

8-4-2023

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Recommended Citation

Alwood, A. (2023). Alienation, resonance, and experience in theories of well-being. *Philosophia*, 51(4).
10.1007/s11406-023-00667-4

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Alienation, Resonance, and Experience in Theories of Well-Being

Accepted for publication in *Philosophia*, 2023

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Each person has a special relation to his or her own well-being. This rough thought, which can be sharpened in different ways, is supposed to substantially count against objectivist theories on which one can intrinsically benefit from, or be harmed by, factors that are independent of one's desires, beliefs, and other attitudes. It is often claimed, contra objectivism, that one cannot be *alienated* from one's own interests, or that improvements in a person's well-being must *resonate* with that person. However, I argue that every theory of well-being must allow that we can be alienated from our own well-being, and that sophisticated objectivists can accept and make use of a resonance constraint against their opponents.

1. Introduction

Theories of well-being tell us what makes one's life go better or worse for the one living it. That is, they identify the intrinsically beneficial and harmful features that explain everything that is good or bad for a person.¹ A crucial division is between subjectivist theories on which all of these features depend on the person's attitudes (such as desires and beliefs), and objectivist theories on which some of them do not.

The 'resonance constraint' is said to be "the standard reason in the literature to reject" objectivist theories of well-being.² The objection centers on the special connection a person has with her own well-being. As Ben Bradley puts it, "objective theories tell us that certain things are good for us whether we care about those things or not. But how could something be good for me if I didn't care about it?"³ The objection also gets expressed in terms of a subject being 'alienated' from her well-being, or left 'cold' by alleged improvements.

¹ See Crisp 2006, 2014 for an introduction to well-being (aka 'self-interest' or 'welfare'), and the distinction between explanatory and enumerative theories.

² Bramble 2016, p 106.

³ See Bradley 2014, sec. 1. Bradley also mentions the application of this objection against hedonism.

The resonance constraint is also used to argue against objectivist forms of hedonism. For example, Dale Dorsey claims that “*If hedonism is construed as an objective theory*, the hedonist must be prepared to accept that the good can fail to resonate with, or can alienate, the agent whose good it is.”⁴

But these objections fail to refute all objectivist theories, for the sorts of reasons why they do not refute all hedonist theories. I will argue that the resonance constraint does not give subjectivism a dialectical advantage over objectivism about well-being, even if it does cast doubt on objectivist theories that deny any special connection between a person and her good.

A close examination of talk of ‘the resonance constraint’ reveals that distinct ideas underlie it (section 2), as well as revealing doubts that any of them can serve the subjectivist’s purposes. In section 3, I argue that every theory of well-being must allow that we can be alienated from our own well-being, and that the alienation objection does not give subjectivism an advantage over all objectivist theories. In section 4, I show how hedonists and other sophisticated objectivist theories can accept a version of the resonance constraint worthy of our attention, according to which certain experiences are necessary for benefit or harm to occur. This leads me to examine an ‘experience requirement’ which, I suggest, illuminates the special connection each individual has to his or her well-being. The experience requirement is a substantial commitment that may strongly count against several theories of well-being (section 5), in favor of an objectivist theory that gives a central explanatory role to enjoyable experience.

If subjectivists wish to continue to claim that ‘the resonance constraint’ gives them an advantage, or that objectivist hedonists cannot accommodate it, they will need to clarify its

⁴ Dorsey 2011, p 11, his emphasis.

meaning and role while clearly distinguishing it from the experience requirement that apparently favors certain theories such as objectivist hedonism.

2. The Resonance Constraint

We can tease out several important, if subtle, differences in how philosophers articulate the resonance constraint on well-being.

An early version of the resonance constraint is stated by Peter Railton:

Is it true that all normative judgments must find *an internal resonance* in those to whom they are applied? While I do not find this thesis convincing as a claim about all species of normative assessment, it does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that *what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware.* It would be an intolerably *alienated* conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to *engage* him.⁵

In this quote, Railton claims that it would be an “alienated” conception of well-being to suggest that a subject’s well-being is improved in ways that cannot “engage” her, or which she would not find “compelling or attractive”. His view is that resonance amounts to a kind of desire in idealized conditions.

Other philosophers articulate a resonance constraint in similar terms. Dorsey talks of “the crucial subjectivist link between *her good* and *her*” and then articulates “the deeply plausible thought” at the heart of subjectivism: “for any intrinsic good ϕ for a person p , it must be the case that ϕ ‘fits’ p , *resonates* with p , fails to *alienate* p , and so forth.”⁶

Although I agree that these notions indicate a similar rough idea, I believe Dorsey’s “thought” here is actually three (or more) different theses: one about fit, one about resonance,

⁵ Railton 1986, p. 47 (I have added italics for emphasis). Railton has influenced a large literature on issues related to the resonance constraint.

