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John Bronsteen

Brian Leiter

Jonathan Masur

Kevin Tobia

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THE FOLK THEORY OF WELL-BEING

John Bronsteen, Brian Leiter, Jonathan Masur & Kevin Tobia

I. Introduction

What constitutes a “good” life—not *necessarily* a morally good life, but a life that is good for the person who lived it (sometimes called “prudential goodness” or “well-being” or “welfare”)? On some views, of course, a life cannot be good for the person who lived it if it was not also morally good, but we want to prescind from that question. Even scholars holding those views—such as some of the ancient Greeks or Kant, who arguably thought moral goodness was central to welfare—also recognized that a good life must have other features or attributes.

What might those attributes be, and which (if any) is most important? In this experimental philosophy study, we assess three candidate views of the “good life” or “well-being”¹:

According to *Desire-Satisfaction* [“*Preferentism*”], a good life is one in which the agent is able to satisfy his desires, or most of his desires, or his most important desires, or in which desire-satisfaction outweighs desire-frustration.

According to *Objectivism*,² a good life is one that includes certain good features, quite independent of how they make the person feel or the person’s desires: this might include, e.g., perfecting one’s skills or talents (or particular kinds of skills and talents), realizing one’s essential traits, or having certain kinds of widely recognized goods, such as loving relationships, wealth, recognition, and success.

According to *Hedonism*, a good life is one in which *pleasurable* (or *enjoyable*) mental states are either dominant or outweigh the *painful* (or *unpleasant*) mental states.

These traditional categories will be useful for our purposes, even if they simplify many of the theoretical positions on offer and cannot claim to exhaust the possible views in logical space. For example, Fred Feldman (2004), an important contemporary hedonist, emphasizes the attitude of *enjoyment* (rather than sensory pleasure).³

Although ancient philosophers did not analyze conceptions of well-being in the same terms used today, the role of pleasure in the quality of a person’s life has been debated for millennia. In the eighteenth century, this view became particularly prominent due to the work of

Thanks to Joshua Knobe, Shaun Nichols, Jonathan Phillips, Roseanna Sommers, two anonymous reviewers, and audiences at the University of Chicago for helpful feedback.

¹ This typology derives from Parfit (1984). Parfit’s typology is not uncontroversial. For doubts, see Kagan (1992); Arneson (1999).

² Parfit calls them “objective list” views, but their distinctive feature is that they make the goodness of a life independent of an agent’s subjective psychological states, actual or idealized.

³ Views that have hedonic elements, like Daniel Haybron’s (2008) “self-fulfillment” account of well-being are harder to place or test.

Jeremy Bentham, and his influence in focusing on happiness lasted well into the twentieth century.

But during that century, scholars' focus shifted away from happiness and toward preference satisfaction. As Sumner (1996) has chronicled, this initially happened not because anyone viewed preference satisfaction as even a plausible theory of well-being but instead because preferences were considered visible (via choices) whereas happiness was considered invisible, unmeasurable, and therefore unfit for guiding policymaking even though it was what policymakers valued. Thus preferences were originally used purely as a proxy for what was taken to really matter, which was happiness. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, a shift occurred. Economists were joined by philosophers in focusing on preference satisfaction (albeit in very different ways, as economists deemed choices to reveal one's preferences whereas philosophers emphasized idealized preferences over actual ones), and both in ways that ultimately resulted in the original proxy-based reasoning being forgotten, as Sumner recounts. Preference satisfaction became viewed as well-being itself rather than merely a proxy for happiness. This shift coincided with famous philosophical attacks on the happiness theory of well-being, most notably Nozick's experience machine example (Nozick 1974: 42), which many took to demonstrate its intuitive implausibility.⁴ At the turn of the new millennium, therefore, the preference theory was dominant and the happiness theory had fallen into disrepute.

Late in the twentieth century and throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first, several developments began to challenge those trends. One was a widespread dissatisfaction with the preference-based view, whose policy-based limitations helped give rise to objective rivals championed by scholars such as Sen (1993). By now, very few, if any, philosophers accept *Desire-Satisfaction* as formulated in the simple way above, since many desires are hostage to an agent's ignorance or irrationality, and their satisfaction would seem clearly not to make the agent better off. Although very thirsty, I am not better off drinking the glass of liquid soap in front of me that I think is a lemonade; and when addicted to heroin, I am not better off sticking the syringe into my arm yet again, although it is what I desire. Most philosophers who accept something like *Desire-Satisfaction* build in *idealization* conditions that desires must satisfy in order to be constitutive of well-being: for example, they must be the desires an agent would have when fully informed about all relevant empirical facts (Brandt, 1979; Railton, 1986; Sobel, 1994).

Another development was the emergence of methods by psychologists to study happiness and produce data that could be used in ways similar to the ones employed by economists in making preference-based policy (Kahneman, 1999). In policymaking, preference satisfaction continues to dominate, but leading academics and government officials from around the world have called for changes focused on objective conditions and happiness data (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009).

To adjudicate among these competing accounts (and to develop the best version of each), moral philosophers traditionally appeal to thought experiments and intuition (see generally Stich

⁴ One of us (Leiter) accepts the force of Nozick's argument; two of us (Bronsteen and Masur) reject the Nozick thought experiment (Bronsteen, Buccafusco & Masur, 2015); and one of us (Tobia) is ambivalent in light of recent empirical findings (de Brigard, 2020; Hindriks & Douven, 2018; Weijers, 2013).

