

ARE SUBJECTIVE MEASURES OF WELL-BEING “DIRECT”?

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Subjective measures of well-being – measures based on answers to 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?” – are often presented as superior to more traditional economic welfare measures, e.g., for public policy purposes. This paper aims to spell out and assess what I will call the *argument from directness*: the notion that subjective measures of well-being better represent well-being than economic measures do because subjective measures (and subjective measures alone) are *direct* measures of well-being. My main thesis is that the argument begs the question against proponents of economic measures: it is based on a premise that they reject and that is no less in need of justification than the conclusion of the argument, namely, the proposition that well-being is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states. If subjective measures can be defended as valid measures of well-being at all, I will maintain, it is because they are (imperfect) *indirect* measures of well-being.

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1 Introduction

Happiness, satisfaction, and other ‘positive’ or desirable states – conceived of as subjectively experienced mental states – have become the object of serious empirical study in psychology, economics, medicine, and elsewhere [Diener and Seligman 2004; Kahneman et al. 2004b; Tiberius 2006; Angner 2009a; 2009b]. While the very concept of systematic empirical happiness research is often greeted with disbelief [Garton Ash 2009], the research project can trace its roots back to the early twentieth century. By now, centres of happiness research include Harvard and Princeton, and empirical results appear in publications like *Science* and *The British Medical Journal*. Much of this work takes place under the heading of ‘subjective well-being’, a term that serves as a placeholder for whatever subjectively experienced mental state attracts the author’s attention [Diener 1984]. In recent years, the study of subjective well-being has received additional impetus from the emergence of ‘positive psychology’: a movement motivated by the belief that traditional psychology has spent an inordinate amount of time examining pathology and that positive emotional states are no less worthy of study [Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000].

The scientific study of mental states like happiness depends critically on the notion that such states can be reliably and validly measured. Though researchers have experimented with a wide variety of measurement techniques, virtually all contemporary work is based on one or more questions like: ‘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: 411, italics in original]. Or, 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: 151]. Other researchers have invited responses using graphic representations like horizontal lines [Watson 1930], ladders and mountains [Cantril 1965], as well as happy and sad faces [Andrews and Withey 1976]. Answers – which may be elicited during personal interviews, over the phone, or using technological aids like Palm Pilots – are used to compute single numerical measures of both individual and social well-being. Proponents maintain that these measures have been shown to be reliable and valid by comparing the scores to frequency of smiling, absence of suicide attempts, other people’s judgments, and so on, in accordance with standard practice in psychology [Diener et al. 2009].

On the basis of such measures, researchers claim to have established a range of empirical phenomena. Many studies have found that happiness as a function of income is increasing at a sharply diminishing rate, meaning that the average increase in happiness generated by an additional dollar is considerably larger for the poor than for the rich [Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008]. Other studies have found that objective health indicators – including physicians’ health ratings and comorbidity counts – are poor predictors of happiness (exceptions include conditions that disrupt daily functioning, like urinary incontinence and social hearing handicap); by contrast, subjective health measures – measures reflecting the subject’s own assessment of his or her health status – have been found to be excellent predictors of happiness [Diener and Seligman 2004; Angner et al. 2009]. One longitudinal study found that happiness is so contagious that the effects of an individual’s happiness can be detected at up to three degrees of separation, that is, among the friends of her friends’ friends [Fowler and Christakis 2008].

Some explore the causes and correlates of happiness, satisfaction, and the like because they are interested in the topic for its own sake. But what makes the study of happiness, etc., different from

the study of any number of other psychological constructs (like intelligence, optimism, hope, and so on), and what makes it particularly interesting from a philosophical perspective, is the fact that measures of happiness, etc., are often treated as measures of welfare or well-being *simpliciter* (see section 2). I am using these terms synonymously and in the sense familiar to philosophers: ‘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: 493, italics in original]. The concept of well-being, as it is used here, is typically assumed to represent that which we have reason to pursue in our own lives and to promote in the lives of others (at least in cases when the individual himself or herself is concerned), as well as the currency in which individual interest is taken into account in moral argument [Scanlon 1998: 93]. Because measures of happiness and the like – that is, measures of subjective well-being – are thought to represent well-being *simpliciter*, they are also referred to as *subjective measures of well-being* [Campbell 1976].