⁶ Dorsey 2017, p. 196, 198 (his emphasis).

and another about alienation.⁷ We need to distinguish different strands within talk of the resonance constraint.

One strand is overtly about the “fit” between a subject and what affects her well-being. Connie Rosati claims that “an individual’s good must not be something alien – it must be ‘made for’ or ‘suited to’ her.”⁸ Dorsey, too, claims that “the good must ‘fit’ the person whose good it is”.

Another strand emphasizes an emotional or affective dimension. Richard Arneson discusses the claim that “a purportedly happy occurrence in one’s life that leaves one utterly cold cannot intrinsically enhance one’s well-being.”⁹ Guy Fletcher calls a theory “non-alienating” if it “rules out the possibility of someone having a high level of well-being whilst being left affectively cold.”¹⁰ This affective dimension seems appropriate to emphasize since the relevant dictionary definition of ‘resonance’ is “to affect or appeal to someone in a personal or emotional way.”¹¹ Arguably, the affective strand in talk of the resonance constraint also includes ideas mentioned in favor of an experience requirement, which I will come back to in section 4, such as the point from Ben Bramble that “something that has no effect on a person’s experiences does not ‘touch’ or ‘get to’ this person in the sort of way required for something to benefit or harm someone.”¹²

⁷ Perhaps Dorsey might agree with me. He comments in footnote 15 on his ostensibly “deeply plausible thought” that “Obviously, to resonate is not identical with a failure to alienate.” This would seem to recognize that there are distinct theses in his deep thought. But he continues the comment: “I group these together, however, insofar as both suggestions seem to get to the generally plausible thought that an individual ought to be sovereign over that which is good for her.” However, the claim of sovereignty seems to be yet another strand in talk of the resonance constraint.

⁸ See Dorsey 2017, p. 196; and Rosati 1996, p. 298.

⁹ Arneson 1999, p. 139.

¹⁰ Fletcher 2016, p. 62.

¹¹ From Merriam Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resonate>

¹² Bramble 2016, p. 88. Bramble urges objectivist hedonists to simply reject the resonance constraint (p. 107-9). I will argue that they can accept and develop a version of the resonance constraint.

Yet another strand emphasizes the authority of the person whose well-being is under consideration. Arneson raises the issue that “what is good for each person is entirely determined by that very person’s evaluative perspective.”¹³ Dorsey claims that “people, broadly speaking, should be ‘sovereign’ over their own good”; he also refers to this notion as “*evaluative authority*: authority to determine the good.”¹⁴

This shows that ‘the resonance constraint’ can be broken down into distinct versions which sharpen, in different ways, the rough thought that a person’s well-being is intimately related to that person.

(RC)	ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if ϕ <i>resonates</i> with S.
(RC – Fit)	... only if ϕ <i>fits</i> with S.
(RC – Alienation)	... only if S is not <i>alienated</i> from ϕ .
(RC – Affect)	... only if S is not left <i>affectively cold</i> by ϕ .
(RC – Authority)	... only if ϕ is deemed so by the <i>authority</i> of S.

Each version of a resonance constraint distinguished here is articulated as a necessary condition on improvements in well-being. This is how ‘the resonance constraint’ is typically understood among the authors mentioned. However, we might also be interested in the subtly different issue, which I will come back to in section 5, of what psychological change is necessary to explain why a person’s well-being improves.

I do not have space to closely examine every version of a resonance constraint. I will focus on (RC – Alienation) in section 3 and argue that everyone should deny it. I will focus on (RC – Affect) in section 4 and argue that sophisticated objectivists can accept it and even claim it to their advantage. But I will limit myself to only a few remarks about the other theses since,

¹³ Arneson 1999, p. 116.

¹⁴ Dorsey 2017a, p. 196.

although they clearly merit closer examination, there are reasons to doubt they could serve the subjectivists' purposes.

(RC – Fit) seems plausible enough, but the notion of 'fit' is overtly metaphorical and requires further articulation. It does not sharpen enough the original rough thought. It also does not obviously pose a problem for objectivism, as I will show later in section 4.

(RC – Authority) surely is an important point of controversy in the debates over well-being. But it need not have any leverage against objectivists. It appears to beg the relevant question, because an authoritative act of deeming something good involves attitudes that objectivists claim are *not* necessary. For similar reasons, a subjectivist cannot refute objectivism by pointing out that it implies that a person's attitudes are sometimes irrelevant for explaining changes in her well-being. This merely states the difference between the two groups of theories, without yet furthering the debate between them. For similar reasons, I now set aside (RC – Authority).¹⁵

3. The Non-Alienation Constraint

I think we all have good reason to deny (RC – Alienation) because we all are committed to recognizing possibilities in which something can make a person's life better even though he or she is alienated from it. Of course, the notion of 'alienation' can be understood in different ways. For instance, there are sociopolitical definitions that are not pertinent here.