& Tobia 2016). Consider Feldman's (2010) "Methodological Comments" about constructing an ideal happiness test:

First, we are looking for a test that will measure something that corresponds fairly closely to some pre-theoretical concept of happiness. A mark of success here would be that people who score higher on the test should be, by and large, people who would naturally be described by themselves and by those who know them well as "happier." ... I recognize that this is largely a matter of linguistic intuition. I described some cases. I tried to give sufficient detail. I ask the fair-minded reader to consider whether he or she would describe the individuals in question as 'happy.' ... I have informally discussed these cases with friends and colleagues. They seem to share my linguistic intuitions. I recognize that this is far from conclusive.

The key point, for our purposes, is that intuitions about well-being are relevant data for moral philosophers. Of course, no good philosopher would simply defer to whatever survey participants say about well-being. Yet most philosophers would also agree that ordinary linguistic intuitions about well-being are relevant to theories of well-being. Kant famously claimed that his account of the categorical imperative only captured what "every German peasant" already knew,⁵ while Henry Sidgwick (1966) claimed that utilitarianism was the "unconscious" morality of common sense.

Of course, there is variation among philosophers in the weight assigned to these intuitions and the role they play in theory. Kant did not think the putative fact that German peasants knew the truth of the categorical imperative established its truth; Sidgwick is closer to the modern tendency of treating "folk" intuitions as a ground, or partial ground, for the truth of the proposed theory of morality or goodness. If most people thought "pleasure" or "satisfying a desire" were *irrelevant* to goodness, after all, it would seem surprising if a philosophical theory treated those factors as decisive. Objectivist views can more easily repudiate "folk" opinion, but only at the cost of motivational inertness: if the "good" is something no actual person cares about, well, who cares? *Internalism* about well-being is the view that what is really good for persons must be something that they do or can care about. Not all philosophers accept internalism, but for those who do, folk views about well-being are at least relevant to, if not decisive for, moral theory.

It is hard to see how moral theory can entirely escape appeal to intuitions: where else can we start, after all, than with what people believe about what ought to be done, how one ought to live, and the like? And once we accept the relevance of intuition and characterize it in this way (what *people* believe about what ought to be done), it becomes clear that moral theorizing tends to benefit from considering the intuitions of ordinary people.

Ultimately, we take as our starting point that most if not all contemporary philosophical theories of well-being at least treat folk intuitions as data for theorizing and some of those theories assign them even more weight. In this paper we present a pair of studies in which we test the folk intuitions of all three theories of welfare against one another. Our goal is to assess whether laypeople find all three theories intuitively plausible, and (perhaps more importantly) to

⁵ As Nietzsche quipped in *Beyond Good and Evil*, it may have done so, "but in terms no German peasant could understand." Kant's account of the categorical imperative is obviously a version of the Biblical Golden Rule.

determine whether folk intuitions trend in favor of one kind of philosophical theory of well-being. The results will not decide the question of what constitutes prudential goodness, but they will, we hope, provide data points for competing theories to consider.

II. The Literature on Well-Being in Psychology and Experimental Philosophy

Given that Derek Parfit's (1984, p. 494) taxonomy of well-being theories—hedonic, preference-based, and objective—is so widely discussed, it is perhaps surprising that we have found no experimental philosophy work testing all three theories against one another in terms of their respective intuitive appeal.

That said, several scholars have conducted important and relevant empirical inquiries. Prinzing, Freitas, and Fredrickson (2021) studied lay people's intuitions about a "meaningful life," finding that either happiness (positive psychological states) or positive objective conditions can cause participants to label a life meaningful. King and Scollon (1998) found that participants' ratings of happiness and meaning in life correlated with their assessments of both how desirable and how morally good the person's life was, whereas the participants' ratings of wealth (above a certain level) did not. Yang, Knobe, and Dunham (2021) found that participants varied their assessments of people's happiness based on whether the people were morally good or bad, while not varying their assessments of people's happiness based on whether the people were intelligent. The issue of whether people conceive of happiness as being influenced by moral considerations (e.g., believing that Jim is happier if he's more moral than if he's less moral, all else being equal) has also been studied by Jonathan Phillips, Julian De Freitas, Christian Mott, June Gruber, and Joshua Knobe (Phillips, De Freitas, Mott, Gruber & Knobe, 2017; Phillips, Nyholm & Liao, 2014; Phillips, Misenheimer & Knobe, 2011). Like Yang et al., Phillips et al. find evidence that participants (in this case, both lay people and academics, including those who study happiness) vary their judgments of people's happiness based on their assessments of people's moral character.

One recent paper that bears more directly on the specific question we have in mind—namely, the degree to which folk conceptions of well-being reflect hedonism as opposed to objective list or preferentist theoretical rivals—is from Markus Kneer and Daniel Haybron (2019). Haybron and Kneer's studies helpfully pit happiness against objective values. However, they do not test either of those against preference satisfaction. Kneer and Haybron's first two studies present the vignette of a deceived person — a man who feels cheerful and satisfied, but only because he does not know his family and friends despise him. Participants rated the man's happiness—and (in different studies) the extent to which he was doing well, or had a happy life, or had a good life, or had an enviable life, or had a high degree of well-being—both before and after learning of the deception. The participants' assessments of all terms (whether the man had a happy life, a good life, etc.) were dominated by the man's psychological states (e.g., his cheerfulness and enjoyment of life) rather than the objective circumstances of which he was unaware, though some terms like "doing well," "good life," and "enviable life" were more sensitive to objective circumstances than were other terms like "happy."

