

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING:
WHEN, AND WHY, IT MATTERS

Erik Angner, PhD*

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* Contact information: Erik Angner, Dept. of Philosophy, Dept. of Economics, and School of Public Policy, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, 3F1, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA. Email: egangner@gmu.edu. This first draft of this paper was written while on a Gould Foundation grant at the Paris School of Economics, for which I am most grateful. I thank Daniel Hausman, Antti Kauppinen, Laura Sizer, Gitendra Uswatte, and Sam Wren-Lewis for useful feedback on earlier drafts. Errors remain my own.

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to give a principled answer to the question of under what conditions measures of *happiness* or *life satisfaction*, understood as subjectively experienced mental states, can serve as proxies for *well-being*. According to a widely held view, measures of happiness and life satisfaction represent well-being because happiness and life satisfaction are *constitutive* of well-being. This position, however, is untenable. Efforts to address this question in terms of Amartya Sen's capability approach have been similarly unsuccessful. Instead, I argue, happiness and life satisfaction matter because, and insofar as, people want to be happy and/or satisfied; consequently, measures of happiness and life satisfaction can serve as measures of well-being whenever happiness is sufficiently correlated with or causally efficacious in bringing about greater preference satisfaction. While this position entails a less expansive view of the uses of happiness and life satisfaction measures, I maintain that if their proponents were to take this line, many of the objections to their enterprise can be met.

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, & Feld, 1960, p. 411).¹ Using the term "subjective well-being" to denote that which they are supposed to represent, subjective measures of well-being are frequently referred to as *measures of subjective well-being* (Andrews & Robinson, 1991). Subjective measures are frequently presented as substitutes for, or complements to, more widely used welfare

¹ The literature offers several reviews of subjective measures of well-being (Angner, 2009a, 2009b; Campbell, 1976; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Tiberius, 2006).

indicators like Gross National Product (GNP) (Diener, 2000; Diener, Kesebir, & Lucas, 2008; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004b; Kesebir & Diener, 2008; Krueger, 2009). Since subjective measures suggest rather different answers to questions about the determinants and distribution of welfare as compared to other welfare indicators, a shift to subjective measures for public policy purposes could have potentially vast implications.

The very notion of systematic happiness research is often greeted with disbelief (Garton Ash, 2008). One line of criticism objects that subjectively experienced mental states like happiness and satisfaction cannot possibly be measured. Wilfred Beckerman, in a defense of GNP as a measure of welfare, claims that “[the] concept of happiness is one for which there can be no scientific objective measure” (Beckerman, 1975, p. 53). In response to this challenge, proponents of subjective measures argue that the general procedures that must be followed when validating a scientific measure are straightforward and uncontroversial, that widely used measures of happiness and satisfaction have passed the basic tests mandated by these procedures, and that those who would reject the validity of subjective measures have failed to marshal any empirical evidence against them (Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009, chap. 5). By now it is in fact widely acknowledged that subjective measures represent “something” (Schokkaert, 2007, p. 415); the question is *what*, exactly. For the purposes of the present paper, I will bracket these concerns and simply assume that measures of subjective well-being succeed, though imperfectly, in representing that which they were intended to represent.²

Another line of criticism maintains that subjective well-being has little to do with well-being *simpliciter*, that is, “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). Among philosophers, at

² See Angner (2012) for more about what subjective measures are designed to represent and for a longer discussion of measurement issues.

least, the notion that well-being is constituted by some particular subjectively experienced mental state is virtually unanimously rejected. The point is often made by reference to Robert Nozick's thought experiment of the *experience machine* – a device that would allow superduper neurophysiologists to stimulate one's brain so as to generate whatever experience one pleases – or to Amartya Sen's descriptions of destitute beggars, landless laborers, overworked servants, and subjugated housewives (Nozick, 1974, pp. 42–43; Sen, 1985, p. 15; cf. section 2 below) These examples are supposed to establish that people are not necessarily well off even though they may be happy or satisfied – either because the experience machine makes them so artificially or because they have “learned to have ‘realistic’ desires and to take pleasure in small mercies” (Sen, 1985, p. 14).

Nevertheless, subjective measures cannot be so easily dismissed. Daniel M. Haybron has argued that the science of subjective well-being, in spite of its flaws, helps address Socrates' question: “How should I live?” After chastising modern philosophy for having “little of significance to say” in response to this question, Haybron continues:

Luckily, empirical researchers have recently begun to say some interesting things about it, and by all indications we are on the verge of actually being able to answer it in substantial respects. After some two and a half millennia of unrelenting embarrassment, we may at last produce definitive answers to a great part of Socrates' question (Haybron, 2000, p. 208).

