. Angner (2008, 2009a, 2009b), Campbell (1976), Diener (2001), Diener & al (2005), Diener and Seligman (2004), Kahneman et al. (2004), and Tiberius (2006).

public-policy purposes, proponents have advocated *National Well-Being Accounts (NWBAs)*, which track population-level scores on subjective measures over time (Kahneman et al., 2004; Diener and Seligman, 2004; Diener, 2006). While it is hard to predict the extent to which subjective measures will assume the role traditionally played by other measures, subjective measures seem to be gaining ground. For instance, their use was recently endorsed by French President Nicholas Sarkozy's Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. The Commission, which was headed by Nobel Memorial Prize laureates Joseph E. Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, had been charged with the task of exploring alternatives to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of economic performance and social progress (Stiglitz et al., 2009).

Subjective measures of well-being are frequently referred to as *measures of subjective well-being* (Andrews and Robinson, 1991). Thus, for example, Stiglitz and coauthors write: "*Recommendation 1: Measures of subjective well-being provide key information about people's quality of life. Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people's life evaluations, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own surveys*" (Stiglitz & al., 2009, p. 58, italics in original). The term "subjective well-being" (Diener, 1984) – denoting that which subjective measures of well-being are designed to represent – has its own encyclopedia entries (e.g., Diener, 2001) and handbook articles (e.g., Diener & al., 2005). By now, an established body of literature employs subjective measures of well-being to shed light on the causes and correlates of subjective well-being. Though issues about the reliability and validity of such measures remain, scientific research these days focuses relatively less on establishing reliability and validity and more on examining substantive empirical relationships.

Nevertheless, considerable confusion remains when it comes to what subjective well-being is and how it relates to what I will call well-being *simpliciter*: "what we have when our lives are going well for

us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good *for us*” (Tiberius, 2006, p. 493). It has been pointed out that subjective measures differ from economic and capability-based measures with respect to the underlying account of welfare or well-being (Adler and Posner, 2008; Angner, 2008, 2009a).<sup>2</sup> It has also been noted that proponents of subjective measures differ among themselves (Bruni, 2008, pp. 117-120; Tiberius, 2006, pp. 494-495). Yet, when it comes to the nature of subjective well-being and its relation to well-being *simpliciter*, existing literature fails to capture the degree of diversity, and disagreement, among proponents of subjective measures. The result is a false impression of homogeneity and an obstacle to fruitful communication and cooperation within and across disciplinary boundaries.

This paper examines the notion of “subjective well-being” as the term is used in literature on subjective measures of well-being. In the first instance, I wish to examine what subjective well-being is and how it relates to well-being *simpliciter*, I begin by exploring the accounts of well-being implicit in the literature on subjective measures – as well as the role that subjective well-being plays in those accounts – and proceed to examine what subjective well-being is thought to be.

My aim is to establish that proponents of subjective measures differ at least superficially on at least two points. First, they disagree about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*: about whether subjective well-being constitutes well-being *simpliciter* or merely a component of it. Second, they disagree about the nature of subjective well-being: about whether it is constituted by a cognitive, hedonic, emotional, or mood state, or some combination, and about whether to call that state “happiness,” “satisfaction,” or something else entirely. In an effort to

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<sup>2</sup> Following standard practice in the literature, I use “well-being” and “welfare” interchangeably.

reconcile these differences, I propose an interpretation according to which subjective measures presuppose *preference hedonism*: an account according to which well-being is a matter of desired mental states. This reading has not (to my knowledge) been explicitly endorsed by proponents of subjective measures. Yet, it succeeds in reconciling much that has been written about subjective measures and it has the additional advantage of attributing to proponents of subjective measure an account of well-being that has clear axiological foundations and is relatively plausible.

A proper appreciation of the nature of subjective well-being and its relation to well-being *simpliciter* is important for a variety of reasons. Among other things, such an appreciation can help both proponents and critics of subjective measures to develop clearer and more effective arguments. Proponents of subjective measures – like those who argue for the development of NWBAs – will want to identify the most plausible interpretation of these measures, so as to permit the development of as strong a case as possible in their favor. Critics – like those who argue for the superiority of traditional economic or capability-based measures – will want to zero in on the most plausible of subjective measures so as to avoid the charge that they are attacking a straw man. My hope is that in the end, a clearer appreciation for the foundations of subjective measures can help remove obstacles to scientific communication, collaboration, and progress.