Subjective measures are frequently compared to traditional economic measures, including measures of national income, consumer surplus, as well as equivalent and compensating variation. A host of prominent authors have argued that subjective measures better represent well-being than economic measures do; that the former should replace or complement the latter for purposes of the articulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policy; and that governments should establish *National Well-Being Accounts* tracking the subjective well-being of the population as a guide for public policy [Diener 2000: 40-1; Diener and Seligman 2004: 21-2; Kahneman et al. 2004a; 2004b]. More recently, economists, philosophers, and others have started to push back; thus, authors like Matthew Adler and Eric A. Posner [2008] and Martha C. Nussbaum [2008] maintain that it would be a mistake to reorient public policy so as to maximize subjective well-being. Since subjective measures

suggest rather different answers to questions about the determinants and distribution of well-being as compared to economic indicators, the choice has considerable policy implications.

In defence of subjective measures, perhaps the most common argument is based on the idea that subjective measures (and subjective measures alone) are *direct* measures of well-being, or as I will say for short, that subjective measures are *more direct* measures of well-being. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener and Norbert Schwarz, for example, charge that ‘economics assesses variables that are only indirect indicators of something else – of subjective fulfillment’ [Kahneman et al. 1999: xii]. Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman write: ‘Although economics currently plays a central role in policy decisions because it is assumed that money increases well-being, we propose that well-being needs to be assessed more directly, because there are distressingly large, measurable slippages between economic indicators and well-being’ [Diener and Seligman 2004: 1]. Using the term ‘experienced utility’ to refer to subjective well-being, Kahneman and colleagues clarify: ‘Direct measures of experienced utility become particularly relevant in a context of bounded rationality’ [Kahneman et al. 2004a: 429]. Frank M. Andrews and John P. Robinson contrast subjective measures with other psychological indicators:

Subjective well-being is important as a psychological summing up of the quality of an individual’s life in society. Several social psychological concepts tap aspects of the quality of life indirectly, such as self-esteem, depression, locus of control, or alienation, but only life satisfaction and happiness have a ‘bottom-line’ finality in terms of consequences for the individual [Andrews and Robinson 1991: 61].

Norman M. Bradburn and David Caplovitz defend subjective measures by saying that ‘self-reports have the eminently practical virtues of face validity, directness, and ease of use’ [Bradburn and Caplovitz 1965: 7]. A similar sentiment is endorsed by Diener and Eunkook Suh, who say that their research project is built on the assumption that ‘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: 191] and by Angus Campbell, who criticizes economic and social indicators as follows: "They describe the conditions of life that might be assumed to influence life experience, but they do not assess that experience directly' [Campbell 1976: 118].

The aim of this paper is to assess what I will call the *argument from directness*: the notion that subjective measures better represent well-being than economic measures do because subjective measures (and subjective measures alone) are direct measures of well-being. My main thesis is that the argument begs the question against proponents of economic measures. This is so because the argument is based on a premise that proponents of economic measures reject and that is no less in need of justification than the conclusion of the argument, namely, the proposition that well-being is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states. If subjective measures can be defended as valid measures of well-being at all, I will maintain, it is because they are (imperfect) *indirect* measures of well-being.

There are, I believe, several interrelated reasons why philosophers should care about the empirical research discussed here. First, as this paper illustrates, philosophical analysis can be highly relevant to scientific practice. Social and behavioural scientists frequently rely critically (though often implicitly) on fundamental theoretical commitments, e.g., about the nature of well-being. If so, what may seem to be a purely scientific question – e.g., about the directness and validity of welfare measures – cannot be settled except by identifying, articulating, and assessing such commitments, and philosophers are particularly well situated to perform this task. Second, empirical research can be highly relevant to philosophical argument. Many arguments in moral, social, and political philosophy rely critically on empirical assumptions, e.g., about the determinants and distribution of

well-being. If so, the soundness of philosophical arguments will hinge on the truth of empirical claims, and it behoves us to base our arguments on the best available evidence rather than on pre-theoretical prejudice. Finally, as pointed out above, the choice between measures of well-being has important policy implications.