Roughly speaking, to be alienated is to be or feel separated from something one used to be, or should be, more closely involved with. This rather general and uncontroversial understanding is enough for my purposes. I will not offer a theory or analysis of what alienation

¹⁵ Fletcher 2016, p. 61, makes a similar point (see also his fn 11).

is, nor will I spell out general criteria for how to distinguish its occurrence (none of which is attempted by the authors I cite).¹⁶ It will be enough that someone who persistently fails to recognize improvements to their well-being, when their well-being does improve, is alienated from what is good for them.

There are a range of example cases we might consider. I expect everyone will agree that it can make sense in a particular instance for a person not to recognize a change in his well-being. Let's say that you witness an event and notice that John benefits, but he does not notice the benefit. Suppose further that you get him to consider the matter, and he denies that his well-being has improved. How should we understand what is going on here?

Further details may influence how we interpret the case. But it is clearly coherent to think that John may be mistaken in evaluating how his well-being was affected. Although we may *usually* defer to others when it comes to a matter of their own well-being, we do not think they are *infallible indicators* of every change in their well-being. There are various ways that a person's judgment of his current level of well-being can be led astray. One way is for the person to be distracted or not paying attention. Another way is for the person to have firm or even dogmatic ideas about what benefits or harms him. If John feels confident, but is mistaken, that something cannot benefit him, this may lead him to deny that he benefits when, in fact, he does.

Suppose that John thinks that nothing will benefit him unless it brings him closer to God. You, however, have a desire-satisfaction theory of well-being. You witness an event that satisfies one of John's mundane desires and you get him to consider how it affected his interests. He denies any benefit and insists that mundane desire-satisfaction is worthless, saying 'it does nothing for me.' You inquire further and he agrees that he does have certain desires and that

¹⁶ See Leopold 2022 for more about alienation.

some of them were satisfied. You get him to consider the difference between a marginal benefit and a significant benefit and yet he continues to deny that he benefitted in any marginal way. You then think, sticking with your desire-satisfaction theory, that his mistaken ideas about what is of benefit to him have led him to mistakenly evaluate whether he benefitted from the event.

This elaboration of the scenario shows that even subjectivists of the sort who embrace a generic desire-satisfaction theory of well-being should agree that self-reports of changes in well-being are fallible. The point generalizes, too, regardless of which theory of well-being you support. It is possible for people to dogmatically espouse a mistaken theory of well-being that leads them to judge incorrectly how their interests are affected. Such judgments aim to reflect the changes in their interests, and they are not guaranteed to be correct. They are not authoritative acts of deeming what is truly beneficial.¹⁷

Suppose, in a further elaboration of the example, that John systematically miscalculates his own interests because of his dogmatic allegiance to a mistaken ideology. The failure to recognize the benefit in some bit of mundane desire-satisfaction is not an isolated incident, but part of a larger pattern. After repeated observations and discussion, with similar results, you conclude that John systematically fails to track changes in his well-being. Perhaps his mistaken confidence in his judgments of when he benefits makes him *incapable* of recognizing when he truly benefits or, even worse, perhaps he systematically *miscalculates* his well-being so that whenever his well-being improves he believes that he is harmed by what, in fact, benefits him.

¹⁷ I do not mean to beg the question against a subjectivist who thinks there are such authoritative acts of deeming something to be beneficial. Even if John has authoritatively deemed that something benefits him, it is possible that he later forgets what he has done and then mistakenly denies it has any benefit whatsoever. Having the authority to make something beneficial to oneself does not also guarantee that one will infallibly remember to evaluate all future events according to what is implied by one's past authoritative acts.

The example may seem extreme, but it is enough for my purposes that it be a real possibility. Since John systematically fails to track changes in his well-being and seems incapable of recognizing when he truly benefits, this makes him *alienated* from what is good for him. This is a counterexample to (RC – Alienation), since John benefits despite being alienated from the benefit. At the least, his intellectual understanding of what makes his life go well is detached from what actually makes his life go well. Perhaps we could also follow John around, observing his behavior or even, more fancifully, observing his emotional responses to everything that happens. We might observe that his emotions are likewise systematically detached from genuine improvements in his well-being. This would be all the more reason to classify John as alienated.

I expect there could be different responses to how I've set up and explained this counterexample. Some may react to the example by denying that John benefits at all, perhaps because nothing that leaves one feeling only unfulfilled or 'cold' could be of benefit. That would shift our focus to (RC – Affect) as the more fundamental version of (RC). I will return to this thought in section 4.