Even authors who have been sharply critical of many facets of the literature on happiness do not dismiss it outright. Martha Nussbaum, for example, admits: “Subjective states matter greatly” (Nussbaum, 2008, p. S107). And according to Sen himself: “It would be odd to claim that a person broken down by pain and misery is doing very well” (Sen, 1985, p. 12). Hence: “The perspective of happiness illuminates one critically important element of human living” (Sen, 2008, p. 26). This suggests that measures of happiness and the like have some evidential role to play: it is hard to deny that subjective measures of well-being may contain *some* information that can be used to assess

individual well-being and to identify its causes and correlates (cf. Sen, 1985, p. ix). This position is particularly plausible if subjective measures are compared to more established economic welfare measures, like GNP per capita, whose flaws are highly evident and well known. Hence, people like development economist Carol Graham infer that “happiness surveys can tell us things that purely income-based measures of progress do not, and this may shed light on how the *direction* and *nature* of progress affects well-being” (Graham, 2008, p. 85).

The purpose of this paper is to give a principled answer to the question of under what conditions measures of happiness and satisfaction, understood as subjectively experienced mental states, can serve as proxies for well-being *simpliciter*. I will operate under the assumption that the question of *when* happiness matters cannot be answered except in the context of a discussion about *why* it matters, which brings the discussion squarely into the domain of philosophy. While many writings in this area (frequently by economists and psychologists) proceed without addressing head-on philosophical questions about the nature of well-being, the resulting arguments are frequently less than compelling. Instead, I will proceed by examining how the answer can be addressed in light of traditional philosophical views about the nature of well-being. For simplicity, I will rely on Parfit’s (1984) distinction between *mental-state*, *desire-fulfillment* (or *preference-satisfaction*), and *objective-list* accounts, which though not free from problems, is perfectly standard (cf. Griffin, 1986, pt. 1). The discussion is divided into three sections, corresponding to the possibility of answering the question within each of the three main kinds of account.

My main thesis is that subjective measures can usefully be understood as representing well-being in the sense of preference satisfaction. Happiness and life satisfaction matter because, and insofar as, people want to be happy and/or satisfied; consequently, measures of happiness and life satisfaction can serve as measures of well-being whenever happiness is sufficiently correlated with or causally efficacious in bringing about greater preference satisfaction. While this position entails a less

expansive view of the uses of happiness and life satisfaction measures, I maintain that if their proponents were to take this line, many of the objections to their enterprise can be met.

It might be objected that the present project puts the cart before the horse, as it attempts to discuss welfare measurement without first establishing what the proper account of well-being is. Yet, there is good reason to proceed in this way. To begin with, the question of the conditions under which it is appropriate to rely on subjective measures as proxies for well-being is of crucial practical importance; while a consensus about the nature of well-being may not be instantly forthcoming, judgments about welfare and its measurement have to be made immediately. Moreover, it is at least conceivable that progress can be made on the *when* question even before the nature of well-being has been completely nailed down. But most importantly, the degree to which various accounts of well-being permit us to address fruitfully the *when* question is one consideration that can be used when assessing the accounts (Angner, 2009a). As James Griffin has argued:

We cannot just ask, What is the best account of well-being? ... Before we can properly explain well-being, we have to know the context in which it is to appear and the work it needs to do there... Nor can we first fix on the best account of "well-being" and independently ask about its measurement. One proper ground for choosing between conceptions of well-being would be that one lends itself to the deliberation that we must do and another does not (Griffin, 1986, p. 1).

The discussion about relative advantages of various welfare measures, for purposes of both science and policy, is undoubtedly one context in which the concept of well-being appears and is expected to do serious work. Taking Griffin's point seriously requires us to examine what account of well-being best lends itself to deliberation about the choice of welfare measure, as part of our effort to nail down the nature of well-being. Consequently, a discussion about the *measurement* of welfare can provide an important perspective on the *nature* of welfare.

2. Mental-state accounts

Mental-state accounts of well-being say that a person is well off to the extent that she is in some particular mental state or state of mind, like happiness or satisfaction. From the very beginning in the early twentieth century, happiness scholars appear to have been firmly committed to mental-state accounts of well-being. In his path-breaking 1930 paper, Goodwin Watson wrote:

No human quest may claim a larger following than that for happiness and satisfaction in life. Even the highest ethics tends to justify itself by its contribution to human happiness... It becomes, therefore, extraordinary almost beyond belief that so few attempts have been made to apply the techniques of psychological study to the understanding of happiness (Watson, 1930, p. 79).