2 The argument from directness

In this section, I attempt to articulate the argument from directness as presented by proponents of subjective measures of well-being. This is a non-trivial task, since the authors who invoke the idea of directness in support of subjective measures neither spell out the premises of their argument nor offer explicit definitions of central terms like ‘direct’. In addition, the relevant writings are often vague or ambiguous, and in some cases people’s views appear to have evolved over time. Hence, some indeterminacy is likely to remain.

Let us imagine that a proponent maintains that the fact that some subjective well-being measure M (and M alone) is a direct measure of well-being implies that M better represents well-being than some economic welfare measure M^* does. If so, I claim, we can reconstruct the argument as follows:

- (P1) M is a direct measure of well-being whereas M^* is an indirect measure of well-being.
- (P2) For all X , if M and M^* are measures of X , and if M is a direct measure of X whereas M^* is not a direct measure of X , then M better represents X than M^* does.

(\therefore) M better represents well-being than M^* does.

In what follows, I will justify my reconstruction of the argument by showing that there is direct and circumstantial evidence to the effect that those who endorse the argument from directness accept these premises.

The first premise says, among other things, that both subjective and economic measures are measures of welfare or well-being *simpliciter*. The main reason to think that those who endorse the argument from directness are committed to this proposition is the fact that proponents of subjective measures appears to defend a conception of well-being according to which well-being is constituted by subjective well-being. If so, it follows that a measure of the latter is also a measure of the former. It should be noted that conceptions of subjective well-being differ across authors: whereas many think of it as identical to happiness – as in the following quote: ‘Subjective well-being is a more scientific-sounding term for what people usually mean by happiness’ [Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 9] – others think of it as a cognitive, mood or emotion state, or as a composite of such states [Tiberius 2006: 494-495]. Still, many writings on subjective measures clearly presuppose the claim that whatever the preferred measure of subjective well-being is designed to represent – whether happiness, satisfaction, or something else – is constitutive of well-being *simpliciter*.¹

The thesis that proponents of subjective measures adopt a conception of well-being according to which well-being is constituted by subjective well-being is supported by the fact that many proponents use ‘well-being’ and ‘subjective well-being’ interchangeably. Kahneman, who defines subjective well-being in terms of happiness, writes that ‘happiness [and] well-being ... are used

¹ It is possible to maintain that subjective measures represent well-being *simpliciter* without presupposing that well-being is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states. Recently, some proponents of subjective measures have been moving toward this position. Section 4 below explores the implications of this move.

interchangeably in this chapter' [Kahneman 1999: 5]. David G. Myers claims: 'Well-being, sometimes called "subjective well-being" to emphasize the point, is a pervasive sense that life is good' [Myers 1992: 23]. Diener and Eunkook M. Suh write: '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' [Diener and Suh 1997: 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 an individual's subjective experiences, but is *defined* by them, strongly suggests that they treat well-being as constituted by subjective well-being.

It might be objected that these authors do not rely on the same concept of well-being as philosophers like Tiberius do. This objection, however, is undermined by the fact that proponents of subjective measures use 'well-being', 'subjective well-being', and 'happiness', etc., in much the same way as philosophers use 'well-being': as referring to 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. Tal Ben-Shahar – whose positive psychology course is known as the most popular course at Harvard – calls happiness 'the ultimate currency, the end toward which all other ends lead' [Ben-Shahar 2007: vii] and infers that it 'should be the determinant of our actions, the goal toward which all other goals lead' [Ben-Shahar 2007: 55]. Under the heading 'In Defense of Happiness', Pelin Kesebir and Diener appear to agree: 'Happiness is most likely the ultimate aim of human existence' [Kesebir and Diener 2008: 76]. Andrew Oswald makes a similar point: 'The relevance of economic performance is that it may be a means to an end. That end is ... the enrichment of mankind's feeling of well-being. Economic things matter only in so far as they