Some may react to the example by wondering if John lacks the relevant concept. They might be tempted to say that his judgments about benefit and harm are not judgments about personal well-being. But I don't think we want to preclude someone from possessing a concept of well-being simply because they've become convinced of an ideology that we think is mistaken. Relatedly, philosophers disagree about the correct explanation of personal well-being, but need not deny that those with whom we disagree lack the appropriate concept.

Others may react to the example by denying that John is alienated in the relevant sense. He is not *completely* alienated, one might say, since he at least obtains some desire-satisfaction.

My response to this objection is to clarify the issue at hand. I won't try to analyze what it is to be completely alienated, but I am willing to go along with the assumption that alienation can come in degrees, so that one can be less than completely alienated while still undergoing some substantial element of alienation. We can distinguish a strong version of a non-alienation constraint that pertains to being wholly or completely alienated, from a weaker version that pertains to being partly, yet substantially, alienated.

(RC – Alienation) ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if S is not alienated from ϕ .

(Strong RC-A) ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if S is not *completely* alienated from ϕ .

(Weak RC-A) ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if S is not *substantially* alienated from ϕ .

I do not have to insist that John is completely alienated. The counterexample I provided above targets (Weak RC-A) and therefore also (RC – Alienation) itself. In the example, John is at least substantially alienated from his desire-satisfaction even though, by the desire-satisfaction theorist's lights, he benefits from it. Moreover, our reasons for rejecting (Weak RC – A) are also reasons for rejecting (RC – Alienation) itself. Surely, one way of being alienated from something is to be substantially alienated from it, even if not completely alienated. So, the example is indeed a counterexample to (RC – Alienation), whether or not we also think it is a counterexample to (Strong RC – A).

I suspect that some desire-satisfaction theorists favor the strong version of the non-alienation constraint and think that this puts them at a dialectical advantage with respect to objectivist theories of well-being. It is impossible to be completely alienated from one's own desire-satisfaction, they might say, since having a desire satisfied is exactly the sort of thing that contrasts with being alienated.¹⁸

¹⁸ Willem van der Deijl 2022 similarly considers how subjectivist theories of well-being are compatible with some non-alienation constraints, such as a "narrow" one that permits "significant degrees of alienation" although, he says,

The strong version of the non-alienation constraint, (Strong RC – A), is plausible, however I am still inclined to question the subjectivist’s use of it. What prevents one from being completely alienated from one’s own attitudes? Is it question-begging to insist that desire-satisfaction contrasts with alienation? I think that answering these questions would require a deeper examination of the nature of alienation than I need to go into here.¹⁹

There is a clearer problem with the subjectivist strategy to use (Strong RC – A) against objectivism. It does not threaten all versions of objectivism, because it does not threaten objectivist hedonism.

The objectivist hedonist claims that pleasure is intrinsically beneficial for S independently of S’s attitudes, where pleasure is conceived of as an experience or experiential quality rather than as *desired* experience or anything else that essentially involves attitudes.²⁰ A hedonist can say, with great plausibility, that pleasure is the sort of thing that contrasts with alienation. Fletcher, for example, claims that pleasure is a “positive response” that contrasts with alienation.²¹ Again, we must clarify whether it is complete alienation at issue. It seems possible to be substantially alienated from one’s own pleasure, such as if one is actively trying to avoid pleasure at the time one experiences pleasure. This gives the objectivist hedonist good reason to

it will not give subjectivists an advantage over objectivist hedonism. His arguments and mine reach similar conclusions but they are based on rather different premises. He focuses on the times at which benefit accrues and resonance occurs (e.g., when a desire becomes satisfied). He does not discuss my claim that a person, such as John in the example above, who systematically misevaluates his own well-being, can benefit despite being alienated.

¹⁹ There is no non-controversial analysis of alienation in the literature on the resonance constraint. But neither do we need one. van der Deijl 2022, while not offering a deeper analysis of alienation, claims that a resonance constraint that is compatible with significant degrees of alienation “cannot be said to derive support from an independent notion of alienation.” He takes this point to undermine the subjectivists’ use of the constraint to argue against objectivist theories of well-being: “This, however, was the *very motivation* for the constraint.” By contrast, I do not assume that subjectivists need an independent notion, or a deeper analysis, of alienation, nor do I assume this was the very motivation for their use of the constraint against objectivists. Still, I agree with van der Deijl that if this were how subjectivists aimed to use the constraint, they were making a mistake.

²⁰ See Smuts 2011 for more about the debate over the nature of pleasure.