## 2 Subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*

In this section, I explore the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter* in the writings on subjective measures. I will argue that proponents of subjective measures of well-being disagree about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*: about whether subjective well-being constitutes well-being *simpliciter* or merely a component of it.

As my starting point, I take the concept of well-being, that is, what I have so far called well-being *simpliciter*: “what we have when our lives are going well for us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good *for us*” (Tiberius, 2006, p. 493, italics in original). Let us call this the “core” concept of well-being. There are many other terms that are used in the same sense, including “a person’s good, benefit, advantage, interest, prudential value, welfare, happiness, flourishing, *eudaimonia*, and utility” (Moore and Crisp, 1996, p. 599). Because the concept of well-being is intended to capture what is ultimately – and not just instrumentally – good for the individual, it is also supposed to capture that which we have reason to promote – as an end and not just as a means – both in our own lives and in the lives of others. As Thomas Scanlon puts it:

It is commonly supposed that there is a simple notion of individual well-being that plays the following three roles. First, it serves as an important basis for the decisions of a single rational individual, at least for those decisions in which he or she alone is concerned (that is to say, in which moral obligations and concerns for others can be left aside). Second, it is what a concerned benefactor, such as a friend or parent, has reason to promote. Third, it is the basis on which an individual’s interests are taken into account in moral argument (Scanlon, 1998, p. 93).<sup>3</sup>

In particular, it is frequently assumed that well-being is one consideration – or, as some people would argue, the only consideration – that should serve as an end, and not just a means, for public policy.

Here I will take it for granted that when proponents of subjective measures talk about such measures as representing *well-being*, they use the term in the core sense (Angner, 2009a, in press). First, as indicated above, subjective measures are often presented as alternatives to other measures

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<sup>3</sup> Though Scanlon proceeds to criticize the view outlined in this passage, this does not change the fact that it is a nice characterization of the role that the concept of well-being is often supposed to play.

of welfare or well-being; this would make little sense if, in fact, subjective measures were not intended to represent that which the other measures were designed to represent, viz., welfare or well-being. Second, the proponents' concept of well-being plays the very same role as that played by the core concept: those who defend the use of subjective measures of well-being often emphasize that they think of well-being as that which is ultimately good for the individual, as that which is worth promoting in the life of others, and as a central (sometimes the only) ultimate goal for public policy (cf. Diener and Seligman 2004, quoted above). Third, a number of proponents explicitly cite classical philosophical literature in enthusiastic agreement while signaling that they use "well-being" and/or "happiness" in the same sense as philosophers do (Kahneman et al., 1997; Layard, 2005; Watson, 1930).

Over the years, philosophers have tried to shed light on the concept of well-being by developing and defending various accounts, or conceptions, of well-being. Here, I follow Derek Parfit (1984, pp. 493-502) in dividing such accounts into three main classes: *mental-state accounts*, *preference-satisfaction* or *desire-fulfillment accounts*, and *objective-list accounts*.<sup>4</sup> According to mental-state accounts, well-being is a "mental state" or a "state of mind." Because these accounts all see welfare "as having to enter our experience," they are said to satisfy the *experience requirement* (Griffin, 1986, p. 13). Scanlon writes: "Experiential theories hold that the quality of life 'for the person who lives it' is completely determined by ... its experiential quality," where "experiential quality" refers to "what it would be like to live it" (Scanlon, 1998, pp. 97, 99). On this view, then, subjectively felt experience is both necessary and sufficient for a person's well-being. According to desire-fulfillment or preference-

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<sup>4</sup> This tripartite division is standard but not unproblematic; below, we will see examples of accounts that do not fit neatly into any of the three categories.

satisfaction accounts, by contrast, a person is well off to the extent that her desires are fulfilled and/or her preferences are satisfied. Scanlon puts it this way:

Desire theories reject the experience requirement and allow that a person's life can be made better and worse not only by changes in that person's states of consciousness but also by changes elsewhere in the world which fulfill that person's preferences (Scanlon, 1993, p. 186).