make people happier' [Oswald 1997: 1815]. The same idea is implicit in the quote from Andrews and Robinson, cited above, according to which 'only life satisfaction and happiness have a "bottom-line" finality in terms of consequences for the individual' [Andrews and Robinson 1991, 61]. Kahneman writes: 'In the present framework ... it is objective happiness [the area under the happiness curve] that matters. Policies that improve the frequencies of good experiences and reduce the incidence of bad ones should be pursued' [Kahneman 1999: 15]. Finally, Diener and Seligman assert: 'Our thesis is that well-being should become a primary focus of policymakers, and that its rigorous measurement is a primary policy imperative.... [We] propose that well-being ought to be the ultimate goal around which economic, health, and social policies are built' [Diener and Seligman 2004: 1-2].

The claim that proponents of subjective measures use the same concept of well-being as philosophers do is further supported by the fact that several proponents explicitly cite philosophical – especially classical utilitarian – literature in enthusiastic agreement [Nussbaum 2008: S81-S82]. Richard Layard, one of the most visible proponents of subjective measures of well-being, writes: '[Bentham] proposed that all laws and all actions should aim at producing the greatest possible happiness... I believe that Bentham's idea was right and that we should fearlessly adopt it and apply it to our lives' [Layard 2005: 111-112]. On the same note, the title of Kahneman, Peter P. Wakker, and Rakesh Sarin [1997] suggests that we go 'Back to Bentham'. Campbell refers to the ancient Greeks:

The attraction of the concept of happiness is certainly great, coming as it does from the early Greek identification of happiness with the good life and having as it does almost universal currency as a recognized, if not uniquely important, component of the quality of life experience [Campbell 1976, 119].

Similarly, Watson [1930, 79] may refer either to the utilitarians or the Greeks when he defends the study of happiness by quoting 'the highest ethics'.

Even if those who endorse the argument from directness do not think of well-being as constituted by subjective well-being, there are other reasons to think that they treat both subjective and economic measures as measures of welfare or well-being. The fact that subjective measures are presented as alternatives to, and improvements over, traditional economic welfare measures strongly suggests that the two kinds of measure are thought to represent the same thing. It would make little sense to argue that one measure better represents some attribute than another measure does if, in fact, the two measures were not both thought to represent that attribute. And economists since A. C. Pigou [1952] have been explicit about their desire to develop an index of welfare. Though economists disagree about the relative advantages and disadvantages of specific measures, they have been quite consistent in thinking of measures of national income, consumer and producer surplus, and so on, as measures of well-being or welfare [Hausman and McPherson 2006: 64; Mongin and d'Aspremont 1998: 382]. It is not a coincidence that the branch of economics that deals with such measures is called welfare economics.

The first premise also says that subjective measures are in some sense direct, and that economic measures are indirect, measures of well-being. As we saw in the introduction, those who endorse the argument from directness do describe subjective measures as direct, and economic and other measures as indirect, measures of well-being. It is, however, not entirely clear what it means to say that a measure is direct. In the absence of an explicit definition of 'directness', it is reasonable to assume that those who endorse the argument from directness, given that the majority of them are psychologists, use the term in accordance with the *APA [American Psychological Association] Dictionary of Psychology* [VandenBos 2007], which I take to be the most authoritative source available. The *APA Dictionary* defines a direct measure in the context of attitude measurement, saying that a direct

attitude measure is ‘any procedure for assessing attitudes that requires a person to provide a report of his or her attitude’ [VandenBos 2007: 283]. More generally, we might say that a measure M is a *direct* measure of a person P ’s state S if and only if M is based on P ’s report about whether (or to what degree) she is in S . Notice that this sense of ‘direct’ makes no mention of the nature of the causal chain connecting the measure with that which it is supposed to represent. Notice, also, that the definition itself makes no mention of the *validity* of the measure, that is, the degree to which the measure succeeds in representing that which it is supposed to represent [Garrett 1937: 324].