Kneer and Haybron's last two experiments provided vignettes that described good and bad objective conditions, and they paired those conditions with good and bad psychological

states (e.g., affect and enjoyment of life). Participants associated the positive psychological states with six well-being-related concepts far more strongly than they associated the positive objective conditions with those six concepts. That said, the effect of objective conditions on well-being assessments was “sizeable,” albeit much smaller than the effect of positive psychological states on well-being (2019, p. 29).

Kneer and Haybron concluded that “[f]urther studies are needed to replicate and build on these” (2019, p. 35). One preliminary contribution of the studies we present in this paper is that they answer this call, as well as that of well-being theorists like Fred Feldman (2010). That said, our studies also depart sharply from those of Kneer and Haybron (2019) in that, among other things, we test preference theories in addition to hedonic and objective theories. This is a crucial addition because preference theories are the foundation of the economic analysis of policy and law. That mode of analysis is both dominant in academic circles and also profoundly affects the lives of the millions of people affected by administrative regulations (Sumner, 1996; Bronsteen, Buccafusco & Masur, 2013). Indeed, according to Haybron’s (2008) own description of the state of the literature, preference satisfaction is “the theory to beat.”

We thus set out here to make the first test of whether laypeople view well-being the way that many scholars in economics and philosophy seem to have assumed they do. In doing so, we compare preference satisfaction directly with its two leading rivals as theories of well-being: objective measures, and happiness.

III. Experimental Studies

To investigate the relationship between folk and philosophical theories of well-being, we performed two experimental studies. In the first, we test the central claims of each of the three leading philosophical theories of well-being: Does lay evaluation of well-being increase with increases in (i) hedonic satisfaction, (ii) preference-satisfaction, or (iii) objective criteria (here, ones related to professional success). The results tell a broadly pluralistic story: all three factors affect folk judgments of well-being. But the impact of hedonic satisfaction is especially strong.

In the second study we test the strength of each of these theories, as a matter of folk intuition, against one another. We present participants with scenarios that pit hedonic against preferentialist and objective theories. We ask participants to evaluate how an individual’s life is going if that individual has high (or low) hedonic levels but low (or high) levels of preference satisfaction or objective achievement. Here again, we find support for a pluralistic folk notion of well-being, but one in which hedonic satisfaction is an especially important factor. All data and materials for both studies are available at Open Science [<https://osf.io/t8zfu/>].

A. Study 1

Method

In this study, we presented participants with a vignette describing the life of an individual engaged in a career. The first set of vignettes were designed to test whether lay intuitions of well-being would vary with variations in the level of happiness ascribed to the individual. For

instance, one group of vignettes describes Richard, a gifted and successful painter. In all three of these vignettes, Richard's level of objective success and accomplishment, as well as the extent to which he is satisfying his preferences, are held constant. Only his level of hedonic satisfaction is varied: in one version, Richard is very happy about his recognition and accomplishments ("High Hedonic state"); in another version, Richard is neither happy nor sad ("Neutral Hedonic state"); and in a third version, Richard is sad ("Low Hedonic state").

Our variable of interest is whether Richard, the subject of the vignette, has high or low welfare (or well-being, a term we use interchangeably with welfare). However, we did not think that lay survey respondents would understand the question well if we simply asked how much welfare or well-being Richard had. Instead, as a means of posing the same question in a way that we hoped would make more sense to laypeople, we asked respondents "How well did Richard's life go for him?" This was meant to elicit respondents' judgments regarding Richard's level of welfare, though of course it is possible that respondents interpreted that phrase in some other way. Respondents were asked to rate Richard's life on a seven-point scale, using radio buttons, with 1 labeled as "Not well at all" and 7 labeled as "Very well." Appendix A includes the full set of vignettes used in Study 1.

In a second set of vignettes, we held constant Richard's level of achievement and his hedonic state and instead varied the extent to which being a successful painter means that he has satisfied his preferences. In one version, "Richard always wanted to spend his life as a painter" ("High Preference satisfaction"); in another, Richard "had no real desire to be a painter or to do something else" ("Neutral Preference satisfaction"); and in a third, Richard "never wanted to be a painter" ("Low Preference satisfaction").

In a third set of vignettes, we explicitly held constant Richard's hedonic state and his level of preference satisfaction and instead varied his level of objective achievement. In one version, "Richard's fame as a painter eventually spreads around the world" ("High Objective achievement"); in another, "Richard has mixed success in terms of recognition of his work" ("Neutral Objective achievement"); and in a third, "Richard is never regarded as a particularly good painter" ("Low Objective achievement").⁶

The full materials are available in the appendix and at Open Science (<https://osf.io/t8zfu/>), but to get a rough sense of the vignettes, consider the following summary:

[Core story, for the painter scenario]: Since a young age, Richard has always wanted to be a painter and he has always been regarded as a gifted one. Over the years, his fame as a painter spreads around the world, and by his old age, he is one of the most celebrated artists of his time, lauded for his genius and talent. He continues producing celebrated art work until the end of his life.

