Journal of the American Philosophical Association (2025) 715–729
DOI: 10.1017/apa.2025.10012

The Desirability of the Good: A Defense of the Objective List Theory

ABSTRACT: *Interest in objective list theories is driven by the difficulties faced by both hedonism and desire theories: in particular, the scarce plausibility of their attitude-dependence and the poor consistency with our considered moral judgments. Objective List Theories, however, are often charged with not offering any clear explanation of the goodness of objective goods and the related allegation of providing no principled way to decide which elements should feature in the list. It is argued that an explanatory account centered on the notion of 'desirability' can overcome these difficulties, as well as weaken another standard objection, that Objective List Theories alienate people from their desires.*

KEYWORDS: Well-being, objective list theories, hedonism, desire-theory, desirability

1. The Plausibility of Objective List Theories

Two theories have dominated contemporary discussions on well-being: hedonism, which identifies well-being with pleasure, and the desire theory, which ties it to the fulfillment of subjective desires. Both theories face problems (Kagan 1992; Arneson 1999). While recent accounts have tried to tackle the main objections,[1] many scholars share lingering worries that something is wrong in these theories—specifically, their subjectivism, or their holding that whether someone's life goes better or worse is entirely dependent on the attitudes of the person whose life it is.[2]

The view that our well-being can be authentically promoted by what we happen to desire, enjoy, or welcome is inherently controversial and open to serious criticism: it is a common experience that we are very often disappointed by the fulfillment of our desires, and dissatisfied by collecting pleasurable, fleeting experiences. In light of these considerations, growing attention has been paid to the merits of 'objective list theories' (Parfit 1984; Moore 2000; Fletcher 2013; Rice 2013; Hooker 2015). The main feature of such theories is their attitude-independence, that is, the claim that some things make human lives better irrespective of any attitude taken by the subjects of those lives. A second relevant feature of objective list theories is their limited

[1] For hedonistic accounts, see Sumner 1996; Crisp 2006a and 2006b; Feldman 2004 and 2010; de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014; for desire theories, see Harsanyi 1977; Griffin 1986; Sobel 1994; Heathwood 2005; Mariqueo-Russell 2023.

[2] See Sarch 2011; Lin 2017a. Some have denied the attitude-dependency of hedonism; however, it seems to me that, to count as pleasurable, an experience must necessarily include a pro-attitude, that is, it must be enjoyed, welcomed, or appreciated by the subject experiencing it.

pluralism. While hedonism posits pleasure as the single, overarching good of human life, to which all other goods are reducible, and the desire theory accepts that virtually anything can count as a good, provided that it is the object of our desires, objective list theories typically defend the existence of a limited list of goods—*e.g.*, health, knowledge, autonomy, achievement, friendship, and aesthetic experience—that contribute to making people's lives better; any event-token that instantiates one of the good-types on the list benefits the individual who experiences it.

The problems with attitude-dependency provide a reason to reject desire theory and hedonism and defend the objective list theory. Another consideration that counts in favor of objective list theory is that it fits nicely with our pre-theoretical assumptions about living a good life; as noted by Fletcher, "If you ask people what they ultimately want for themselves and their loved ones they will typically give you a list of items—health, pleasure, friendship, knowledge, achievement—without thinking that these can all be reduced to one value and without thinking that the list is determined by what their loved ones in fact desire" (Fletcher 2016: 152). I assume, therefore, that the objective list theory is intuitively more plausible than its two main competitors.

Nonetheless, the theory has been the target of several objections. The most relevant is perhaps that it seems to list a bunch of goods without offering any unified account of why these goods are goods; relatedly, it seems unable to specify why certain items are included in the list, and others not. My main goal is to defend the claim that the notion of 'desirability' provides the required explicative account and a test for the inclusion of potential candidates in the list; moreover, I will show that tying the objective goods on the list to the notion of desirability also helps reply to another standard criticism that charges the objective list theory with alienating people from their desires and preferences. I will end by stressing the differences between my version of the theory and some forms of perfectionism.