This interpretation of the term ‘direct’ is supported by the fact that the definition is broadly consistent with the manner in which psychologists use the term. According to a review of indirect (or *implicit*) measures in social cognition research: ‘What these various approaches have in common is that they all seek to provide an estimate of the construct of interest without having to directly ask the participant for a verbal report’ [Fazio and Olson 2003: 300]. The interpretation is also consistent with the manner in which proponents of subjective measures use the term. Given that subjective measures are based on people’s self-reports about mental states like happiness and satisfaction, the interpretation accounts for the fact that proponents of subjective measures think of them as direct. Given that economic measures and social indicators tend to be based on data regarding income, market choices, etc., the interpretation accounts for the fact that those who endorse the argument from directness describe economic measures and social indicators as indirect.

If this interpretation of ‘direct’ is right, it offers additional evidence that those who endorse the argument from directness adopt a conception of well-being according to which it is constituted by subjective well-being. Given the interpretation, a measure of well-being is direct just in case it is based on people’s own reports about their well-being. If well-being is constituted by (say) happiness,

it can be argued that a measure based on people's reports about their happiness is *ipso facto* based on people's reports about their well-being, which implies that the measure is indeed a direct measure of well-being. If well-being is not constituted by happiness, however, it is hard to argue that a measure based on people's reports about their happiness is a direct measure of their well-being. In arguing that subjective measures are direct measures of well-being, it appears, those who endorse the argument from directness are implicitly committing themselves to the view that well-being is constituted by happiness or some other subjectively experienced mental state.

The second premise says, roughly speaking, that direct measures tend to be valid. We have reason to assume that those who endorse the argument from directness accept some version of this idea.

Presumably, few think of directness as a value in itself; insofar as it matters at all, it matters because it implies some other desirable characteristic. And it is plausible to assume that the desirable characteristic in question is the degree to which the measure succeeds in representing that which it is designed to represent. But more to the point: given that the argument is based on the premise that subjective measures are more direct measures of well-being than economic measures are, and given that the conclusion of the argument states that the former better represents well-being than other measures do, for the argument to be valid some premise linking the two is required. The second premise, as I interpret it, serves this purpose. The argument would remain valid even if the second premise were narrowed down, e.g., by substituting 'well-being' for 'X'. Since my critique will focus on the (P1), however, the exact shape of (P2) will not matter.

If it is indeed true that proponents of subjective measures are committed to the idea that directness implies validity, this offers additional support for the interpretation of them as committed to the idea that subjective measures are measures of *well-being*. It is in principle possible to maintain that a

subjective measure is a direct measure of (say) happiness while denying that it is a direct measure of well-being, on the grounds that happiness and well-being are conceptually distinct. But in order to make this a premise in the argument from directness, the argument would also require a premise to the effect that direct measures of happiness tend to be valid measures of well-being, where happiness and well-being are conceptually distinct. And it is much easier to justify a claim of the form ‘the fact that M is a more direct measure of X implies that it is a more valid measure of X ’ than it is to justify a claim of the form ‘the fact that M is a more direct measure of X implies that it is a more valid measure of Y , where X and Y are conceptually distinct’. I assume that those who endorse the argument from directness accept the former, less tenuous alternative.

In this section, I have tried to reconstruct the argument from directness. Though some indeterminacy inevitably remains, I have argued that those who endorse the argument from directness think of both subjective and economic measures as measures of well-being; that they treat the former as direct, and the latter as indirect, measures of well-being; and that they use the same concept of well-being as philosophers do. In addition, we have seen that these premises are based on a particular conception of well-being, according to which well-being is constituted by subjective well-being: some subjectively experienced mental state, like happiness or satisfaction, or a composite. Hence, the strength of the claim that subjective measures are direct measures of well-being will hinge on the viability of simple mental-state accounts of well-being, that is, accounts of well-being according to which well-being is constituted by some subjectively experienced mental state.