⁶ It is of course possible that respondents might judge Richard's happiness as greater in the vignettes where his fame is greater. We take extensive measures to avoid or minimize this problem by describing his happiness explicitly on multiple occasions in each vignette. The beginning of each vignette reads, ". . . painting has always made him very happy. Luckily, he has been able to pursue a career as a painter. Richard doesn't care about achievement or recognition: he just loves painting and wants to do it. He has a very happy life, doing exactly what he wants."

[Hedonic state as variable]

[High:] Richard is very happy about this recognition and accomplishment; indeed, he feels happy throughout his life.

[Neutral:] Richard is neither happy nor sad about this recognition and accomplishment; Richard goes through life without feeling strongly either way.

[Low:] But Richard has never been pleased or happy about this recognition: to the contrary, it makes him sad. He feels he has never lived up to his ultimate promise and so the recognition and accomplishments leaves him unhappy. Indeed, he feels sad throughout his life.

[Preference satisfaction as variable]

[High:] Richard always wanted to spend his life as a painter.

[Neutral:] Richard, however, had no real desire to be a painter or to do something else; it just turned out he was very good at painting....

[Low:] Richard, however, never wanted to be a painter, he wanted instead to be a professional athlete; it just turned out he was very good at painting.

[Objective accomplishment as variable]

[High:] Richard's fame as a painter eventually spreads around the world. By his old age, he is one of the most celebrated artists of his time, lauded for his genius and talent.

[Neutral:] Richard has mixed success in terms of recognition of his work. He is not a great painter, but he is not terrible either: he is a painter of average talent and ability.

[Low:] Richard is never regarded as a particularly good painter and has to support himself by other means. By his old age, his paintings are almost entirely unknown and poorly regarded by those who do know his work.

[Question] How well did Richard's life go for him?

This study was designed to test whether folk intuitions about an individual's well-being are affected by whether or not that individual has Low or High levels of happiness, Low or High levels of preference satisfaction, and/or Low or High levels of objective achievement. If respondents' answers to the question of how well Richard's life was going for him did not vary with Richard's level of happiness (or preference satisfaction, or objective achievement), we would interpret this as indicating that lay perceptions of well-being are not dependent on whether someone is happy (or has satisfied her preferences, or achieved objectively worthwhile goals).

For each of these conditions, we created vignettes for three individuals: Richard the painter, Richard the stock market investor, and Richard the soccer player. We used these three variations in order to reduce the effects of any noise generated by reactions to the particular profession and activities described in the vignette. All told, Study 1 included 27 vignettes in a 3 (profession) \times 3 (theory of well-being) \times 3 (high/neutral/low) design. We used a between-subjects design, in which each survey respondent only saw one vignette. In addition to our main dependent variable question (“Was Richard’s life good for him?”), we included a battery of manipulation checks and demographic questions.

We assigned participants randomly to one vignette, in a 3 (Factor: hedonic, objective, preference) \times 3 (Level: high, neutral, low) \times 3 (Profession: investor, painter, soccer player) between-subjects design. Thus, there were 27 distinct vignettes.

Results

We recruited 1253 participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.0$, 50.3% female). A 3 (Profession: soccer player, investor, painter) \times 3 (Varying Quality: hedonic state, objective accomplishment, preference satisfaction) \times 3 (Level: low, neutral, high) ANOVA, using the “How well did Richard’s life go for him?” question as a measure of well-being, revealed a significant effect of Level, $F(2, 1226) = 251.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .29$. Low levels of the Varying Quality led to lowest well-being ratings ($M = 4.96$, $SE = .05$), neutral levels led to intermediate ratings ($M = 5.8$, $SE = .05$), and high levels led to highest ratings ($M = 6.65$, $SE = .05$).

There was a small significant effect of the Varying Quality, $F(2, 1226) = 34.4$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2_p = .05$. Hedonic state scenarios were rated lowest ($M = 5.44$, $SE = .05$), then preference satisfaction scenarios ($M = 5.90$, $SE = .05$), then objective accomplishment scenarios, ($M = 6.03$, $SE = .05$). There was no significant effect of Profession, $F(2, 1226) = 1.29$, $p = .28$.

Most importantly, there was a significant interaction between Varying Quality (hedonic state, objective accomplishment, preference satisfaction) and Level (low, neutral, high), $F(4, 1226) = 38.9$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2_p = .11$. The means, standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals are depicted in the figure and table that follow.