2. Desirability

What is it about the objective goods on the list that makes them good? Is there any good-making feature that objective list theorists can point to, which ties the items on the list together? One strategy for tackling this problem is to reject the challenge of offering any such explanation; as noted by Fletcher, "all explanation stops somewhere" (Fletcher 2013: 218), and it is not clear that hedonism and desire theory have something non-trivial to offer as an explanation of why pleasure or desire fulfillment is ultimately good. Another possibility is to deny that the basic goods have any common feature, declaring that "each good is its own good-maker" (Moore 2000: 78). Objective list theorists may note that the requirement to single out a common good-maker "begs the question against pluralistic theories" (Rice 2013: 204), whose point is precisely to claim a plurality of the goods. This may seem a promising line, but the worry is that it relies on a sort of intuitionism that requires us to imagine a life that contains a candidate good and ask ourselves whether that life is more beneficial than another that does not contain it (Hooker 2015). For those with worries about intuitionism, it seems that no real help can be offered by objective list theories to establish whether some good is an element of well-being.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My main claim is that we can offer a reply by identifying a formal element that brings together objective goods, following a suggestion by Henry Sidgwick. In the first book of *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick defines 'ultimate good on the whole for me' as "what I should practically desire if my desires were in harmony with reason, assuming my own existence alone to be considered" (Sidgwick 1962: 112). This definition is meant to correct Mill's naturalistic analysis that identifies the good with pleasure, based on the empirical fact that "there is in reality nothing desired except happiness" (Mill 1985: 237). Sidgwick rightly notes that 'being desirable' differs from 'being desired', in that it contains a normative element: it refers not to our occurrent desires, but to what we *should* desire, or we have *reason* to desire, even if we do not presently desire it.

In the third book, Sidgwick uses this definition to show that "Ultimate Good can only be conceived as Desirable Consciousness" (Sidgwick 1962: 398), and this notion must be identified as Happiness or Pleasure, while the importance we attach to ideal objects like knowledge, beauty, and virtue can only be justified "by considering its conduciveness, in one way or another, to the happiness of sentient beings" (1962: 401). I suggest that we follow Sidgwick in holding that desirability is the key to the analysis of prudential good, and that we designate with this notion the common feature of the goods on the objective list, and the criterion for inclusion in it. The proposal, then, is to pinpoint the explanatory character of the objective list theory by noting that the entries on the list are desirable elements in human life. But what does desirability mean, and how can we establish what is desirable? To unpack the notion of desirability, I suggest that we concentrate on the following five propositions: the desirability of any good involves i) that such good is most of the time desired by most people; ii) that it is welcomed and enjoyed by most people who have it, even if they did not desire it before obtaining it; iii) that the satisfaction it provides is lasting and not fleeting; iv) that individuals who possess it can be brought to appreciate its benefit, though its benefit has gone unnoticed up to now; v) that it is deeply missed once it is taken away from people, even if they did not particularly enjoy it when they possessed it, and perhaps did not even notice that they had it. These five conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient for desirability; let us briefly review them.

2.1. Objective Goods Are Desired

Proposition i) states that objective goods are desired by most people most of the time. This may seem to bring us back to the desire theory since it invokes the occurrent desires of people to explain the supposed objectivity of the goods on the list. This is not so, however, because—according to the present proposal—occurrent desires are not *constitutive*, but only *revelative* of the goodness of the goods. The fact that a desire for x is near universal is evidence of the goodness of x, not because x acquires intrinsic value by fulfilling antecedent desires, but because it shows that x is very generally believed to make human lives better. Of course, such evidence is defeasible because it may turn out that people desire something that is not truly valuable. If we find that people are very often dissatisfied when obtaining x, even though they have desired it badly, then we have reason to conclude that those desires, though

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

widespread, are deceptive. If, however, most people desire x, and are satisfied when they obtain it, then we have reason to conclude that x is truly desirable.

2.2. Objective Goods Provide Satisfaction

This idea of welcoming or enjoying something as a positive contribution to one's life is a second necessary element in our notion of desirability: some good x is desirable if obtaining it produces satisfaction. The idea here is that the items on the list are such to provide a sense of completeness to human life, even if they do not fulfill any antecedent desire; when we obtain these goods, we experience their appropriateness for human life and conceive a desire for their continuance. This will be true at least for reasonable people, who can be convinced by argument to make an attempt. Many introverted and shy people, for example, have gone through the experience of not desiring friendship or love, and then—once they have been convinced to make the attempt—find that they do contribute to making their lives better. The same may happen with achievement or autonomy: we may be initially reluctant to engage in some project, out of indolence or fear of failure, but, when we eventually decide to attempt, we realize that the very fact of undertaking a project of our own positively affects our well-being. Similarly, we can initially be satisfied with relying on others' ideas and plans but then learn that there is a special satisfaction tied to acting autonomously based on one's convictions and considered judgments. These experiences testify to the fact that some goods can be appreciated and valued even if we did not antecedently desire them. This provides further evidence in favor of proposition i), because it shows that occurrent desires are not constitutive of the prudential value of such goods. The value of these goods does not *depend on* their being presently desired; rather, from their being desired, and from the satisfaction they produce also for those who did not desire them, we infer their desirability.