3 The argument assessed

Let us begin the assessment of the argument from directness by examining the second premise: the proposition that directness implies validity. As psychologists know well, it is not in general the case that more direct measures are more valid. In fact, there are contexts in which direct measures are demonstrably less valid than properly designed indirect measures, as in the case of the measurement of prejudice [Fazio and Olson 2003]. However, I will not quarrel with this premise. In the specific case of subjective well-being, there is empirical evidence supporting the contention that direct measures are more valid. In the 1950's, Herbert Jeremy Goldings feared that direct measures of happiness and satisfaction might be subject to 'distortion' and developed an indirect measure of satisfaction or happiness by presenting subjects with photographs of faces with ambiguous expressions and by asking them 'to rate the satisfaction or dissatisfaction (happiness or unhappiness) of the people' [Goldings 1954: 34]. Because he expected subjects to project their own happiness onto the faces, he assumed that a person's responses could be treated as a measure of her happiness. Unfortunately, Goldings's results suggested that this indirect measure lacked validity. Since then, direct measures of subjective well-being have dominated the field.

Let us instead focus on the first premise: the proposition that subjective measures are, whereas economic measures are not, direct measures of well-being. In light of the preferred definition of 'directness', it seems correct to say that subjective measures are direct measures of that particular subjectively experienced mental state that the measures were designed to represent (whether happiness, satisfaction, or the like). According to the definition, a measure M is a direct measure of a person P 's state S if and only if M is based on P 's report about whether (or to what degree) she is in S . And in fact, subjective measures of happiness are based on people's own reports about the degree to which they are happy, subjective measures of satisfaction are based on people's own reports

about the degree to which they are satisfied, and so on. Thus, the measures quoted in the introduction, for example, are indeed direct happiness measures.

If in addition well-being were constituted by whatever subjectively experienced state that M represents, it seems fair to say that the first premise would be true and that M would be a direct measure of well-being whereas economic measures would not. For if M is a direct measure of (say) happiness, and happiness were constitutive of well-being, it does seem to follow that M would be a direct measure of well-being whereas traditional economic measures would not. To put it differently, *if* some simple mental-state account of well-being were correct, it appears that the first premise would be true.

That is a big *if*, however. The fact that the argument from directness relies critically (though implicitly) on the notion that well-being is constituted by subjective well-being means, I will argue, that those who endorse the argument beg the question against proponents of economic measures. According to *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, 'to beg the question' is to commit the fallacy 'of founding a conclusion on a basis that as much needs to be proved as the conclusion itself' [Burchfield 2004 (1926), 101]. Notice that what needs to be proved will typically depend on the context, and especially on the assumptions of the intended audience. In what follows, I will argue that those who endorse the argument from directness in the context beg the question in exactly this sense.

The proposition that well-being is constituted by some subjectively experienced mental state is one that proponents of economic measures reject. Unlike subjective measures, traditional economic measures are based on *preference-satisfaction* or *desire-fulfilment* accounts of well-being, according to which an individual is well off to the extent that her preferences are satisfied [Hausman and

McPherson 2006: 64; Adler and Posner 2008: S254]. Notice that having satisfied preferences is different from feeling satisfied; economic measures are intended to represent the former rather than the latter. Because utility is understood as an index of preference satisfaction [Mongin and d'Aspremont 1998: 382], economists can legitimately talk about utility without making any reference to subjective states like happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction. Anyway, the conception of well-being as constituted by subjectively experienced mental states is parochial in the sense that it is not shared by the intended audience.

Because proponents of economic measures largely reject the proposition that well-being is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states, this proposition is no less in need of justification than its conclusion. And how to defend it is hardly obvious. Philosophers, drawing on centuries of discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of simple mental-state accounts of well-being, virtually unanimously reject them [see Nussbaum 2008]. Recently, there have been efforts made to rehabilitate mental-state accounts; however, these authors modify the accounts by moving away from the idea that well-being is identical to subjectively experienced mental states, e.g., by demanding that happiness be 'authentic' or that pleasures be 'truth-adjusted' [Sumner 1996; Feldman 2004; Tiberius 2006: 497]. Thus, even these authors reject simple mental-state accounts of well-being such as those adopted by proponents of subjective measures. (In the next section, I will suggest that the notion that subjective measures are measures of well-being may be easier to defend than the notion that well-being is constituted by subjective well-being, and if so, the premise of the argument from directness is actually more in need of justification than its conclusion.)