Such accounts do not require that a person who is well off experience any feelings of happiness or satisfaction. What they do require is that her desires are fulfilled (or that her preferences are satisfied), which does not come down to the same thing. The two kinds of account described so far are frequently referred to as *subjective accounts*, because they describe a person's well-being as (at least partly) a function of his or her feelings, experiences, desires, and so on. According to so-called *objective accounts*, by contrast, a person's well-being does not depend on such subjective factors. On such accounts, "certain things are good or bad for beings, independently in at least some cases of whether they are desired or whether they give rise to pleasurable experiences" (Chappell and Crisp, 1998, p. 553). Identifying the list of things that are good for people regardless of what they want is notoriously difficult, but one provisional list of such things includes "moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty" (Parfit, 1984, p. 499). Obviously, there are many versions of accounts of each kind.

The tri-partite division permits us to capture a major difference between subjective measures of well-being, traditional economic welfare measures, and welfare indicators inspired by the capability approach. It has been noted elsewhere that traditional economic welfare measures are based on preference-satisfaction accounts of well-being (Angner, 2009a, 2009b, in press; Harsanyi, 1982; Hausman and McPherson, 2006). This is evident, among other things, from the fact that welfare

economists traditionally have defended their measures by showing that they are utility functions, that is, that they are indices of preference satisfaction. It has also been noted that measures inspired by the capability approach are based on objective list accounts of well-being (Nussbaum, 2008; Sen, 1987). This is clear, among other things, from the assumption that certain things – in particular, having a large capability set – are thought to be good for a person regardless of whether those things would make the person happier, and of whether the person desires them.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, it is fairly obvious that many proponents of subjective measures think of well-being as a mental state. There is abundant evidence, for one thing, that they adhere to the experience requirement. In the literature on subjective measures, well-being is often described as a matter exclusively of individual subjective, hedonic, or affective experience. For example, David G. Myers quotes Madame de la Fayette as saying: “If one thinks that one is happy, that is enough to be happy,” and adds that “like Madame de La Fayette, social scientists view well-being as a state of mind. Well-being, sometimes called ‘subjective well-being’ to emphasize the point, is a pervasive sense that life is good” (Myers, 1992, pp. 23, 27). Myers evidently takes well-being to be something thoroughly subjective; note, in particular, the use of the term “subjective well-being” as synonymous with “well-being.” The explicit reference to states of mind strongly suggests that what he has in mind is some type of mental state account.

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<sup>5</sup> See Gasper (this issue) and Veenhoven (this issue) for more about different conceptions of well-being and quality of life

Similarly, Ed Diener writes: “The area of subjective well-being ... is subjective.... [It] resides within the experience of the individual” (Diener, 1984, p. 543). Diener and Eunkook Suh reinforce the point:

Subjective well-being research ... is concerned with individuals’ subjective experiences of their lives. The underlying assumption is that well-being can be defined by people’s conscious experiences – in terms of hedonic feelings or cognitive satisfactions. The field is built on the presumption that to understand the individuals’ experiential quality of well-being, it is appropriate to directly examine how a person feels about life in the context of his or her own standards (Diener and Suh, 1997, p. 191).

Diener and Suh, like Myers and the authors to whom he refers, apparently use the term “well-being” interchangeably with “subjective well-being.” The fact that Diener and Suh argue that well-being is not only *concerned* with the individual’s subjective experiences, but *defined* by them, strongly suggests that they adhere to the experience requirement.

Several authors emphasize the subjective character of well-being, as they use the term, by contrasting subjective measures with “objective” ones, including social and economic indicators. Diener makes this point in the following way:

Notably absent from definitions of SWB [subjective well-being] are necessary objective conditions such as health, comfort, virtue, or wealth. Although such conditions are seen as potential influences on SWB, they are not seen as an inherent and necessary part of it (Diener, 1984, p. 543).<sup>6</sup>

This quote confirms that, in Diener’s work, an individual’s well-being is defined not by the objective circumstances in which she finds herself, but by her subjective experiences, though he allows the former to be causally responsible for the latter. Daniel Kahneman, who identifies well-being with happiness, adds that happiness – “is not to be confused with good fortune, which is an assessment

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<sup>6</sup> References have been omitted.

of the circumstances of someone's life" (Kahneman, 1999, p. 5). In Kahneman's view, it is possible to enjoy good fortune – presumably income, health, and so on – without having objective happiness. Angus Campbell (1976), quoted in Diener (1984, p. 543), expands on this point. Campbell maintains: "The gross national product, important as it undoubtedly is, is clearly not the ultimate touchstone against which the quantum of happiness in this country can be assessed" (Campbell, 1976, p. 117). He continues:

If we are primarily concerned with describing the quality of life experience of the population, we will need measures different from those that are used to describe the objective circumstances in which people live. We will have to develop measures that go directly to the experience itself. These *subjective* measures will surely not have the precision of indicators that are expressed in number of dollars, units of time, or numbers of square feet, but they will have the great advantage of dealing directly with what it is we want to know, the individual's sense of well-being (Campbell, 1976, p. 118, italics in original).