The notes that Watson strikes have echoes throughout the modern literature on subjective well-being. Richard Layard, one of the most visible proponents of subjective measures of well-being, cites Jeremy Bentham: “[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 (Diener & Seligman, 2004, pp. 1–2) adopt it and apply it to our lives” (Layard, 2005, pp. 111–112). Tal Ben-Shahar – whose positive psychology course is billed as the most popular course at Harvard – calls happiness “the ultimate currency, the end toward which all other ends lead” (Ben-Shahar, 2007, p. vii) and infers that it “should be the determinant of our actions, the goal toward which all other goals lead” (Ben-Shahar, 2007, p. 55). Ed 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 & Suh, 1997, p. 191). As these quotes illustrate, many happiness scholars think of well-being in terms of mental states like happiness and satisfaction, and of happiness and satisfaction in terms of subjectively experienced mental states (cf. Angner, 2010).

This approach offers a clear and concise answer to the question of why and when happiness matters: happiness matters because it is constitutive of well-being, and it *always* matters – indeed, it is the only thing that matters. In an early contribution, Abraham Myerson tries to establish a field of study he called *eupathics*, which had “for its aim the *well being of the normal*” (Myerson, 1917, pp. 343–344); after asking rhetorically what was left out of this field, he answered: “nothing of consequence” (p. 346). In contemporary work, Daniel 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, p. 15). Moreover, Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman assert: “Our thesis is that [subjective] 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 & Seligman, 2004, pp. 1–2).

Yet, this approach was always hobbled by the fact that simple mental-state accounts have intolerably awkward implications. As we saw in the introduction, people like Nozick and Sen have both challenged simple mental-state accounts by offering examples of people who, they believe, could not possibly be characterized as well off even though they are perfectly happy, satisfied, and so on. In Griffin’s words:

I prefer, in important areas of my life, bitter truth to comfortable delusion. Even if I were surrounded by consummate actors able to give me sweet simulacra of love and affection, I should prefer the relatively bitter diet of their authentic reactions. And I should prefer it not because it would be morally better, or aesthetically better, or more noble, but because it would make for a better life for me to live (Griffin, 1986, p. 9).

Recently, however, the use of Nozick’s thought experiment has come under fire from Felipe De Brigard, who in empirical studies of philosophically innocent undergraduate students finds that

“people’s intuitions about the experience machine in fact are highly divergent” (De Brigard, 2010, p. 55) and by Torbjörn Tännsjö, who points out that “many people choose to use drugs they know are dangerous, such as alcohol, in spite of the fact that they know that it is difficult to give up the habit of using them” (Tännsjö, 2007, p. 94).³ We will return to this critique in section 4 below.

Ironically, the most consistent source of counterexamples to simple mental-state accounts of well-being is the science of happiness itself. Many of these examples are cases of *adaptation*. In a classic study, Philip Brickman, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1978) compared lottery winners and patients with spinal-cord injuries to people in a control group, and found that lottery winners were not significantly happier than the controls and that individuals with spinal-cord injuries “did not appear nearly as unhappy as might be expected” (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978, p. 921). The standard interpretation of these results is that both lottery winners and people with spinal-cord injuries over time adapt to their condition in the sense that their happiness returns to (in the case of lottery winners), or at least approaches (in the case of spinal-cord injuries), baseline levels. Cases like these appear to drive a wedge between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter*, since people with spinal-cord injuries appear worse off even if their happiness levels return to baseline levels as a result of adaptation. Other studies on health and happiness have found that while subjective health indicators – people’s own judgments about how healthy they are – are excellent predictors of happiness, objective health indicators – including physicians’ health ratings and comorbidity counts – are largely uncorrelated with happiness; exceptions include conditions that disrupt daily functioning, like urinary incontinence and social hearing handicap (Angner, Ray, Saag, & Allison, 2009; Diener & Seligman, 2004). The favored explanation of these phenomena is that people adapt to most medical conditions, with the exception of those that disrupt daily functioning.

³ While De Brigard (2010) and Tännsjö (2007) seek to undermine the experience machine objection to mental state accounts, neither attempts to develop a positive case for such accounts.