²¹ See Fletcher 2016, p. 69, and p. 60-69. Fletcher 2013 also argues that the resonance constraint does not favor subjectivist theories of well-being over objectivist theories.

reject (Weak RC – A). But (Strong RC – A) can be accepted on the grounds that it is impossible for a person to be completely alienated from her own pleasure.

Thus, if it is the stronger version of the non-alienation constraint that the subjectivist wishes to use in an attempt to refute objectivism, the attempt fails because it fails to refute every version of objectivism. The objectivist hedonist claims that whenever a person benefits he has an experience whose pleasant quality prevents him from being completely alienated from the experience. Of course, questions can be raised here about what exactly alienation is, and what is its proper contrast. But such questions can be raised for subjectivist attitudes, too, and it is plausible that alienation involves negative qualities of experience that contrast with pleasurable experience. There is a parity here, and so no dialectical advantage for subjectivism over all versions of objectivism.

Finally, I will note that a defender of (Weak RC – A) would have trouble using it against objectivism, even if we ignored the counterexample to it that I discussed above. It is open to an objectivist to say that the presence of some degree of substantial alienation is so objectively bad that it overwhelms the positive value of anything it attaches to. That is, some objectivists might defend (Weak RC – A) as part of their account of what objectively harms well-being, although my argument in this section implies that this is inadvisable.

I have argued in this section that we all should reject (Weak RC – A), and therefore we should reject (RC – Alienation). Furthermore, (Strong RC – A) does not put subjectivism at an advantage with respect to all objectivist theories, so it cannot be used to refute objectivism.

4. Affect and the Experience Requirement

In this section, I will discuss the thesis (RC – Affect), repeated here from above.

(RC – Affect) ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if S is not left *affectively cold* by ϕ .

(RC – Affect) seems plausible. But it cannot be used to refute every version of objectivism about well-being. For example, hedonists who are also objectivists will endorse it, as can some philosophers who reject hedonism while nevertheless positing a central role for pleasure in their explanations of well-being.

First, the word ‘affect’ can be clarified. Psychological affect encompasses emotions and moods, and so plausibly involves lots of attitudes. But there are also the affective phenomenal qualities that characterize what it is like to be a subject of experiences, from the first-person perspective, e.g., what it is like to enjoy drinking a pleasantly cold beverage on a warm day. Such qualitative or phenomenal features of experience are distinct from attitudes and may even have little or nothing to do with them. An objectivist about well-being can claim that certain phenomenal features are intrinsically beneficial or harmful, and thus agree with (RC – Affect) on those grounds.

For example, a hedonist can readily agree that what leaves a person affectively cold is of no benefit, since he will say that it is precisely *pleasantness*, or *enjoyableness*, that fundamentally explains any improvement in life. A hedonist will agree with objectivism if he maintains that the value of pleasure or enjoyment for the one enjoying pleasure is independent of her attitudes. Objectivist hedonists tend to accept a phenomenological theory of pleasure, on which pleasure is identified as a phenomenal feature of experience (a so-called ‘felt quality’ or ‘hedonic tone’ theory of pleasure).

Note that hedonists will agree that the features determining well-being are *subject-dependent*, and *mind-dependent*, even if not attitude-dependent. Hedonists agree with the rough

thought that well-being has a special relation to that person, and furthermore that a person's well-being depends on particular features of her psychology. These agreements do not preclude them from also accepting the objectivist claim that some of the psychological features on which well-being depends are independent of attitudes.

Other objectivists, who reject hedonism on the grounds that more than pleasure is intrinsically good for us, can agree with (RC – Affect) if they include pleasure – or positive affective qualities of experience²² – as part of every item on their objective list of what fundamentally explains improvements in a person's well-being. This includes hybrid theories on which someone benefits from what they enjoy only if those things are objectively worth enjoying.²³

It is thus a more specific version of (RC – Affect) that can be accepted by objectivists, one focused on attitude-independent affective phenomenal qualities of experience. This dovetails with another thesis from the philosophical literature on well-being, *the experience requirement*, according to which a person's well-being cannot be affected, for better or worse, without affecting that person's experiences. Our interest in (RC – Affect), as a way of sharpening the initial rough idea of a special connection between a person and her well-being, naturally leads us to examine how experience constrains well-being.

The experience requirement is, of course, accepted by hedonists who say well-being is determined by pleasant and unpleasant experience. It is also accepted by what Shelly Kagan calls “a mental state view, according to which well-being is simply a matter of having the right sorts of mental states,” which are not necessarily pleasant.²⁴

²² There are some reasons to think it is not pleasantness itself that explains why an experience is beneficial, but instead is a more particular way the experience feels. I discuss these reasons in other work.

²³ For example, see the final paragraphs of appendix I in Parfit 1984.