Quality of life, on Campbell's view, is a function of individuals' *sense* of well-being. If we want to study the quality of life, then, we need to study the individuals' *experience* of their lives, not the objective characteristics of their existence.

These writings clearly give pride of place to subjectively experienced mental states. Indeed, the evidence suggests that these authors adopt the experience requirement and think of well-being as constituted by some subjectively experienced mental state. They are best understood as using the term "subjective well-being" to denote the subjectively experienced mental state, so that well-being can be said to be constituted by subjective well-being. The notion that well-being is constituted by subjective well-being, by the way, explains the identification of "subjective measures of well-being" and "measures of subjective well-being."

Others, however, appear to resist the view that well-being is constituted by subjective well-being alone (cf. Angner, in press). Increasingly frequently, it is suggested that subjectively experienced mental states constitute but one component of well-being. For example, Kahneman writes:

Objective happiness is not proposed as a comprehensive concept of human well-being, but only as a significant constituent of it. Maximizing the time spent on the right side of the affect grid is not the most significant value in life, and adopting this criterion as a guide to life may be morally wrong and perhaps self-defeating as well. However, the proposition that the right side of the grid is a more desirable place to be is not particularly controversial...

Objective happiness is a common element of many conceptions of well-being (Kahneman, 2000, p. 691).

The point is clear enough: well-being has multiple components, of which “objective happiness” is only one (albeit an important one). A similar position is defended by Diener, Jeffrey J. Sapyta, and Suh, who use the term “subjective well-being” to denote the subjectively experienced component of well-being and who argue that although subjective well-being is not sufficient, it is “essential to well-being” (Diener, Sapyta, and Suh, 1998, p. 33; cf. Kesebir and Diener, 2008, p. 69). Seligman too can be attributed this view:

I use *happiness* and *well-being* interchangeably ... embracing both positive feelings (such as ecstasy and comfort) and positive activities that have no feeling component at all (such as absorption and engagement). It is important to recognize that “happiness” and “well-being” sometimes refer to feelings, but sometimes refer to activities in which nothing at all is felt (Seligman, 2002, p. 261).

In sum, all these passages all seem to express the notion that well-being has multiple components and that some subjectively experienced mental state constitutes one of these components. It is unfortunate that these authors do not say more about the number and nature of the remaining components, but it is quite clear that they need not be subjectively experienced mental states.

The idea that well-being has multiple components, though it does not fit neatly into Parfit’s taxonomy, has been defended by several modern philosophers. By the end of his discussion, Parfit

himself indicates that it might be possible to form a more plausible account of well-being by taking each of the three kinds of account as describing a necessary (but not individually sufficient) condition for well-being (Parfit, 1984, p. 501; cf. Haybron, 2008, p. 18). Parfit's suggestion appears to have been picked up by Simon Keller (2004), who writes that welfare – like physical fitness – is multi-dimensional. He believes that you can be better off (or fitter) *simpliciter* than I am without scoring higher along all the relevant dimensions; yet, there are cases in which we cannot say that either one of us is better off (fitter) because there is no fact to the matter. In Keller's view, one component of well-being is the achievement of one's goals, no matter what those goals are (Keller, 2004, p. 36). On my reading, authors like Kahneman can be understood as agreeing with Keller about the multi-dimensionality of well-being, although he may not be proposing the same components. Notice, however, that the two proposals are not incompatible.

In any case, these proponents of subjective measures still give pride of place to subjectively experienced mental states. The authors do not, however, treat well-being as constituted by a subjectively experienced mental state alone. Instead, they treat subjectively experienced mental states as constituting a mere component – albeit an important one – of well-being. These writers are best understood as using the term “subjective well-being” to denote that subjectively experienced mental state, so that subjective well-being can be said to constitute, not well-being, but a component of well-being.

