

Welfare, subjectivity, and attitudes

1. A general consensus among the theorists of subjectivist persuasion resides in the idea that the welfare of an individual must, in a way to be specified, reflect the 'perspective' adopted by that individual. The idea is further spelled out by saying that the welfare of X essentially depends on the attitudes of X . Thus, e.g., if the life of X goes in a way W_x and the life of Y goes in a way W_y , and we are satisfied that the descriptions of W_x and W_y coincide in every minimally important respect, a possibility exists that X and Y would form radically different attitudes towards their lives. Their attitudes carry significant weight (or a *pro tanto* significant weight, as we shall see in a moment) in the determination of their welfare's level. By contrast, a theory belonging in the objectivist camp, is expected to be concerned primarily with the properties of W_x and W_y . It can of course be the case that an objectivist theory attributes some significance to the person's attitudes. But it would assign no special priority to these attitudes in the mix of other factors.

My purpose in this talk is to argue that some familiar varieties of subjectivism are not even coherent. In fact the only coherent version of subjectivism is expressed in hedonism.

2. The claim that g is good for X only if g is an object of a pro-attitude of X is immediately qualified by the subjectivists by imposing a constraint on the circumstances under which g is to be such an object. X must be in a certain condition C for his attitudes to count as decisive in the determination of his welfare. In the first place, he must be under ordinary optimal conditions. X should not be under the influence of drugs, overcome with emotions (anger, for instance), depressed, drunk, or hypnotised. Like with physical measurement, the measurement of attitudes should be protected from unduly irrelevant disturbances. There is, on the other hand, an entirely distinct class of concerns related, not to the subject's psychological condition, but to his competencies. The person must be in a certain epistemic state for his attitudes to play an important role. In cases of extreme ignorance their role will be negligible. Ignorance comes in two flavours. One is factual: the person must have sufficiently adequate knowledge of his station in the world. Another is ethical: the person should not be ignorant of the proper ethical dimensions in

which his station and his relation to other individuals must be evaluated. Thus Truman Burbank, Don Quixote, and the brainwashed citizens of North Korea do not have either one or both of these competencies to endow their attitudes with a privileged role in welfare determination. Simply examining satisfaction of their desires or interrogating them with regard to their welfare would not yield a correct result.

By imposing these constraints we already travel some distance away from the vision of subjectivism. Take a typical situation where subjectivism reigns unopposed: food tasting. Even if the person is ignorant about the ingredients (eating snails unawares and enjoying them), even if he is drugged (and enjoying the food he would normally abhor), even if he is brainwashed (and enjoying the Big Macs)—we would still say, correctly it seems, that he is entitled to form as many pro-attitudes as he wishes, and that his epistemic disabilities do not detract from the weight these attitudes possess in establishing the claim that the meal ‘tastes good’ to the person. By limiting the authority of the subject’s attitudes we introduce an objective standard into the procedure. It may be said in response that the constraints are themselves subjective. On the occasions when they fail the subject is ‘not himself’. If he were placed under the right epistemic conditions, he would have revealed his true attitudes. The response may be convincing with regard to ordinary optimal conditions. A drug intake can affect a person in a way incompatible with his character traits, long-term plans, and their associated values. When the question is posed about what attitudes a given person would adopt, we do not mean identify that person with a creature of such and such genetic makeup. We are asking about the attitudes adopted by a creature of a certain character and dispositions. The ordinary optimal conditions may, therefore, be among the pragmatic presuppositions of the question itself.

But the case is evidently different for ethical constraints. According to one popular idea defended in the literature, whatever set of ethical beliefs the agent has, they must have been chosen autonomously. The agent must not be bullied or brainwashed into having these beliefs. He must use his rationality freely in choosing them. Well, can we sensibly term this view ‘subjectivist’? An oppressed peasant woman in an Indian village (to use Sen’s famous example) has the circumstances of her upbringing and social environment too deeply entrenched in her moral identity. To imagine her reasoning freely and conversing with philosophers about values would mean to imagine an individual who, while sharing the genetic makeup with her, has virtually nothing else in common with her. It appears very strained to insist on defending the idea that welfare must be ‘up to her’ on the basis of endowing this morally remote individual with the special epistemic authority. Suppose I were to have an identical twin leading a life different from mine in nearly every aspect (and also having a vastly different moral character). If the subjectivist is to insist that the genetic identity of the agent determines his epistemic authority,

he must also say that my identical twin carries at least some of that authority in evaluating my own welfare. Hardly anyone, I think, would be willing to defend such a claim.

The role of factual constraints is more elusive. Some instances of factual ignorance appear to be covered by ordinary optimal conditions. A person competes in a tournament, wins it, learns about his win, but the next day momentarily forgets about it. His con-attitude, a result of that forgetting, does not count, as long as he would easily be able to recover his memory. But of course the subjectivists have entirely different cases in mind, namely those of global and consistent deception (Truman Burbank and Don Quixote). Such deception is an integral part of the person's life. Remove the deception, and the person may change to such an extent as, again, not to be recognisable in his behaviour. Another worry is that there may be cases of irrelevant radical ignorance. A person may be ignorant about the identity of his biological parents, about the state of his health, yet it is not immediately clear why his attitudes should not nevertheless be taken at face value.