²⁴ Kagan 1994, p. 310

The experience requirement is also defended by L. W. Sumner. Although Sumner 1996 denies that well-being reduces to pleasures and pains, he identifies well-being with authentic happiness and then claims that “a subject’s happiness is a matter of her experience of the conditions of her life.”²⁵ Indeed, Sumner characterizes the experience requirement as an important insight that survives the objections against hedonism: “hedonism underlines a truth which applies to all goods and ills...that nothing can make our lives go better or worse unless it somehow affects the quality of our experience.”²⁶

The experience requirement is also blithely rejected by some authors, such as Griffin 1986, who think that a little reflection reveals that well-being depends on more than mere experiences, such as genuine accomplishment: “If I want to accomplish something with my life, it is not that I want to have a *sense* of accomplishment.”²⁷ Robert Nozick’s thought experiment about an experience machine that can perfectly simulate what it is like to accomplish something, for example, is rightly seen as being in conflict with the experience requirement.²⁸ If adding an accomplishment to a person’s life-history can improve her well-being, without affecting what it is like for her to live that life and thus making no difference to her experiences, then there would be no experience requirement on well-being.

But it is a mistake to blithely reject the experience requirement. First, there is something pre-theoretically attractive about it. It is common to hear that “what you don’t know cannot hurt you”.²⁹ I think what is often meant by this is that if you are so unaware of some event that it

²⁵ Sumner 1996, p. 139

²⁶ Ibid, p. 112. But see Hawkins 2016 for her distinction between stronger and weaker versions of an experience requirement, and her explanation for why Sumner only agrees with the weaker version.

²⁷ Griffin 1986, p. 19

²⁸ Nozick 1974. Responses to Nozick on behalf of hedonism can be found in Crisp 2006, Tannsjo 2007, and Bramble 2016.

²⁹ Also relevant is Bramble’s point that something that does not affect one’s experiences does not “touch” or “get to” one in the way needed to affect well-being.

makes no difference at all to your experiences, not even indirectly, then it cannot benefit or harm you.

Also, there are philosophical arguments in support of the experience requirement.

One argument begins with the insight from Kagan 1994, that “individual well-being is a state of the individual person.”³⁰ A change in a person’s well-being must involve changes in that person and, one might add, in changes the person is capable of being aware of.³¹ Such an awareness requirement would amount to an experience requirement since there is something it is like to become aware, and thus the change in awareness would involve a change in phenomenal experience – with what it is like to become aware of something.

Another argument is that postmortem benefits and harms are impossible because, we might assume, one could not be aware of such things after death. Epicurus famously argued that “death is nothing to us... (in part because) death is the privation of sense-experience.”³² Bramble 2016 defends hedonism on similar grounds, arguing that we should accept the experience requirement because it best explains why posthumous benefits and harms are impossible.

Yet another argument is that only sentient beings have well-being, in the relevant sense, and that this fact must be explained by the experience requirement.³³ Eden Lin has argued against each of these arguments and concludes that we lack sufficient reason to accept the experience requirement.³⁴ However, he does not consider my suggestion in this paper, that the experience requirement is the best way to sharpen the original rough thought behind talk of ‘the

³⁰ Kagan 1994, p. 313

³¹ Ibid, p. 310-17

³² Epicurus *Letter to Menoeceus*, line 124

³³ See van der Deijl 2021.

³⁴ See Lin 2021.

resonance constraint’ when that is spelled out in terms of what ‘leaves us cold’. Moreover, despite his criticism, the arguments above remain quite plausible.

We thus have good reasons to accept the experience requirement, and indeed to accept a version stronger than its usual articulation. Sumner understates the insight when he says that “nothing can make our lives go better or worse unless it somehow affects the quality of our experience.” Bramble likewise leaves it indefinite.³⁵ The important claim, however, is not that one’s experience must be affected *in some way or other*, or that phenomenal awareness is necessary regardless of how it impacts quality of experience. The quality of experience must *improve*, for well-being to improve. Likewise, the quality of experience must worsen, for well-being to worsen. We need not waste time considering theories on which well-being improves only if experiences get worse, since such a constraint is obviously incorrect.

A more precise version of the experience requirement should specify how an experience is improved or worsened. Arguably, this depends on the presence of positive and negative affect, i.e., the qualitative, phenomenal features of an experience that characterize how good or bad it feels to the subject of experience. This allows us to articulate the thesis (ER), in parallel to (RC – Affect).

(ER) ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if S experiences positive affect regarding ϕ .

(RC – Affect) ϕ is intrinsically good for S only if S is not left *affectively cold* by ϕ .