The most fascinating example of the phenomenon of adaptation apparently driving a wedge between subjective well-being and well-being *simpliciter* recently appeared in *Health Psychology* (Smith, Loewenstein, Jankovic, & Ubel, 2009). The authors tracked 71 patients with either irreversible or reversible colostomies, operations where the bowels are surgically diverted to void into a bag outside the body. The authors found that one week after the operation, as one would expect, patients with temporary colostomies were happier than those with permanent ones. Yet, over the course of a six-month period, those with permanent colostomies got progressively happier whereas those with temporary colostomies did not; indeed, from some point between one week and one month after the surgery on, patients with permanent colostomies were happier than those with temporary colostomies. It appears that patients with the permanent colostomies were able to adapt to their new condition and “move on,” whereas patients with the temporary ones were not. In the authors’ words: “These findings suggest that knowing an adverse situation is temporary can interfere with adaptation, leading to a paradoxical situation in which people who are better off objectively are worse off subjectively” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 787).

While people seem capable of adapting to a wide range of serious medical interventions and conditions – like permanent colostomies (in Smith et al., 2009), as well as arthritis, high cholesterol, hypertension osteoporosis, diabetes, and a history of cancer (in Angner et al., 2009) – people do not in general seem to adapt to having children. Having children has been found to be associated with lower happiness scores (Di Tella, MacCulloch, & Oswald, 2003). One time-use study found that in terms of affect – a common proxy for happiness – taking care of children ranked just above working, doing housework, and commuting, and just below napping, talking on the phone, cooking, and shopping (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004a). Yet, even if it is true that people’s subjective well-being goes down when they become parents, it seems a mistake to infer that

they are necessarily worse off: many people of course *want* children, and certainly think of themselves as better off as a result of having them.

Another set of counterexamples concern phenomena like *aspiration*. According to aspiration level theory, a person's happiness depends not just on her *attainment* – that is, what she succeeds in having, being, and doing – but also on her *aspiration level* – that is, what she seeks to have, to be, and to do. Because a person's attainment is evaluated in part by reference to the standard set by her aspiration level, all things equal, higher aspirations are associated with lower happiness (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Stutzer, 2004). Hence the paradox of “happy peasants and frustrated achievers” (Graham, 2009, p. 19). A similar effect has been found in the case of *John Henryism*: a behavioral predisposition to cope actively with stressors, which is thought to have three main components: (1) mental and physical vigor, (2) commitment to hard work, and (3) determination to succeed (James, 1994). A recent study shows that John Henryism is strongly negatively correlated with happiness: whereas individuals with John Henryism Scale of Active Coping scores in the lowest (12-16) range had a median happiness score of 6.25 on a 1-7 happiness scale, individuals in the 36-40 range had a median happiness score of 2.75 (Angner, Hullett, & Allison, 2011). Even if in fact happiness is a decreasing function of aspirations and the like, broadly construed, so that people lacking all aspirations are the happiest, it would seem a mistake to infer that they are the best off. It can be argued that people with no ambition fail to realize their potential, which is either good in itself or good because people want to realize their potential.

Increasingly, happiness scholars are becoming aware of both situations where people who are arguable well off are not happy (as in the case of lottery winners, parents, etc.) and situations where people are arguably not well off are happy (as in the case of people with minimal ambition, as well as people in the experience machine). Under pressure, some of these scholars are moving to a position where subjective well-being is thought to merely constitute one component of well-being,

rather than “all of” well-being (Angner, 2010). 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, p. 691). Similarly, Diener, Jeffrey J. Sapyta, and Suh maintain that subjective well-being, though not sufficient, is “essential to well-being” (Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998, p. 33). Citing Nozick’s experience machine, Diener and Christie Scollon maintain that subjective well-being “is not the sufficient and final good for which people strive, and to which all other desirable objects are merely a means” but that it “is one component of the good life” nevertheless (Diener & Scollon, 2003, p. 3).

The notion that well-being might have multiple components has been independently endorsed by a number of modern philosophers. Simon Keller (2004) compares welfare to physical fitness and argues that both are best understood as multi-dimensional. Some philosophers even suggest that some subjectively experienced mental state like happiness or satisfaction might be one of the components of well-being simpliciter. Parfit (1984, p. 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. Dan Haybron, who has written extensively on subjective measures, writes that in the face of scenarios like Nozick’s: “Most [philosophers] have tended toward the view that mental states comprise only a *part* of well-being” (Haybron, 2008a, p. 18). His own view is that “emotional state happiness serves as a central constituent of happiness” (Haybron, 2008b, p. 77).