3. Our discussion so far has relied on a key concept of attitude, but we did not care to clarify it to any extent. If language is our guide, there are two major routes one can take at this juncture. Sometimes we say, 'X has developed a strong aversion to stray dogs.' And on other occasions we also say, 'X has a positive attitude toward this policy.' Therefore, one can (1) interpret attitudes as psychological states of a special kind. They would be distinguished from other states by their directionality. One cannot have an attitude *simpliciter*: an attitude must always be directed at something. Call the attitude thus interpreted 'mental attitude'. Alternatively, (2) one can attempt to depsychologise attitudes. Perhaps the attitudes in our discussion are on a par with a propositional attitude such as belief. Following Wittgenstein, one would say that no mental state uniquely characterised can be associated with belief. On two different occasions one can believe the same proposition and with the same degree of confidence, yet be present in two very different mental states. The ontological category of propositional attitudes is murky. Instead we should study their outward manifestations (patterns of behaviour) and attitude-ascriptions.

I will return to the first option below. Let me now say why choosing the second option in developing the subjectivist view should prove extremely problematic. Our desired concept of attitude must leave room for pro-attitudes and con-attitudes. Not every propositional attitude can have these polarities (e.g., belief does not). Among those that have them are attitudes designated with expressions 'like/dislike', 'approve/disapprove', 'endorse/reject'. So the subjectivist is supposed to say that, for example, the approval by the subject is a key necessary component of theory of welfare. But what is it that the subject should approve (or disapprove)?

There are several possibilities. (1) The subject should approve a certain state of affairs (equivalently, a proposition). It is not enough that some authority believes that piano lessons are good for the subject. For them to contribute positively to his welfare the subject must 'like the fact' that he studies piano. However, if I am not mistaken, this sort of talk points us towards attitudes *qua* mental states. It is simply another way of saying that the subject must enjoy playing piano in order for this activity to increase his welfare. As promised, I will come back to this solution in a moment.

(2) Very generally, we conceive of welfare as functionally dependent on a number of factors. The task of the theory of welfare is figure out these factors. One theory names desire satisfaction among those factors, another theory emphasises enjoyment, a third perfection of intellectual capacities. Now, according to subjectivism, the subject will be granted the authority to approve or disapprove different factors of welfare. Perhaps he will not be able to judge the scope of their respective contributions. For this will involve him in calculations he may be unable to perform. But he would be able to insist on the broadest outline of the welfare function. The subject cannot say, e.g., *how much* family life contributes to welfare, but he must be able to say whether it contributes *at all*.

This response is plainly disastrous. It amounts to an outright refusal to provide any *theory* of welfare. *A* says that *his* welfare consists in sensual pleasure, *B* says that *his* welfare consists in serving his country, while *C* says that *his* welfare consists in charity works. The subjectivist must now say that all of them are right with regard to their own welfare. This effectively blocks any meaningful discussion of the nature of welfare. So far as we hope to have a theory of welfare, the subject cannot be endowed with the authority to decide what concept of welfare applies in his own case.

(3) The subject must be able to approve, not the parameters of the welfare function, but the individual values of these parameters. As far as I can see, this response works best for a conative theory of welfare. Such a theory might say, in a completely objective manner, that welfare consists in desire satisfaction. An objective version of this view would also specify which desires should be satisfied (e.g., informed desires). A subjective version would leave the specification up to the agent. But the latter claim is ambiguous. It can mean that each agent comes up with his own specification (e.g., informed desires or morally good desires). This should prompt the same no-theory objection just examined. Or rather, the claim can entail the absence of any specification. That is, whatever desires the subject happens to have, their satisfaction should increase his welfare.

Here I want to voice an old objection, originally due to Prichard and Ross. The concept of welfare is a normative concept. It must state what is good for the person. But there is no obvious connection between a *de facto* satisfaction of each and every desire and what is good for the person. On the other hand: the moment

we attempt to arrange desires in some order and say that these count more, those count less, and those count not at all, subjectivism is in retreat. The person cannot plausibly be credited with any authority in making such an arrangement. Another, even more ancient objection is that satisfaction of certain desires might not be approved by the subject himself. (Details to be elaborated in the talk.)

Let us now take up the interpretation of 'attitudes' as mental attitudes. For g to increase the person's welfare the person must form a mental pro-attitude towards g . I claim that this is a paraphrase of saying that the person would enjoy (take pleasure in) g . And g can be a proposition, an object, or a feeling. So this interpretation puts us on a fast track to hedonism.

But we must be careful in articulating the subjectivity of hedonism. It is not epistemically subjective. The subject is not automatically endowed with any epistemic authority in deciding the level of his welfare. It remains possible, with the right equipment, to measure his enjoyment objectively. Equally there should be an objective account of how to generate enjoyment in a most efficient way. However, hedonism is ontically subjective. The welfare of an individual depends on the internal state of that individual, with no regard to how adequately it represents the world, whether it fits moral rules, or aesthetic principles. The subject's state *de facto* determines the level of his welfare, even if the subject lacks any privileged access to figuring out how his welfare is determined. Furthermore, if the reasoning in §2 is sound, the prospects for qualified hedonism are rather dim.

My conclusion is twofold. First, there is no coherent epistemically subjectivist theory of welfare. Second, the only coherent subjectivist account is nothing other than (unqualified) hedonism.