2.3. Durable Satisfaction

Proposition iii) clarifies proposition ii) by stressing the durable character of the satisfaction offered by objective goods. Indeed, we can easily imagine that some desires—*e.g.* for revenge against wrongdoers—are very common and that their fulfillment provides some satisfaction. Such satisfaction, however, is momentary, and most reasonable people would not count it as something that durably betters their lives and enhances their well-being. Exercising power over other people is another example of something that perhaps many people desire and enjoy: but oppressing others generally deprives one of authentic relationships of friendship and love and hardly provides *durable* satisfaction.

More generally, we can observe that anything that has been desired, perhaps for a long time, generates some satisfaction when obtained. This satisfaction, however, clearly is not evidence that the thing desired is an objective good, for it is very often shallow or short-lived. Our third proposition, instead, points to a durable satisfaction, independent of any antecedent desire, that is tied to the attainment of the objective values; one reason that probably accounts for the fact that objective goods are typically desired by most people most of the time is exactly that their attainment

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

provides durable satisfaction in human life. This seems to cast some doubt on the inherent goodness of pleasure, which is listed by some defenders of the objective list theory among the objective goods (*e.g.* Fletcher 2013). Of course, pleasure usually tends to make human life better, but it generally does not provide durable satisfaction; this may suggest that it is not an objective good after all unless we are thinking not of any pleasure *per se*, but of the satisfaction that is characteristically tied to obtaining some objective good. Friendship or achievement do provide a durable satisfaction, but this satisfaction is much more complex and is obtained in much more indirect ways than as conceived by the standard hedonistic picture.

2.4. Objective Goods Unknowingly Benefit

The objective list theory is attitude-independent, that is, the goodness of the goods is neither constituted by nor presupposes any acknowledgment or other attitude of the subject who has them. Our last two propositions connect the notion of desirability with this basic element of the objective list theory. Proposition iv) points to existing elements of our lives that contribute to our well-being, even when we fail to notice their importance. It suggests that in most cases it is possible to realize, or to be brought by others to realize, that these elements in fact make our lives better. For example, people are sometimes unaware of the contribution to their well-being by their having a family and enjoying close ties with parents or siblings. They might never mention this as a central element of their well-being, nor say that it provides any particular enjoyment. But, the present suggestion is that further experience—including illuminating conversations with others—can change their perception of such relationships, bringing them to appreciate the prudential value of these relationships: in such cases, people do not say that what wasn't valuable before has become valuable for them, rather I submit that they are brought to recognize an already existing value that they had previously neglected or underestimated. The present point is that objective goods can benefit people when they are unaware of this benefit.

2.5. Revealing Loss

Proposition v) points to a similar experience that can be revelatory of the goodness of some goods. Objective goods need not be presently desired, or experienced as pleasurable, to better your life; we may not even notice we possess them. Nonetheless, we may also become aware, at some point, of their existence and value, and one relevant source of such awareness is the experience of loss. Standard examples of this are the goods of health and freedom. Health is not something for which we generally rejoice; there is no ordinary pleasure in being healthy, and we may not even notice that all is working well in our bodies and minds. Health—as was noted by a famous physician—is mere "life lived in the silence of the organs" (Leriche 1936: 16.1). Nonetheless, we have a very clear perception of the (not merely instrumental) importance of health's contribution to our well-being when we are suddenly deprived of it. When we are sick and suffering, we remember the foregoing period as one in which everything was ok, and we enjoyed a state of

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

complete well-being. And even if we are presently unaware of our unhealthy state, disease can objectively detract from our well-being by reducing our possibilities to enjoy positive experiences. This shows that, contrary to the hedonistic account, the goodness of health does not depend on the pleasure it produces but is independent of any actual enjoyment; likewise, the badness of disease is not tied solely to the present experience of pain and discomfort.

The same seems to be true of freedom. People who have always been free may not often rejoice about having the possibility to freely decide what to do, express our opinions on political or other matters, or travel in and out of our country. The fact of enjoying the freedom to do these things makes our lives better even if we never concentrate on it, nor derive any discernible pleasure from it (perhaps because we make scarce use of it). This becomes immediately apparent when we are deprived of these liberties by the failing of a democratic polity; the highly depressive effects of such a political change are clear evidence of the contribution that freedom or autonomy makes to our well-being.

3. Dispelling Some Objections

The explanatory account defended here, therefore, holds that the goods on the list share the good-making property of being desirable; for each item on the list—that is—it is true i) that most people desire that good, ii) that most people welcome it when they have it, even if they had not antecedently desired it, iii) that it provides durable satisfaction to those who have it; iv) that it makes people's lives better even if they are not always aware of this fact and v) that this can be revealed by the experience of a severe sense of loss when we are deprived of it, even if we did not enjoy it or care much about it when we possessed it.