This proposal succeeds in explaining why subjectively experienced mental states like happiness and satisfaction matters, and it is superficially more plausible that simple mental state accounts. Yet, it has similarly awkward implications. Many strands of Buddhism consider the pursuit of subjectively experienced mental states – like the pursuit of material wealth – to be an obstacle to *nirvana* (bliss), which requires the cleansing of one’s mind from attachment to all things and states

(Rahula, 1974). It would be odd, if not incoherent, to say that a Buddhist monk who has succeeded in reaching *nirvana* would be better off if he were also happy in the sense of a subjectively experienced mental state. More to the point, for present purposes, the proposal does not offer an adequate answer to the question of the conditions under which subjective measures can serve as proxies for welfare. While the proposal does entail that *ceteris paribus* people with higher happiness/satisfaction scores are better off, in reality the *ceteris paribus* clause rarely or never holds. As a result, this proposal fails to lend itself to the kind of deliberation that we need to do.

In conclusion, whereas the proposition that well-being is constituted by happiness offers a clear answer to the question of why and when happiness matters, the proposal has intolerably awkward implications. The proposition that happiness is but one dimension of well-being is far more plausible, though not obviously correct; yet, it fails to answer the question and therefore does not lend itself to the deliberation that we must do. Luckily, there are other proposals, to which we will turn next.

3. Objective-list accounts

Objective-list accounts of well-being say that some things – such as knowledge, rational activity, the development of one’s abilities, having children, awareness of true beauty, and the like – are good or bad for a person whether or not she wants those things or would be made happier by having them (Parfit, 1984, p. 499). The *capability approach*, due to Amartya Sen (1985), is the most prominent effort to develop a defensible objective-list account of well-being. The capability approach centers on the concepts of *functioning* and *capability*. In Sen’s own words:

Functionings are part of the condition of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do (or be) in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can attain, and from which he or she can choose one collection (Sen, 2008, p. 24).

Examples of functionings may include being adequately nourished, being in good health, achieving self-respect, and being socially integrated (Sen, 2008, p. 24). A person's capability is not the vector of functionings that a person actually attains, but the set of vectors of functionings that are available to her. What makes the capability approach an objective-list account of well-being is that it says that some things – to wit, capabilities – are good for us whether or not they will make us happier, and whether or not we desire them. As three prominent followers of Sen's put it, "capabilities and functionings have value in themselves: 'intrinsic value'" (Comim, Qizilbash, & Alkire, 2008, p. 10). Recently, there has been a spate of efforts trying to integrate happiness studies with the capability approach.⁴ Here, I will discuss two serious attempts at trying to explain why, and when, happiness matters within the framework provided by the capability approach.

In a 2007 paper, Erik Schokkaert argues that measures of happiness and/or life satisfaction can be used to solve the *indexing problem*: "the challenge of bringing together the different functionings in one overall measure of individual well-being" (Schokkaert, 2007, p. 416). Because there is a vast – perhaps uncountable – number of functionings, any measure of a person's capability is necessarily wildly multi-dimensional. If we wish to transform this multi-dimensional capability measure into a one-dimensional welfare measure, then, we need some principled way to index the capabilities. Sen (1982, p. 368) himself has described the problem as "a serious one," and in Schokkaert's view: "An adequate theory of capabilities needs a good answer to the question how to construct an individual index of well-being" (Schokkaert, 2007, p. 428). In a nutshell, Schokkaert's proposal is to construct an index based on the effect of various functionings on life satisfaction (Schokkaert, 2007, p. 423). Other than solving the indexing problem, Schokkaert's proposal would

⁴ See, for example, the recent volume titled *Happiness and Capability* (Bruni, Comim, & Pugno, 2008) and the 2010 special issue of the *Journal of Socio-Economics* 39(3), edited by André van Hoorn, Ramzi Mabsout, and Ester-Mirjam Sent.

also give a principled answer to the question of why, and when, happiness and/or life satisfaction matters.

However, this proposal is inconsistent with both the spirit and the letter of the capability-approach, with its emphasis on things that are good for us whether they make us happy or not. As Sen puts it: “A person who is ill-fed, undernourished, unsheltered and ill can still be high up in the scale of happiness or desire-fulfillment if he or she has learned to have ‘realistic’ desires and to take pleasure in small mercies” (Sen, 1985, p. 14). He continues:

The destitute thrown into beggary, the vulnerable landless labourer precariously surviving at the edge of subsistence, the overworked domestic servant working round the clock, the subdued and subjugated housewife reconciled to her role and fate, all tend to come to terms with their respective predicaments. The deprivations are suppressed and muffled in the scale of utilities (reflected by desire-fulfillment and happiness) by the necessity of endurance in uneventful survival (Sen, 1985, pp. 14–15).