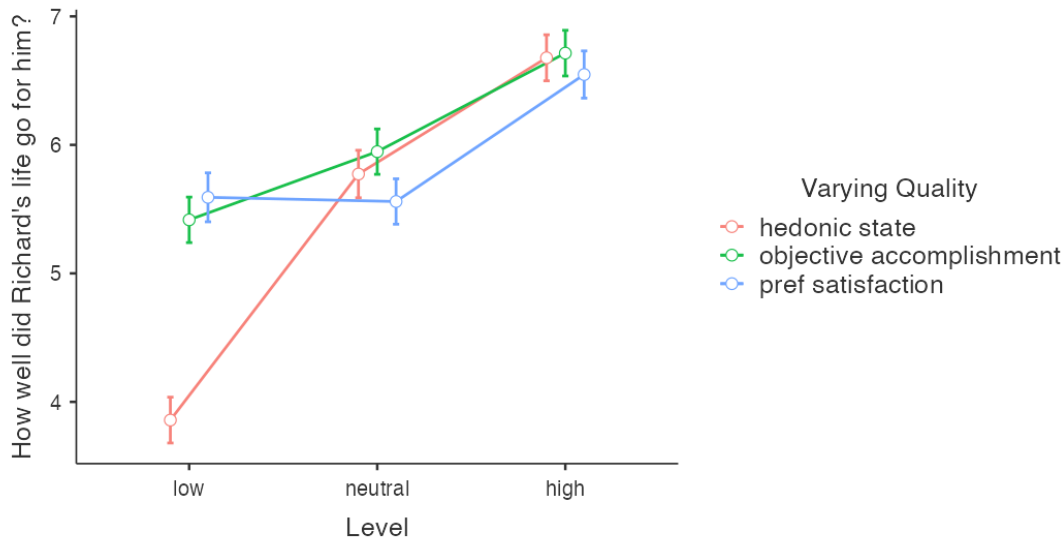


Figure 1. Estimated marginal mean ratings of well-being, by Varying Quality and Level.

Estimated Marginal Means - Level * Varying Quality

Varying Quality	Level	Mean	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
hedonic state	low	3.858	0.091	3.680	4.037
	neutral	5.773	0.094	5.589	5.958
	high	6.678	0.091	6.499	6.857
objective accomplishment	low	5.417	0.090	5.240	5.594
	neutral	5.947	0.090	5.771	6.124
	high	6.714	0.091	6.536	6.892
pref satisfaction	low	5.592	0.097	5.401	5.782
	neutral	5.559	0.090	5.383	5.736
	high	6.547	0.094	6.364	6.731

Table 1. Estimated marginal mean ratings of well-being, by Varying Quality and Level.

There was no significant interaction between Varying Quality and Profession, $F(4, 1226) = 1.56, p = .18$; or between Profession and Level, $F(4, 1226) = 1.22, p = .30$. There was no significant three-way interaction among Varying Quality, Profession, and Level, $F(8, 1226) = 1.78, p = .08$.

In sum, Study 1's results provide some initial evidence for a "pluralistic" folk concept of well-being. For each Varying Quality (hedonic state, objective accomplishment, preference

satisfaction), higher levels are associated with greater attributed well-being. At the same time, there was a significant interaction between Varying Quality and Level, indicating that folk judgments are especially sensitive to (low vs. neutral or high levels of) *hedonic* satisfaction.

B. Study 2

Method

In this study, we examined the intuitive force of the hedonic theory of well-being by comparing it against the other two leading families of theories, preferentist and objective list theories. We designed a series of vignettes in which an individual has high well-being according to one theory but low well-being according to another theory. For instance, in the first vignette, Jenny is a ballet teacher in a small town who is happy (“High Happiness”) but is never able to satisfy her preference to be a famous ballerina who lives in Paris (“Low Preference satisfaction”). In the second vignette, these characteristics are reversed. Jenny is a famous ballerina who lives in Paris, thus satisfying her lifelong preference (“High Preference satisfaction”), but she isn’t happy with her life (“Low Happiness”).

The full materials are available in the appendix and at Open Science, (<https://osf.io/t8zfu/>) but to get a rough sense of the vignettes, consider these two examples: (a) high hedonism and low preference satisfaction, and (b) high preference satisfaction and low hedonism.

[High hedonism, low preference satisfaction]

Jenny teaches ballet in a small studio in a small town. She usually spends her weekends going bowling with her friends.

Jenny is happy. She really enjoys teaching her ballet students, and she also has a lot of fun going bowling with her friends. She feels good when she wakes up in the morning and maintains that happy mood throughout the day until she goes to sleep at night. She often smiles and rarely frowns. She experiences positive emotions like joy and contentment most of the time; and she only rarely experiences negative emotions like sadness, anger, and irritability.

But Jenny doesn’t have what she wants. She always wanted to be a famous ballerina who lives in Paris and spends her weekends going to exclusive parties with other celebrities. That is still the life she would choose if she could choose anything.

[High preference satisfaction, low hedonism]

Jenny is a famous ballerina who lives in Paris. She usually spends her weekends going to exclusive parties with other celebrities.

Jenny isn’t happy. She feels a lot of pressure to do her job well, and she doesn’t actually enjoy the work. She also feels pressure to impress her celebrity acquaintances so that she keeps getting invited to their parties. This prevents her from really ever enjoying her professional or her

personal life. She feels bad when she wakes up in the morning and maintains that unhappy mood throughout the day until she goes to sleep at night. She rarely smiles and often frowns. She experiences negative emotions like sadness, anger, and irritability most of the time; and she only rarely experiences positive emotions like joy and contentment.

But Jenny has what she wants. She always wanted this life, and she would still choose it now if she could choose any life for herself.

There are similar vignettes comparing the hedonic theory of well-being with objective theories of well-being. In the first, Jenny is a ballet teacher in a small town who is happy (“High Happiness”) but has not achieved much in her life (“Low Objective achievement”). There is a corresponding vignette in which Jenny is a famous ballerina living in Paris who has achieved great things (“High Objective achievement”) but is unhappy with her life (“Low Happiness”).