It can be objected that I have failed to consider all the different ways in which one might define 'direct'. Because there is an indefinitely large set of possible definitions of any one term, discussing

them one by one would be impossible. My project here is simply to argue that the argument from directness fails *given* the sense of ‘directness’ that can most plausibly be attributed to those who endorse the argument. It is worth noting, though, that anyone aspiring to save the argument from directness by offering an alternative definition of ‘direct’ must show that, given his or her definition, it is the case (i) that subjective measures are direct measures of well-being, (ii) that economic measures are not direct measures of well-being, and (iii) that the directness of subjective measures gives us a reason to think of them as more valid. I doubt that there is a definition of ‘direct’ that satisfies all three conditions.

It may seem as though the problem can be avoided by moving to a conception of well-being according to which subjective well-being is merely one of several components of well-being *simpliciter*, so that subjective measures represent but one component of well-being. This suggestion is increasingly common in literature on subjective measures. 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’ [Kahneman 2000: 691]. Similarly, Diener, Jeffrey J. Sapyta, and Suh maintain that subjective well-being, though not sufficient, is ‘essential to well-being’ [Diener et al. 1998: 33; cf. Seligman 2002: 261]. Such a conception of well-being has some plausibility, and it has (apparently independently) been endorsed by a number of modern philosophers. Derek Parfit [1984: 501] suggests that it might be possible to form a more plausible account of well-being by seeing mental-state accounts as describing a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for well-being. Simon Keller [2004] compares welfare to physical fitness and argues that both are best understood as multi-dimensional [cf. Haybron 2008: 18].

The possibility that subjective measures may represent one component of well-being does suggest one sense in which subjective measures, while not properly speaking *direct*, can still be said to be *more direct* than other measures. It may be proposed that a measure M is a more direct measure of well-being than another measure M^* if M but not M^* is a direct measure of a component of well-being. If we accept this principle, and if some subjectively experienced mental state is indeed one component of well-being, then it can be argued that subjective measures are accurately described as more direct than other measures. Yet, whatever its merits, this move will not rescue the argument from directness. Again, it proceeds from a premise that proponents of economic measures reject – i.e., that subjective well-being is a component of well-being – and that is no less in need of justification than the conclusion of the argument.

In this section I have argued that the fact that the argument from directness relies critically (though implicitly) on the assumption that well-being is constituted by subjective well-being means that those who endorse the argument beg the question against proponents of economic measures. That assumption, which proponents of economic measures reject, is no less in need of justification than the conclusion of the argument from directness. Moreover, the problem cannot be avoided by moving to a conception of well-being according to which subjective well-being is a mere component of – and not identical to – well-being *simpliciter*.

4 Subjective measures as indirect measures of well-being

Obviously enough, the fact that the argument from directness begs the question against proponents of economic measures does not imply that the conclusion of the argument is false. In this section, I will discuss how it might be possible to defend the use of subjective measures. First, it should be

noted that nothing I have said undermines the idea that subjective measures can be used as direct measures of happiness, satisfaction, or whatever subjectively experienced mental state they were designed to represent. But beyond that, it may well be possible to defend subjective measures as measures of well-being. In what follows, I will claim that insofar as subjective measures can be defended as valid measures of well-being, it is because they are (imperfect) *indirect* measures of well-being.

Although much literature on subjective measures explicitly or implicitly presupposes that well-being (or one component of well-being) is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states, some happiness scholars appear to be moving away from that conception [Frey and Stutzer 2006]. And though much literature treats subjectively experienced mental states as ends in themselves, such states are increasingly presented as *means* to other desirable outcomes [Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener 2005]. Thus, Kesebir and Diener write: ‘A crucial discovery of happiness research in the last few years has been that happiness is not just an epiphenomenon, but plays a causal role in bringing about various benefits’ [Kesebir and Diener 2008: 70]. This idea is not new. Myers maintains that ‘human happiness is both an end – better to live fulfilled, with joy – and a means to a more caring and healthy society’ [Myers 1992: 21; cf. Ben-Shahar 2007: 33]. Passages like these can be read as implying that happiness is conducive to well-being *even if* happiness is not constitutive of (even a component of) well-being *simpliciter*. This line of argument would permit proponents to argue that a subjective measure can be treated as a measure of well-being without committing them to a conception of well-being according to which well-being is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states. Given the implausibility of such conceptions, this line of argument may offer a more plausible approach to defending subjective measures as measures of well-being.