The whole point of the capability approach is to permit the judgment that some things are good independently of whether they make people happy: this is a feature of the capability approach, not a bug. Even if the ability to read and write would make the destitute, vulnerable, and subjugated less happy – perhaps because it would make them realize the extent of their deprivation – the capability approach would insist that the larger capability set makes them better off. Hence, there is a sense in which Schokkaert’s proposal to index functioning based on their effect on happiness or life satisfaction represents the abandonment of the capability approach rather than a development of it.⁵

The second proposal comes from Amartya Sen himself. Sen motivates paying attention to happiness in the following way:

⁵ Schokkaert (2007, p. 427) recognizes that phenomena like adaptation causes problems for his approach, and outlines (but does not develop) several possible solutions.

[Happiness] is extremely important, since being happy is a momentous achievement in itself. Happiness cannot be the only thing that we have reason to value, nor the only metric for measuring other things that we value, but on its own, happiness is an important human functioning (Sen, 2008, p. 26).

Sen conceives of happiness as one of many human functionings: one thing that we can do or be. What a measure of happiness reflects, then, is the extent to which a person has attained this particular functioning. Sen continues: “The capability to be happy is, similarly, a major aspect of the freedom that we have good reason to treasure” (Sen, 2008, p. 26). To say that happiness is an important functioning is not to say being happy is a *sine qua non* of well-being: what matters from the capability perspective is not whether people attain happiness but whether happiness is attainable for them, that is, if it is one of the functionings in the vectors that constitute the capability set.

Sen’s proposal is not implausible. It permits us to say that the Buddhist monk who rejects the pursuit of happiness can be well off, provided that happiness was in fact attainable for him. Yet, whatever its merits, the proposal offers no solution to the indexing problem; if anything, the proposal exacerbates the problem, since it insists that we include one more dimension in each vector of functionings.⁶ But more to the point, it fails to give a principled answer to the question of when happiness matters. Sen’s proposal does entail that *ceteris paribus* having the ability to be happy is better than not having the ability to be happy, which is uncontroversial enough. But it fails to address the question of the conditions under which happiness measures can be used as a guide for policy and under what conditions they cannot.

⁶ Proponents of the capability approach, including Sen (2008, p. 25) himself, sometimes suggest that the index problem will have to be solved by means of a deliberative process that draws on the values of the relevant community. This proposal too seems inconsistent with the general drift of the capability approach, which is that things like illiteracy, discrimination, and genital mutilations are bad for people *even if* these things are tolerated or endorsed by the community.

Though both Schokkaert and Sen deserve credit for having seriously struggled with the issue of why, and when, happiness matters, neither one succeeds in producing a satisfying answer (on the basis of the capability approach) to the question of when subjective measures can be used as measures of well-being. Hence, this account of well-being does not seem to lend itself to the deliberation that we must do. Next, we will look at the prospects of developing an answer within a preference-satisfaction framework.

4. Preference-satisfaction accounts

Preference satisfaction or desire-fulfillment accounts of well-being say that we are well off to the extent that our preferences are satisfied or our desires are fulfilled (Griffin, 1986, p. 7; Parfit, 1984, p. 493). This position, which is sometimes called *preferentialism* (Bykvist, 2002), differs from mental state accounts since it is possible to feel happy or satisfied even though one's preferences are not satisfied and *vice versa*. Though there have been few explicit attempts to integrate happiness research with preference-satisfaction accounts of well-being, things are very different in modern (neoclassical) economics, where preferentialism is the name of the game (Adler & Posner, 2008; Angner, 2009a; Harsanyi, 1977). In the words of Daniel M. Hausman and Michael S. McPherson, "preference satisfaction views of well-being dominate orthodox welfare economics" (Hausman & McPherson, 2006, p. 122).

In order to explain how preference-satisfaction accounts can help address the question of when and why happiness matters, it helps to examine how orthodox economists defend their welfare measures. Economists are frequently criticized for thinking of well-being in terms of material wealth only. Hence, Diener and Seligman charge that "in economics ... income is seen as the essence of well-being, and therefore measures of income are seen as sufficient indices to capture well-being" (Diener & Seligman, 2004, p. 2). This critique, however, is misguided: economists think

that income can serve as a proxy for welfare because a person's income reflects the degree to which her preferences are satisfied. As Edward F. Denison puts the basic idea: "Whatever want, need, or social problem engages our attention, we ordinarily can more easily find resources to deal with it when output is large and growing than when it is not" (Denison, 1971, p. 13). On the assumption of perfect information, ideal rationality, complete markets, and so on, the result can be established formally: it can be proven that utility – which is an index preference satisfaction – is strictly increasing in individual wealth (Mas-Colell, Whinston, & Green, 1995, p. 56). But even in when those assumptions fail, there is empirical evidence that income is correlated with preference-satisfaction. Don Ross (N.d.), for example, has convincingly argued that income – especially women's income – is an excellent predictor of welfare. Because women especially are likely to invest increased income in infrastructure development and the education of their children, women's income is not likely to increase unless overall welfare is increasing, and an increase in women's income is likely to be broadly causally efficacious.