The relation of (ER) and (RC – Affect) depends on exactly how we are to interpret the evocative phrase ‘left affectively cold’. On a natural reading, which I think best, these theses are equivalent, since one is left affectively cold by ϕ just in case one does not experience positive

³⁵ Bramble 2016’s abstract articulates the experience requirement thus: “something can benefit or harm a being only if it affects the phenomenology of her experiences in some way”

affect regarding ϕ . On this reading, then, (RC – Affect) articulates an experience requirement on well-being.

There is also another interpretation available of what it means to be ‘left affectively cold.’ Perhaps a person who feels completely neutral, with no positive affect, does not count as being left affectively cold. Perhaps, that is, one must experience negative affect regarding ϕ , in order to be left affectively cold by ϕ . This second reading of (RC – Affect) could serve as a constraint on theories of well-being, but it would not articulate an experience requirement, since it does not require that anything in particular must be experienced for S to benefit from ϕ . It would only require that S fail to experience negative affect regarding ϕ . However, such a constraint would seem to incorrectly predict that a person whose experience does not change at all through some process can benefit from that process, while being completely unaware of the benefit and effectively left a stranger to it. Thus, this second reading of (RC – Affect) does not seem to be a way of sharpening the initial rough thought that a person bears a special relation to her well-being, and may in fact be incompatible with it.

5. Reversing the Role of ‘The Resonance Constraint’

Given the understanding of (RC – Affect) that I have argued for, on which it is equivalent to (ER), it should be clear that such a thesis cannot be used to refute objectivist hedonism, nor can it give any advantage to subjectivist theories of well-being over those objectivist theories on which pleasure or positive affect is an objectively valuable part of what determines well-being. This version of a resonance constraint is *clearly* incapable of serving the purpose that ‘the resonance constraint’ is commonly said to have in this debate. Moreover, it seems to serve the

contrary purpose of giving an advantage to sophisticated objectivists who posit a central explanatory role for pleasure or positive phenomenal qualities of experience.

Consider, first, that simple desire-fulfillment theories of well-being are incompatible with (RC – Affect). These theories imply that having a desire fulfilled will improve well-being even if the person is completely unaware of the change, experiencing no positive affect.

More sophisticated versions add qualifications and idealization about when desire-fulfillment improves well-being. Yet they, too, will be incompatible with (RC – Affect) if they imply that well-being can improve in a person who experiences no positive affect.

For example, Railton claims that the right sort of resonance is found in subjects who are in ideal circumstances involving full information, vivid imagination, and no defects of reasoning.

As he puts it:

An individual's good consists in what he would want himself to want, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses of instrumental rationality. ... Let us then say that an individual's intrinsic good consists in attainment of what he would in idealized circumstances want to want for its own sake...were he to assume the place of his actual self.³⁶

We might call this an 'ideal advisor' account of wellbeing, since it is as if S's idealized self were to advise S about what to desire in S's actual circumstances. Railton adds that "the views we would have were we to become free of present defects in knowledge or rationality would induce an internal resonance in us as we now are."

However, since Railton understands 'internal resonance' as the occurrence of a certain kind of desire, or finding something 'compelling' or 'attractive', rather than an experiential quality, his ideal advisor account of well-being seems to be incompatible with (RC – Affect). It

³⁶ Railton 1986, p. 16-17

is possible for someone to be left affectively cold, experiencing no positive affect, even though there may be some compulsion generated from the fact that one's ideal advisor has the relevant desire.

A similar result will hold for all other subjectivist theories that do not include positive phenomenal qualities of experience as part of what explains improvements in well-being. For example, Dorsey focuses on the cognitive attitude of endorsement, rather than desire, as the relevant pro-attitude. It is a person's endorsing something as good that makes it good for that person, apparently regardless of how it affects the quality of their experience. However, perhaps an extreme example of self-loathing might involve someone who is left affectively cold by their own personal endorsement, which shows why Dorsey's view seems incompatible with (RC – Affect).

Perhaps surprisingly, some hedonist theories of well-being are also incompatible with (RC – Affect), including those following the suggestion of Feldman 2004 to focus on what he calls 'attitudinal-pleasure'. These subjectivist versions of hedonism posit an attitude they call 'pleasure', rather than any experiential quality, to explain improvements in well-being. Feldman is explicit that "attitudinal pleasures need not have any 'feel'."³⁷ His version of hedonism thus implies that a person's well-being can improve even though they are left affectively cold, experiencing no positive phenomenal feelings.

Many objectivist theories will also be found incompatible with (RC – Affect) and the experience requirement. These are the original targets of the resonance constraint because they deny that there needs to be an internal resonance for well-being to improve. For example, John Finnis lists several "basic good" such as freedom and knowledge before adding that "a

³⁷ Feldman 2004, p. 56

participation in basic goods which is emotionally dry, subjectively unsatisfying, nevertheless is good and meaningful as far as it goes.”³⁸ Finnis’ objective list includes at least some items that allegedly can improve well-being while leaving the person completely cold, without any pleasure or positive affect.