Here again, our variable of interest is whether the subject of the vignette has high or low well-being. And again, we did not think that lay survey respondents would understand the question if we simply asked how much well-being the individual had. Instead, we asked respondents, “How well is Jenny’s life going for her?” This question was again meant to elicit respondents’ judgments regarding Jenny’s level of well-being, though of course it is possible that the phrase was interpreted in some other way. Respondents were asked to rate Jenny’s life on a seven-point scale, using radio buttons, with 1 labeled as “Not well at all” and 7 labeled as “Very well.” Appendix B includes the full set of vignettes used in Study 2.

This study was designed to test whether laypeople understand well-being as defined more by how happy a person is (hedonism), by the degree to which she has satisfied her preferences (preference-satisfaction), or by the degree to which she has accomplished objectively worthwhile things (objectivist). If respondents reported that the individual with High Happiness and Low Preference satisfaction has greater well-being than the individual with High Preference satisfaction and Low Happiness, we would interpret this as indicating that laypeople view happiness as more constitutive of well-being than preference satisfaction. If the opposite result obtained, we would interpret this as indicating that laypeople view preference satisfaction as more constitutive of well-being than happiness. Likewise for happiness and objective factors.

For each of these conditions, we created vignettes for three individuals: Jenny the ballerina (or ballet teacher); Todd the doctor (or office worker); and Samantha the CEO (or small business owner). In these vignettes, we used different professions (e.g., ballet teacher vs. ballerina) to make the individual’s high or low level of preference satisfaction or objective achievement more intuitively plausible. As with Study 1, we used these three variations in order to reduce the effects of any noise generated by reactions to the particular profession and activities described in the vignette. In addition, we varied the order in which the vignettes conveyed information about the individual’s happiness, preference satisfaction, or objective achievement. For each individual and each comparison (hedonism vs. another theory), we used one version of the vignette in which the hedonic information was presented first, before the information implicating the alternative theory of well-being, and another version in which the hedonic information was presented second. This was done to control for any effects generated by the order in which the information was presented.

All told, Study 2 included 24 vignettes in a 3 (Profession: ballerina, doctor, CEO) \times 4 (Scenario: High Happiness vs. Low Preferences; Low Happiness vs. High Preferences; High Happiness vs. Low Objective Factors; Low Happiness vs. High Objective Factors) \times 2 (happiness information first or second) design. We used a between-subjects design, in which each survey respondent only saw one vignette. In addition to our main dependent variable question (e.g., “Was Jenny’s life good for her?”), we included a battery of manipulation checks and demographic questions. In particular, we asked all respondents “Was [the individual] happy?” (“Happy Rating”); “Did s/he get what s/he wanted?” (“Satisfied Rating”); and “Was [the individual’s] life objectively successful?” (“Success Rating”).

Results

We recruited 1128 participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.4$, 48.6% female). Treating well-being ratings as the dependent variable, a 3 (Profession: ballerina, doctor, CEO) \times 4 (Scenario: High Happiness vs. Low Preferences; Low Happiness vs. High Preferences; High Happiness vs. Low Objective Factors; Low Happiness vs. High Objective Factors) \times 2 (Order: happiness information first, or second) ANOVA revealed a significant effect of Scenario, $F(3, 1104) = 124.0$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2_p = .25$. Happy but not satisfied was highest ($M = 5.57$, $SE = .08$), then happy but unsuccessful ($M = 5.02$, $SE = .08$), then successful but unhappy ($M = 3.89$, $SE = .08$), then satisfied but unhappy ($M = 3.71$, $SE = .08$). See Figure 2 and Table 2.

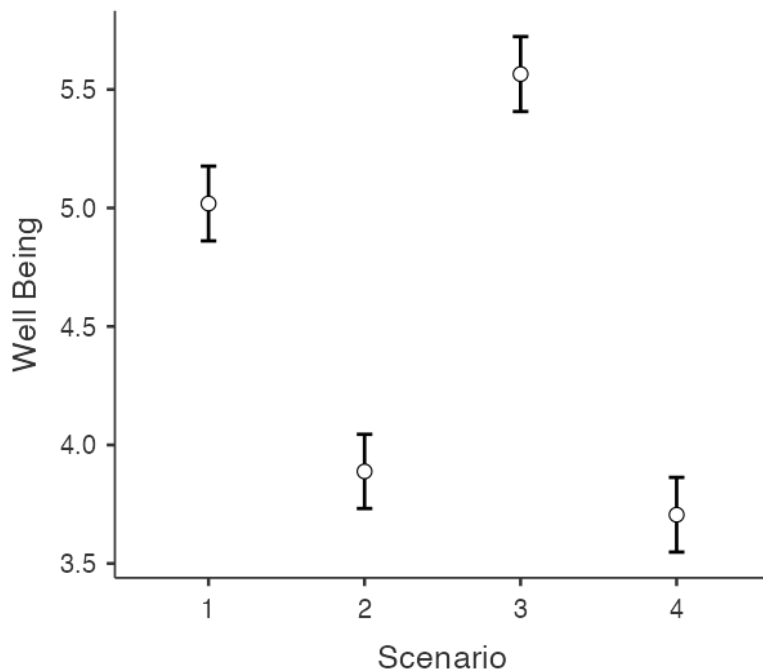


Figure 2. Estimated marginal mean ratings of well-being, by Scenario. Scenario 1 is Happy and Unsuccessful; Scenario 2 is Successful and Unhappy; Scenario 3 is Happy and Unsatisfied; Scenario 4 is Satisfied and Unhappy. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Estimated Marginal Means - Scenario

Scenario	Mean	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
Happy and Unsuccessful	5.019	0.080	4.861	5.177
Successful and Unhappy	3.888	0.080	3.732	4.045
Happy and Unsatisfied	5.565	0.081	5.407	5.723
Satisfied and Unhappy	3.705	0.080	3.548	3.863

Table 2. Estimated marginal mean ratings of well-being, by Scenario.