This brief discussion illustrates the – frequently misunderstood – orthodox economic approach to welfare measurement. When economists use income-based welfare measures, it is not because they think income or material wealth are constitutive of or "essential to" well-being. In their view, income and material wealth matters because people desire it for its own sake – because they *want* it – or because they desire things that are sufficiently correlated with or suitably causally connected to it. They believe that income can (under certain conditions) serve as an indicator of welfare because they believe that income (under those conditions) is sufficiently correlated with degrees of preference satisfaction. Moreover, they believe that interventions designed to increase income (under certain conditions) are likely to lead to an increase in welfare because such interventions (under those conditions) tend to bring about greater degrees of preference satisfaction. One advantage associated with this approach is that it permits a principled answer to the question of

under what conditions it is legitimate to use income as an indicator of welfare, viz., whenever income is sufficiently correlated with preference satisfaction and/or interventions designed to increase income are causally efficacious in promoting preference satisfaction.

My thesis is that the use of subjective measures can be understood by analogy to the use of economic measures. Happiness-based measures of well-being can be used without assuming that happiness is constitutive of or “essential to” well-being. Instead, happiness matters because people desire it for its own sake – because they *want* it – or because they desire things that are sufficiently correlated with or suitably causally connected to it. A measure of happiness can (under certain conditions) serve as an indicator of welfare because happiness (under those conditions) is sufficiently correlated with degrees of preference satisfaction. Moreover, interventions designed to increase happiness (under certain conditions) are likely to lead to an increase in welfare because such interventions (under those conditions) tend to bring about greater degrees of preference satisfaction. One advantage associated with this approach is that it permits a principled answer to the question of under what conditions it is legitimate to use happiness as an indicator of welfare, viz., whenever happiness is sufficiently correlated with preference satisfaction and/or interventions designed to increase happiness are causally efficacious in promoting preference satisfaction.

The fact that preference-satisfaction accounts of well-being permit us to develop a principled answer to the question of under the conditions under which measures of happiness can serve as proxies for welfare means that such an account lends itself to the deliberation that we must do. This, in turn, is an important consideration in favor of preference-satisfaction accounts of well-being and for the preferentialist interpretation of subjective measures of well-being. This is not to say that we already know under what conditions people want to be happy, or under what conditions happiness is correlated with or causally connected to things that people desire. Yet, preferentialism gives us a

principled way to address these questions too, which by and large are empirical questions amenable to scientific study.

The preferentialist approach has other appealing features. The approach defended here preserves an evidential role for information about happiness, as Sen wanted, but it does not entail that happiness is the only thing that we value, or have reason to value, nor that it is the only metric for measuring other things that we value. Preferentialism permits us to desire things other than happiness and it is consistent with the possibility that we happiness may fail to be correlated and causally connected to things that we desire. In particular, preferentialism permits us to care about satisfaction, as well as happiness, and about things like a sense of meaning, which is attracting increasing amounts of attention by philosophers, psychologists, and economists (Karlsson, Loewenstein, & McCafferty, 2004; Kauppinen, 2012). In addition, it permits us to skirt difficult issues about the “true” nature of happiness: on the preferentialist view, whatever happiness is, if people want it, it contributes to their well-being.

Finally, the preferentialist approach has a great deal of *prima facie* plausibility (Bykvist, 2002; Heathwood, 2006; Murphy, 1999). It would take too long to review all arguments for and against here. Instead, I will simply point out that it can handle most of the cases that pose problems for the mental-state and objective-list approaches above. It permits us to say that Griffin would be made worse off if plugged into the experience machine, given his preference for bitter truth over comfortable delusion; but it also permits us to say that somebody who prefers the subjective experience of, say, slaying dragons and marrying princesses can be better off in the experience machine than outside of it, especially if the outside is a maximum security prison in West Virginia (as in De Brigard, 2010). This approach can handle cases of adaptation, since it allows us to say that people who don’t want to have debilitating spine injuries or permanent colostomies are worse off for having them, even if as a result of adaptation they are as happy as they would be otherwise. This

approach permits us to say that people who really want kids are better off for having kids, even if as a result of sleeplessness and new worries about the future of the world make them less happy. The approach can accommodate people who wish to exercise their abilities and try to realize their potential and whose ambitions make them less happy than they would be if they had been couch potatoes. And it allows us to say that the Buddhist monk who has achieved a state of bliss is well off, even if he's not in any particular positive subjectively experienced mental state. (In this simplest form, however, a preference-satisfaction account cannot handle all cases, including Sen's beggars, laborers, and housewives, so it must be modified; I return to this in the next section.)