The discussion in this section has shown that proponents of subjective measures of well-being appear to disagree about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*. Some think of well-being as constituted by some subjectively experienced mental state; they are best understood as using the term “subjective well-being” to denote the subjectively experienced mental

state, so that well-being can be said to be constituted by subjective well-being. Others think of some subjectively experienced mental state as constituting a mere component – albeit an important one – of well-being; they are best understood as using the term “subjective well-being” to denote that subjectively experienced mental state, so that subjective well-being can be said to constitute a component of well-being. Hence, proponents of subjective measures of well-being are not a homogeneous group: they disagree with each other about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*. Moreover, the citations above indicate that some people’s views may have evolved over time.

### 3 Subjective well-being

Whatever the exact relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*, proponents of subjective measures obviously put a great deal of emphasis on what they call “subjective well-being.” In this section, I explore the conception of “subjective well-being” in the literature. I will argue that proponents of subjective measures disagree about the nature of subjective well-being: about whether it is constituted by a cognitive, hedonic, emotional, or mood state, or some combination, and about whether to call that state “happiness,” “satisfaction,” or something else entirely.

Philosophers have considered a number of different mental states as potential constituents of subjective well-being. Following Bengt Brülde (2007), I will discuss four kinds of view.<sup>7</sup> First, there

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<sup>7</sup> These are often discussed as conceptions of happiness rather than subjective well-being (Haybron, 2000; Brülde, 2007). There is no assumption that the list is exhaustive; I discuss these four simply because they are the ones most likely to have been adopted by proponents of subjective measures.

are *cognitive* views, sometimes referred to as attitudinal views, according to which well-being is a cognitive state or attitude towards one's life as a whole. To be well off in this sense "is simply to evaluate one's own life in a positive manner, to approve of it, or to regard it favorably" (Brülde, 2007, p. 17). A special case is the view according to which subjective well-being is a matter of perceived desire satisfaction: the judgment that one's preferences are satisfied. Second, there are *affective* views, according to which subjective well-being is an affective state of some kind. There are at least two different kinds of affective views. On *hedonistic* views, subjective well-being is understood in terms of the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. On this account: "Human well-being consists in the pursuit of happiness and human welfare consists in living a life with a preponderance of pleasure over pain" (Plant, 1991, p. 143). On *mood* or *emotion* views, subjective well-being is a certain kind of mood or emotional state. Such a view will depend on one's definition of mood or emotion, but has been described as differing from hedonistic theories in that "it conceives of certain kinds of pleasant experiences (viz. pleasant moods) as more valuable ... than others, e.g. transient pleasant sensations" (Brülde, 2007, p. 20). Finally, there are what I will call composite views, according to which subjective well-being is a composite state, where the constituents could be cognitive and/or affective.<sup>8</sup> It goes without saying that there are multiple versions of each kind.

For many proponents of subjective measures, well-being is identical to happiness. Above, we saw how Campbell (1976, p. 117) was trying to measure the "quantum of happiness." According to Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: "Subjective well-being is a more scientific-sounding term for what people usually mean by happiness" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 9). There are passages in which Kahneman explicitly asserts that he uses "well-being" as a synonym for

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<sup>8</sup> Haybron (2000) and Brülde (2007) call some such view *hybrid* views.

“happiness.” He writes: “We distinguish two notions of happiness, or well-being (the two terms are used interchangeably in this chapter)” (Kahneman, 1999, p. 5). “Happiness” was also the term used by Richard E. Easterlin (1974), who can be credited with bringing research on subjective well-being to the attention of economists. The contention that proponents of subjective measures think of subjective well-being in terms of happiness is strengthened by the fact that many of the questions that they ask their subjects explicitly ask about happiness. See, e.g., the questions quoted in the introduction.

In order to identify the account of subjective well-being adopted by these authors, however, we need to clarify what they mean by “happiness.” Many of the relevant writings suggest that happiness is thought of in terms of affect. Certainly, this contention is supported by Kahneman’s mention of the desirability of staying on the “right side” of the “affect grid” (Kahneman, 2000, p. 691, quoted above) and his use of the term “affective well-being” (Kahneman et al., 2004, p. 433).<sup>9</sup> For an earlier examine, consider a 1954 article by Herbert Jeremy Goldings: “Happiness and unhappiness may be considered as zones on a continuum of hedonic affect” (Goldings, 1954, p. 31). It appears, then, that these authors can accurately be described as adopting an affective view of happiness and subjective well-being.