Again, however, this line of argument does not rescue the argument from directness. If well-being is not constituted by subjectively experienced mental states, then subjective measures cannot properly be described as direct measures of well-being, as we have used that term. Rather, it appears, if subjective measures can be defended as valid measures of well-being at all, it is because they are (however imperfect) *indirect* measures of well-being, that is, because they succeed in representing well-being in spite of the fact that well-being is not constituted by subjectively experienced mental states. To put the point slightly differently: insofar as subjective measures can properly be described as direct, they cannot be seen as measures of well-being, and insofar as they are seen as measures of well-being, they cannot properly be described as direct.²

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined what I called the argument from directness and in the process tried to shed light both on what those who endorse the argument mean by ‘direct’ and on what conception of well-being underlies subjective measures of well-being. My main thesis is that the argument begs the question against proponents of economic measures: it is based on a premise that they reject and that is no less in need of justification than the conclusion of the argument, namely, the proposition that well-being is constituted by subjectively experienced mental states. The argument fails, then, not because it is inconsistent but because it is based on a parochial assumption, and is likely to appeal only to those who already believe that well-being is a matter of subjectively experienced mental states – which is the very issue at stake in the debate between proponents of traditional economic

² The question of the conditions under which it would be appropriate to rely on such measures is one that I leave aside for now. See Schokkaert [2007], Adler and Posner [2008], Nussbaum [2008], and Sen [2008] for useful recent discussions.

welfare measures and subjective measures of well-being. The argument cannot be rescued, I have claimed, by moving to alternative accounts of well-being, either by adopting a conception of well-being according to which subjective well-being constitutes but one component of well-being, or by adopting a conception of well-being in which subjectively experienced mental states play no essential role. Though I reject the argument from directness, my position allows that these measures can serve as direct measures of happiness, satisfaction, and other mental states, if not well-being, and also that they can serve as indirect – sometimes called *proxy* – measures for well-being properly understood.

Two caveats need to be reiterated. First, I do not maintain that all proponents think of subjective measures as measures of well-being in the sense in which philosophers use the term. Insofar as subjective measures are treated as measures of happiness, and the like, I have no objection to describing them as direct. Second, when it comes to my interpretation of psychologists' and economists' writings, some indeterminacy will inevitably remain. This is so in part because any translation of psychologists' and economists' writing into philosophers' language requires some degree of interpretation, but also because the relevant writings are often vague or ambiguous and some people's views appear to have evolved over time. While I do believe that my interpretation of the relevant writings is better supported than any alternative interpretation, I do not claim to have conclusive evidence for it.

Early on, I identified three reasons why philosophers should care about the empirical literature discussed here: (1) philosophical analysis can be highly relevant to scientific practice, (2) empirical research can be highly relevant to philosophical argument, and (3) the choice between measures of well-being has important policy implications. The discussion above serves to illustrate the first

reason: the fact that what may be described as traditionally philosophical considerations may be critical for answering what may (on the face of it) appear to be purely scientific questions. In the above, we have seen that questions about the directness of a given welfare measure hinges in part on the adequacy of alternative accounts of well-being. Much the same thing is true for questions of validity: because the validity of a measure is defined as the extent to which it measures that which it purports to measure, what is a valid measure of happiness, satisfaction, or well-being cannot be settled without making some assumption about the nature of these things. Hence, one of the upshots of this paper is that questions relating to the proper measure of well-being to be used e.g. for purposes of public policy will depend on traditionally philosophical questions, regarding e.g. the nature of well-being and measurement. In this domain, at least, philosophical reflection will remain critical to understanding the meaning and significance of scientific developments.

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