Though I am not aware of anybody explicitly defending subjective measures on preference-satisfaction grounds, there are passages where people come fairly close. It is common for happiness scholars to point out that by and large, people *want* to be happy (Angner, 2010). Michael Argyle begins 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 or extremely important" (Kesebir & Diener, 2008, p. 69). The fact that people want to be happy does not seem to be relevant except in a broadly speaking preferentialist framework. Such a framework also appears to be implicit in George Loewenstein's critique of the U-index as a measure of welfare, as he points out that "individuals might have very different criteria for what makes their own life worthwhile" and asks: "If an individual values something other than happiness, who is to say that happiness is the right measure of welfare?" (Loewenstein, 2009, p. 94).

In the above, I have argued that the question of when, and why, happiness matters can be answered within a preferentialist framework, according to which people are well off to the extent that their preferences are satisfied. Because this framework lends itself to the kind of deliberation

that we must do, this constitutes a reason to accept some preference-satisfaction account of well-being. In addition, preference-satisfaction accounts are independently relatively plausible and, in particular, appear to be able to handle most of the cases that proved to be problematic for mental-state and objective-list accounts of well-being. Interestingly, this interpretation brings the philosophical foundations of the science of happiness more closely in line with those of modern welfare economics. While happiness scholars by and large share orthodox economists' utilitarian conception of social welfare (Angner, 2009b), my argument is that subjective measures of well-being should be understood in the same way as orthodox economic measures have been understood, as representing welfare in the sense of preference-satisfaction.

5. Discussion

In making the case that preferentialism – the view that well-being is a matter of the degree to which our preferences are satisfied or our desires fulfilled – permits us to give principled answers to the question of under what conditions subjective measures of well-being can serve as indicators of well-being and that this gives us one reason to adopt some version of preference-satisfaction accounts, I have avoided addressing at least two serious problems.

First, I do not mean to suggest that preference-satisfaction accounts are free from problems. As indicated in the previous section, accounts according to which well-being is a matter of the preferences we actually have cannot accommodate cases like Sen's beggars, laborers, and housewives if they (as Sen postulates) actually prefer the status quo. Preferentialists typically respond to all these cases by arguing (i) that only *intrinsic* preferences, that is, that which we prefer for its own sake, and/or that (ii) that the only preferences that should count need not be the ones that we actually have, but the preferences that we would have if we were ideally rational, perfectly informed, and so

on (Rabinowicz & Österberg, 1996, p. 1). Though I believe that problematic cases can be handled by such modifications, I will not examine the issue here.

Second, I have not examined every possible kind of mental-state and objective-list account, nor have I explored every possible way to rely on such kinds of account in order to answer the question of the conditions under which subjective measures can be used to as welfare indicators. During the last few decades, there have been efforts to resuscitate mental-state accounts of well-being by moving away from the idea that well-being is identical to subjectively experienced mental states (Tiberius, 2006, p. 497). Hence, L. W. Sumner has defended a view according to which well-being consists in *authentic happiness*, viz. “the happiness of an informed and autonomous subject” (Sumner, 1996, p. 172). Fred Feldman (2004) promotes a version of hedonism according to which pleasures must be “truth-adjusted.” These modifications are designed to handle cases like Nozick’s experience machine. It is not perfectly clear, however, whether such accounts can give principled answers to the question of when happiness matters and to what extent such answers would differ from those given by preferentialism. Again, I will not explore these issues here.

In spite of these two caveats, I maintain that, if students of happiness and life satisfaction were to take this line, many of the objections to their enterprise can be met. As we saw in the introduction, a whole class of objections to the science of happiness are based on the proposition that happiness and life satisfaction, in the sense of subjectively experienced mental states, are not constitutive of or “essential to” well-being simpliciter. By adopting a firmly preferentialist approach, like orthodox economists have done for decades, happiness scholars can avoid these issues, while continuing to argue that subjective measures of well-being can legitimately be used (under certain well-identified conditions) to examine the causes and correlates of well-being and that empirical research into subjective well-being can in fact help us address Socrates’ question “How should I live?”

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