Yet we also want to know to what kind of affect theory these writers are committing themselves.

Some have talked about mood as opposed to pleasure (e.g., Myerson, 1918, p. 344; Neugarten et al., 1961, p. 137). Some have talked about emotion; thus, Ernest W. Burgess and Leonard S. Cottrell rely on *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, which defined happiness as “a state of well-being

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<sup>9</sup> See also the definition of Campbell et al. (1976, 8) below.

characterized ... by dominantly agreeable emotion” (Burgess and Cottrell, 1939, p. 31). These thinkers, therefore, can be understood as adopting a mood or emotion view of happiness and subjective well-being. Most affect theorists, however, are best understood as adopting a hedonist view. This is certainly true in the case of Goldings and his talk about “hedonic affect” (Goldings, 1954, p. 31, quoted above). Some recent work strongly suggests that happiness is understood in terms of pleasure (cf. Chekola, 2007, p. 56). Kahneman draws a distinction between subjective and objective well-being: “*Subjective happiness* is assessed by asking respondents to state how happy they are. *Objective happiness* is derived from a record of instant utility over the relevant period” (Kahneman, 1999, p. 5, italics in original). And he writes: “Being pleased or distressed is an attribute of experience at a particular moment. I will label this attribute *instant utility*” (Kahneman, 1999, p. 4). Presumably, instant utility is identical to subjective happiness.

Not all proponents of subjective measures are affect theorists, however, and many of them appear to think about subjective well-being in terms of cognition. One early example is Arnold M. Rose, who asks his subjects: “In general, how satisfied are you with your life?” and offers them a list of five alternative answers: “Very dissatisfied,” “Somewhat dissatisfied,” “About average,” and so on (Rose, 1955, p. 15). A cognitive view is implicit in the work of Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B. Withey, whose book *Social Indicators of Well-Being: Americans’ perceptions of life quality* (1976) was a major contribution to the study of well-being in psychology. Their preferred measure of well-being, known as the “Delighted-Terrible Scale,” asks subjects “How do you feel about your life as a whole?” and gives them seven response categories ranging from “Delighted,” “Pleased,” and “Mostly satisfied,” through “Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)” to “Mostly dissatisfied,” “Unhappy” and “Terrible” (Andrews and Withey, 1976, p. 18). Very often, the cognitive state in question is referred to as “life satisfaction” or simply “satisfaction,” though sometimes it is referred to as “happiness” as

well. Thus, Ruut Veenhoven writes that “‘happiness’ or ‘life satisfaction’ denotes the degree to which people judge the overall quality of their life favourably” (Veenhoven, 1988, p. 334).

We have already discovered a great deal of heterogeneity among proponents of subjective measures, in that some think of subjective well-being in terms of affect – whether in terms of mood, emotion, or pleasure – while others think of it in terms of cognition. Yet, all of these proposals implicitly agree that subjective well-being is to be understood as one homogeneous mental state of some kind. Not all proponents of subjective measures take this line.

Frequently, proponents of subjective measures adopt a view according to which both affective and cognitive states matter. Thus, Diener writes that “subjective well-being (SWB) includes both cognitive judgments and affective reactions” (Diener, 2001, p. 16451). Such views go back to psychologists like Campbell, Philip E. Converse, and Willard L. Rodgers (1976), who note that happiness and satisfaction scores are not perfectly correlated and infer that satisfaction is a “judgmental or cognitive experience” whereas happiness is an “experience of feeling or affect” (Campbell et al., 1976, p. 8). Tal Ben-Shahar (2007, chapter 3) defines “happiness” as a matter of both feelings of pleasure and a sense of meaning, where the former has a clear affective and the latter a clear cognitive flavor. Hence, authors who base their measures of well-being on both happiness and satisfaction scores can be understood as adopting a composite view according to which subjective well-being has a dual character: an affective component referred to as pleasure or happiness and a cognitive component referred to as satisfaction.

Other writings suggest that subjective well-being is even more complex. Norman M. Bradburn and David Caplovitz (1965) take subjective well-being to be constituted by three irreducible components:

positive affect, absence of negative affect, and satisfaction. Others appear to allow for a greater number. Hence: “Well-being, which we define as people’s positive evaluations of their lives, includes positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction, and meaning” (Diener and Seligman, 2004, p. 1; cf. Kesebir and Diener, 2008, pp. 66-67). The emphasis on evaluations indicates that the two might be endorsing a pure cognitive view. Yet, this passage can also be read as adopting a composite view, according to which subjective well-being is constituted by all mental states that satisfy the description “positive evaluation,” which are not necessarily assumed to have a purely cognitive nature. In this case, the composite state in question could potentially have many components.