However, an objective list theory of well-being could accept (RC – Affect) and the experience requirement. Such a theory might include positive affect as part of each item on the list of what fundamentally explains everything about well-being.

For example, we could borrow and supplement the pluralistic objective list of Fletcher 2013, which includes friendship, virtue, and happiness, among other things, although I do not presume that Fletcher himself would not agree with the supplementation. Fletcher is keen to say that friendship, virtue, and happiness involve pro-attitudes. In this way, Fletcher aims for his theory to comply with the necessary condition stated in a resonance constraint (as, e.g., a desire-satisfaction theory understands such a constraint) while denying the subjectivists’ explanation of what makes a life go well.³⁹ However, one could instead say that the internal resonance that is inherent in friendship, virtue, and happiness is in fact pleasure or positive phenomenal features of experience. Surely, friendship involves good feelings, and virtue (as Aristotle emphasizes) involves taking pleasure in doing the right thing. Moreover, despite Fletcher’s aim to offer only an enumeration of what is intrinsically beneficial, one might add an explanatory element to the theory by saying that it is impossible to explain what makes friendship and virtue intrinsically

³⁸ Finnis 1980, p. 97

³⁹ My arguments and aims in this paper are different from Fletcher’s in important ways. Fletcher 2013 aims to make his objective list compatible with the idea that everything intrinsically beneficial is attitude-dependent (“whether someone has some good is dependent on his pro-attitudes,” p. 212), even pleasure, whereas I’m suggesting that the value and nature of pleasure may be entirely attitude-independent and yet pleasure resonates *in the relevant sense*. Moreover, I think of objectivist hedonism as an explanatory theory that posits pleasantness as the basic good-making feature of anything that is beneficial, whereas Fletcher conceives of both hedonism and objective list theories as merely enumerative and not explanatory. See Fletcher 2013, p. 218-9.

beneficial without mentioning pleasure or positive affective features of experience, as this constitutes the internal resonance necessary for well-being to improve.

A hedonist who claims that pleasure alone is intrinsically beneficial, and that it is made so by its pleasantness or its positive phenomenal feel, can claim an advantage along with pluralistic versions of an objective list, insofar as their views are not only compatible with (RC – Affect) but also in agreement with the explanatory claim that the internal resonance of pleasure or positive affect is necessary for explaining when and why well-being improves.

But what of the allegedly problematic examples in which a person is alienated from her own pleasure? How could pleasure or positive affective experience be good for a person if that person does not care about it?

It seems to me that a person might objectively benefit from something, despite having mixed feelings about it and despite trying to avoid it. For example, a person actively trying to avoid feeling pleasure may nonetheless get something out of feeling it – the experience includes at least something good for him. Perhaps the experience is partly pleasant but partly unpleasant, and it may even be that the overall experience is net-harmful to him due to the disvalue of the negative affect. Feeling alienated about experiencing an unwanted pleasure may end up making the overall experience bad for the person experiencing it. But this is compatible with the pleasure or positive phenomenal features themselves being intrinsically valuable.

(RC – Affect) and (ER) are worthy of our attention as attractive ways of specifying the special relation between a person and her well-being. It is true that a person's well-being must "fit" that person, and that improvements in well-being cannot leave a person affectively cold. This is because of the experience requirement on well-being, whereby intrinsic benefit (or harm) implies a psychological improvement (or harm) that a person can be phenomenally aware of.

6. Conclusion

The theses and arguments of this paper do not conclusively support or refute any theory of well-being. There are other considerations that must be taken into account, including doubts about the claim that a mere quality of experience, independent of attitudes, can be intrinsically beneficial or harmful.

I focused on “the standard reason in the literature to reject” objectivist theories of well-being, i.e., ‘the resonance constraint’. I distinguished different versions of the resonance constraint and indicated why none of them give a dialectical advantage to subjectivist theories over all objectivist theories.

The non-alienation constraint may initially seem a promising way to sharpen the original rough thought about the special connection between a person and her well-being. But every theory of well-being ought to reject the non-alienation constraint, since every theory faces examples in which a subject benefits despite being alienated. Moreover, the stronger version of a non-alienation constraint cannot be used to refute all objectivist theories.

The affect constraint also seems promising. But it does not give any clear advantages to subjectivism, as it can be embraced by sophisticated objectivist theories. Objectivists are not prevented from agreeing with, and further sharpening, the original rough thought when it is understood in terms of affect. Perhaps surprisingly, the affect constraint can be used to give an advantage to certain objectivist theories.

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