There was no significant effect of Order, $F < 1$. But there was a small significant effect of Profession, $F(2, 1104) = 5.8, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .01$. Ratings for Ballerina ($M = 4.38, SE = .07$) were lowest, followed by Doctor ($M = 4.53, SE = .07$), followed by Restaurant Owner ($M = 4.72, SE = .07$).

There were also three small significant two-way interactions: Profession * Scenario, $F(6, 1104) = 3.1, p = .005, \eta^2_p = .02$; Profession * Order, $F(2, 1104) = 3.2, p = .041, \eta^2_p = .01$; and Scenario * Order, $F(3, 1104) = 8.4, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .02$. There was no significant three-way interaction among Profession, Scenario, and Order, $F < 1$.

Our results generally confirm our findings from Study 1. When we include participants' ratings for perceived happiness, success, and satisfaction in regression models, all three of those variables are predictive of well-being (see Appendix C).

Moreover, the results from Study 2 indicate that participants viewed happiness as significantly more important to overall well-being than success or preference satisfaction. Well-being ratings for scenarios in which the agent was happy (but unsuccessful or unsatisfied) were substantially higher than scenarios in which the agent was unhappy (but successful or satisfied). Moreover, when we include participants' ratings for perceived happiness, success, and satisfaction in the regression models, Happiness rating is more predictive of overall well-being than either Success rating or Satisfaction rating. For example, in a happy vs. successful model regressing well-being judgment on Scenario (successful v. happy), Profession, Order, Happiness rating, Success rating, and Satisfaction rating, the standardized estimate for Happiness rating was 0.57 (95% CI = .43, .70), more than twice as large as the standardized estimate for Success rating (Standardized estimate = .20, 95% CI = .13, .26) and larger than the standardized estimate for Satisfied rating (Standardized estimate = .41, 95% CI = .33, .49), all $ps < .001$ (See Appendix C table 2b for details).

Similarly, in a happy vs. satisfied model regressing well-being judgment on Scenario (satisfied v. happy), Profession, Order, Happiness rating, Success rating, and Satisfaction rating, the standardized estimate for Happiness rating was 0.66 (95% CI = .53, .79, $p < .001$), more than three times as large as the standardized estimate for Satisfied rating (Standardized estimate = .09,

95% CI = .02, .15, $p = .008$) or the standardized estimate for Success rating (Standardized estimate = .18, 95% CI = .11, .24, $p < .001$) (See Appendix C table 2d for details). In sum, we find that Happiness exerts the strongest effect on well-being.

IV. Discussion

The studies yield two primary findings. First, they provide support for folk belief in *well-being pluralism*: laypeople see happiness, desire satisfaction, and positive objective conditions as all constitutive of well-being. Study 1 suggests this conclusion, in that the individuals in the vignettes who had greater happiness, desire satisfaction, and objective conditions were all evaluated as having greater well-being. Consistent with Study 1, Study 2 finds that there is a significant, positive relationship between well-being and all three of perceived happiness, desire satisfaction, and objective conditions (see Appendix C).

Secondly, the studies provide evidence of *hedonic dominance*: laypeople evaluate an individual's happiness as more important to an individual's overall well-being than desire satisfaction or objective conditions. In Study 1, the effect size for the Hedonic manipulation was larger than that of the Objective or Preference manipulations, in both the High vs. Low and Neutral v. Low comparisons. However, in the High vs. Neutral Comparisons, the results were more varied: for one scenario, the Hedonic and Objective effect sizes were larger (Investor); for one, the Objective and Preference effect sizes were larger (Painter), and for one the Hedonic and Preference effect sizes were larger (Soccer Player) (see Appendix C).

Study 2 (involving High vs. Low comparisons) provides stronger evidence of hedonic dominance. Our survey questions yielded 12 different pairs: 6 pitting happiness against preferences, and 6 pitting happiness against objective items. As Figure 2 and Table 2 make clear, in scenarios in which happiness diverged from satisfaction or success, laypeople consistently saw happiness as more relevant to well-being by significant margins.

There are of course a number of methodological limitations to our findings. First, both studies depend on respondents interpreting the experimental prompt ("how well is X's life going?") as asking about the individual's overall well-being in the vignette. If, for instance, respondents misinterpreted this question as asking instead about some other concept, such as whether the individual described in the vignette is happy, then it would be error to interpret our results as yielding folk intuitions regarding well-being. We have attempted to alleviate this concern to the greatest degree possible by employing a phrasing—"How well is X's life going for her?"—commonly employed by philosophers in defining well-being. We also think it is unlikely that respondents would interpret this prompt as asking about happiness, given that the vignettes describe happiness using very different terms. It is notable that Kneer & Haybron find that respondents seem to understand "doing well," which is similar to our prompt, as different than "happiness." This lends further support to the notion that respondents are interpreting the prompts in our vignettes correctly. But we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that some respondents arrived at some other interpretation. Similarly, in Study 2 it is possible that respondents interpreted the questions regarding whether the individual was Happy, Satisfied, or Successful in an unintended manner. Again, however, we consider this unlikely, particularly given that those questions were worded in plain language.