In this section we have seen that proponents of subjective measures disagree about the nature of subjective well-being. Some think of subjective well-being in terms of affective states: possibly in terms of moods and emotions, but typically in terms of hedonic experience. Some think of subjective well-being in terms of cognitive states: as an overall evaluation of, or general attitude to, one’s life. Some appear to adopt composite views, according to which subjective well-being has several irreducible components, some of which may be affective and some of which may be cognitive. That is, while some proponents argue that subjective well-being is one homogeneous, subjectively experienced mental state, others argue that it is a heterogeneous state consisting of some combination of affective and/or cognitive states. Moreover, people disagree about whether to call that state “happiness,” “satisfaction,” or something else entirely.

#### **4 An alternative interpretation**

In the previous two sections, we have seen that proponents of subjective measures disagree (at least superficially) on at least two different points: first, about the relationship between subjective well-

being and well-being *simpliciter*, and second, about the constituents of subjective well-being. In what follows, however, I will propose that it is possible to reconcile much of what has been written about subjective measures by thinking of subjective measures as representing an account of subjective well-being that has come to be known as *preference hedonism*.

Preference hedonists agree that well-being is a matter of pleasure, but they reject the notion that pleasure is a homogeneous mental state. Parfit writes:

What pains and pleasures have in common are their relations to our desires. On the use of 'pain' which has rational and moral significance, all pains are when experienced unwanted, and a pain is worse or greater the more it is unwanted. Similarly, all pleasures are when experienced wanted, and they are better or greater the more they are wanted. These are the claims of *Preference-Hedonism*. On this view, one of two experiences is more pleasant if it is preferred (Parfit, 1984, p. 493, italics in original).

Setting aside questions about the definition of pleasure, the important point to is that according to this view, the well-being of an individual is constituted by whatever mental state she desires. Scanlon puts the central idea as follows: “[The] experience of living a life is made better by the presence in it of those mental states, whatever they may be, which the person living the life wants to have, and is made worse by containing those states which that person would prefer to avoid” (Scanlon, 1993, p. 186).

Accounts like preference hedonism are sometimes referred to as *eclectic*, because they combine psychological states with preferences; thus: “Utility’ we could say, is ‘desirable consciousness,’ meaning by ‘desirable’ either consciousness that we actually desire or consciousness that we would

desire if we knew what it would be like to have it” (Griffin, 1986, p. 9).<sup>10</sup> In spite of its eclectic nature, preference hedonism remains a mental state account because it satisfies the experience requirement: an event affects a person’s well-being if, but only if, it enters her experience. In passing, the desired state may of course differ across people and over time; in this sense, the state that constitutes well-being for one person at one time need not be the same as the state that constitutes well-being for another person at that time, or for the same person at another time.

Proponents of subjective measures of well-being can easily be understood as presupposing an eclectic account of subjective well-being. Those who think of subjective well-being in terms of happiness can be interpreted as preference hedonists who believe that people want to be happy. Those who think of subjective well-being in terms of satisfaction can be understood as preference hedonists who believe that people want to be satisfied. And those who think of subjective well-being in terms of multiple positive evaluations can be read as preference hedonists who think that people desire such things.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that some proponents of subjective measures have argued that people in fact want to be happy, satisfied, and so on. In his pioneering 1930 paper, Goodwin Watson wrote: “No human quest may claim a larger following than that for happiness and satisfaction in life” (Watson, 1930, p. 79). Michael Argyle opens his book *The Psychology of Happiness* by writing: “It does not really need to be proved that most people, perhaps all people, want to be happy. However there is [sic] data to prove it” (Argyle, 2001, p. 1). Pelin Kesebir and Diener argue that national and international studies show “that almost all people rate happiness as very important

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<sup>10</sup> As this quote indicates, there are many different kinds of eclectic account too.

or extremely important” (Kesebir and Diener, 2008, p. 69). Watson, Argyle, Kesebir, and Diener could easily be interpreted as preference hedonists who believe that people desire happiness and/or satisfaction. If this interpretation is sustainable, the fact that some authors assess subjective well-being in terms of happiness and others assess it in terms of satisfaction need not reflect a disagreement about the nature of subjective well-being or well-being *simpliciter*; instead, the difference may be traced to a disagreement about what subjectively experienced states people in general desire.

The interpretation of proponents of subjective measures as preference hedonists has much to be said for it. It is true that this reading has not (to my knowledge) been explicitly endorsed by proponents of subjective measures. Yet, it succeeds in reconciling much that has been written about subjective measures of well-being. Because preference hedonism has a principled answer to the question of why we value certain mental states, this interpretation attributes to proponents of subjective measures a view that has clear axiological foundations. And because preference hedonism is widely considered a more plausible account of well-being than simple mental state accounts, this interpretation has the advantage of attributing to proponents of subjective measures a relatively plausible account of well-being. Finally, because preference hedonism permits us to determine who is well off and who is not even if we do not know, e.g., the true nature of happiness, preference hedonists can skirt issues that proponents of simple mental state accounts simply cannot avoid.

While the interpretation I propose succeeds in reconciling much that has been written about subjective measures, however, it does not remove all disagreement between various proponents of subjective measures of well-being. First, it does not resolve the tension between those who think of subjective well-being as constituting well-being *simpliciter* and those who think of the former as

constituting a component of the latter. Second, it locates the disagreement between those who favor measures of happiness, those who favors measures of satisfaction, and so on, in their beliefs about what subjectively experienced states people desire. It is worth noting, though, that the latter disagreement concerns matters of empirical fact; as such, it should at least in principle be resolvable through scientific means.

## 5 Discussion

In this paper, I have explored the notion of “subjective well-being” as the term is used in literature on subjective measures of well-being. The increasing visibility of subjective measures of well-being, and the coordinated effort to promote their use as a guide in public policy making, means that an assessment of their advantages and disadvantages is highly motivated. Whether one aspires to defend or to criticize subjective measures, a better grasp of what they are thought to represent should permit the development of more informed – and therefore, one hopes, more convincing – assessments of these measures and the scientific edifice built upon their foundation.

In the above, I argued that proponents of subjective measures differ at least superficially on at least two points. First, they disagree about the relationship between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*: about whether subjective well-being constitutes well-being *simpliciter* or merely a component of it. Second, they disagree about the nature of subjective well-being: about whether it is constituted by a cognitive, hedonic, emotional, or mood state, or some combination, and about whether to call that state “happiness,” “satisfaction,” or something else entirely. In an effort to reconcile these differences, I proposed an interpretation according to which subjective measures presuppose *preference hedonism*: an account according to which well-being is a matter of desired mental

states. This reading has not (to my knowledge) been explicitly endorsed by proponents of subjective measures. Yet, it succeeds in reconciling much that has been written about subjective measures and it has the additional advantage of attributing to proponents of subjective measure an account of well-being that has clear axiological foundations and is relatively plausible.

One obvious caveat is that interpreting the writings of psychologists and economists is a non-trivial task. The project requires interpretation of writings that are both vague and ambiguous, and which in at least some cases have evolved over time, which means that some indeterminacy will remain.

The best I can hope to achieve here is to attribute to each proponent of subjective measures of well-being the simplest account of well-being that is consistent with his or her writings on the matter, and this is what I have sought to do.

In the introduction, I argued that a proper appreciation of the nature of subjective well-being and its relation to well-being *simpliciter* is important for a variety of reasons. Among other things, such an appreciation can help both proponents and critics of subjective measures to develop clearer and more effective arguments. Proponents of subjective will want to identify the most plausible interpretation of these measures, so as to permit the development of as strong a case as possible in their favor; if it is true that preference hedonism is the most plausible account of well-being that is consistent with the use of subjective measures, proponents may want to adopt it explicitly.

Meanwhile, critics will want to zero in on the most plausible of subjective measures so as to avoid the charge that they are attacking a straw man; gain, if preference hedonism is the most plausible account of well-being that is consistent with the use of subjective measures, then critics should aim to attack it rather than any of the less plausible accounts. Either way, a proper appreciation of what these measures represent is critical, whether one aspires to defend or criticize them. My hope is that

in the end, a clearer appreciation for the foundations of subjective measures will help remove obstacles to scientific communication, collaboration, and progress.

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