Second, our studies test only the intuitive plausibility of desire-satisfaction; it is possible that folk opinion would change if the vignettes tested involved only *informed* desire-satisfaction. But our cases are ones in which the desires in question do not appear to involve mistakes or irrationality, so these results may generalize even to the *informed* desire-satisfaction cases.⁷

Third, in either Study we cannot know that the manipulations of happiness, desire satisfaction, and objective conditions in the vignettes were of equal strength. That is, we cannot be sure that the “happy” person in Study 1 or 2 is as happy as the satisfied person is satisfied or the objectively successful person is successful. Standing alone, pairwise comparisons between scenarios involving a happy but unsuccessful (or unsatisfied) individual and an unhappy but successful individual offer suggestive but not decisive evidence for hedonic dominance. For this reason, we view the regression analysis (in Appendix C) as the strongest evidence that lay people perceive happiness as the primary constituent of welfare. Those analyses show that, when evaluating well-being, subjects placed substantially greater weight on perceptions of happiness than on perceptions of success or desire satisfaction.

Our results also raise questions for future research. One concerns the comparison between lay and expert evaluations of well-being. Our study examined the views of laypeople, people with no formal philosophical training. A recent study of professional philosophers suggests that there may be expert/lay differences worth further exploration. David Bourget and David Chalmers (2020) presented hundreds of professional philosophers with a survey about their all-things-considered philosophical views. One question asked respondents to accept or reject three views about well-being: (a) hedonism, (b) desire satisfaction, and (c) objective list. Participants could accept zero, one, two, or all three views. These are exactly the views we studied, and the expert results offer a useful comparison. In response to this question about theories, 13% of philosophers accepted hedonism, 19% accepted desire satisfaction, and 53% accepted objective list theory.

On their face, these results are notably different from our results about lay intuition. We find pluralistic support for all three criteria of well-being and strongest support for hedonism. If philosophers’ views simply reflected lay intuition, one might expect the same: acceptance of all three views (pluralism) and strongest support for hedonism. Instead, philosophers seem to disfavor hedonism (and in another question, 77% of philosophers said they would *not* enter Nozick’s experience machine). They also most strongly endorsed an objective list view, which received comparatively weaker support in our study of laypeople.

There are several possible explanations for this apparent lay-expert divergence. Perhaps philosophers might share the lay intuitions *about cases* (feeling the intuitive pull of pluralism and/or hedonic dominance) but ultimately reject those intuitions as a consequence of their philosophical judgment and insight into these theories. It is also possible that some philosophers

⁷ If one deems our evidence irrelevant to idealized desire theories on the ground that idealized desires are unknowable and thus untestable against intuitions, then that would seem to be a major limitation of those theories. At a minimum, they would be useless for practical purposes such as to inform policymaking or even individual decisions. And at a maximum, they could not supply answers to questions needed for the theories to be tested against intuitions in the way that is typically required.

interpreted Bourget and Chalmers's options as mutually exclusive (i.e. to accept "hedonism" is to endorse that hedonic value is the only criterion of well-being). A radically different hypothesis is that philosophers might have fundamentally different intuitions: Perhaps the type of people who become philosophers are not actually representative of laypeople, or philosophical training molds philosophers' intuitions about cases. Comparing our findings to Bourget and Chalmers's suggests that future work exploring philosophers' case-based intuitions could be particularly promising.

Another question for future research concerns the possibility that the folk well-being function may be non-linear. For instance, laypeople might believe that happiness is most important to well-being at low levels of happiness, but that at higher levels of happiness, there are diminishing returns and preferences and objective criteria play a comparatively larger role. In other words, for someone who is truly miserable (i.e., very low happiness), it is much more important in terms of well-being to increase happiness than other putative constituents of well-being; but for someone who leads a comfortable life, the advantage of happiness over other factors is less extreme. Study 1 provides some support for this hypothesis. But our studies were not designed to investigate such nonlinearities directly, and this remains an open question for future research.⁸

Ultimately, teasing apart these notions (happiness, preferences, and objective criteria) is a tricky business. But we take our studies to make some progress on this vexed philosophical question. The evidence suggests that the folk theory of happiness is pluralistic (all three factors matter) and that happiness plays a particularly central role.

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⁸ Further research might also connect the findings here to the literature concerning the "shape" of a meaningful life. Research finds that folk evaluations of the quality and meaningfulness of life depend on life narrative, or a life's shape (e.g. Diener, Wirtz & Oishi 2001; Fuhrer & Cova 2022). For example, participants evaluate lives that end abruptly but very well as better than lives with additional mildly good years (the "James Dean effect."). Future work could assess whether that effect (preference for a high peak) applies equally across the three facets of the pluralistic folk theory supported here: hedonism, preference satisfaction, and objective criteria.

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