A natural objection to this account is to say that, by insisting on the satisfaction generated by experiences that were not antecedently desired, the theory risks falling back into hedonism: it is the pro-attitude that we experience when we make friends—so the objection goes—or the pleasurable tone that we feel in spending our time with them, that accounts for the goodness of friendship. The objective list theorist's insistence on the gratification that generally accompanies the attainment of friendship, however, does not show that this value is reducible to the pleasure it brings: rather, friendship is a form of human relationship that is distinctive of inherently social animals as human beings, and therefore is in most cases accompanied by a special feeling of completeness and satisfaction.

Moreover, according to the objective list theory, friendship does not make human life better only when, and in the measure in which, it produces pleasure. Being friends may be difficult at times, it may require much effort and dedication, and may involve partaking in the friend's suffering and sadness; but the sharing of sentiments and the communion of experiences that is allowed by friendship makes human life better also in these situations. The 'existential void' that is left by the ending of some such relationship confirms this.

A different objection to the proposed account points to the fact that, by insisting on the connection with our desires, it risks falling back on a properly refined version of the desire theory, in which it is not occurrent desires, but rational and informed

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

desires that count. In fact, Sidgwick's definition, with which we began, can be plausibly interpreted as an informed-desire theory (Crisp 1990); therefore—so the objection goes—it is plausible to say that the goodness of the items on the list is constituted by their being the object of informed desires.

Admittedly, the informed desire theory resembles the objective list account in rejecting the view that whatever is desired or enjoyed is good. But our criterion of desirability is much stricter, and the objective list theory certainly does not consider everything desired by fully informed and fully rational people as *per se* desirable. Moreover, it does not require maximal rationality, as many refined theories of desires do, since the judgment concerning, for example, the objective value of friendship may well be partly constituted by the emotions and sentiments experienced in a friendly relationship. Judgments concerning the objective goods on the list are the considered judgments of ordinary people about what makes a durable contribution to a good life, not the verdicts of an ideally rational impartial spectator. Finally, informed desire theories assume that it is the satisfaction of occurrent (informed) desires that counts, while for the objective list account, occurrent desires may be revelatory, but are surely not constitutive, of the value of the items on the list. Their desirability is their aptness to be desired, *i.e.* the fact that people either desire them or may be brought to enjoy them and therefore desire to continue having them: such desirability is grounded on basic features of human nature, not on any individual's occurrent desires.

4. A Definite List?

One standard objection that is generally pressed against the objective list theory centers on the theory's capacity to provide a definite and principled list of objective goods: why are these things and not others on the list? Is there any non-arbitrary principle that justifies inclusion on the list? (Bradley 2009: 16). Defenders of the theory often disagree on the content of the list, and some goods are considered objective elements of well-being by some authors and not others: examples of controversial items are religion, play, and virtue. Disagreement on the content of the list is problematic for objective list theorists because one alleged virtue of the theory is its capacity to provide a sound enumerative account, i.e., a convincing definition of the content of a good life. From this point of view, the objective list theory is said to fare better than both hedonism and desire theory, since hedonism adopts a very limited and reductionist view of the content of well-being, and desire theory is merely explicative, and leaves the content of well-being entirely open to individual pro-attitudes.[3] If the objection is correct, however, the objective list theory does not fare much better, due to the arbitrary character of its definition of the content of a good life.

[3] Lin (2017b) purported to show that all three theories are enumerative and explicative to the same degree. I disagree. While hedonism and objective list theory provide *substantive* content to their theory, desire theory is a merely *formal* theory that does not offer any material suggestion concerning valuable human ends, nor any principle for choosing such ends.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In reply, I wish to offer two observations. The first is that the objection seems to overshoot the mark. The lists offered by objective list theorists indeed differ in some details, but it must also be stressed that both their theoretical accounts and the considered judgments of ordinary people concerning well-being share a substantial common ground. Some items, indeed, feature in all lists: in particular, there is no denying that friendship and other affective relationships, knowledge, and achievement (or success in one's rational aims) are desirable elements of a good life (see Scanlon 1998: 119-26; Moore 2000; Nussbaum 2000: 78-80; Hooker 2000: 41; Hooker 2015; Hurka 2011; Lauinger 2012: 59-60; Rice 2013); aesthetic experience and autonomy are also nearly ubiquitous in all discussions of the theory, even if sometimes under different names (such as 'awareness of true beauty', or 'practical reasonableness'). It is also noteworthy that defenders of rival accounts of well-being often insist that their theories can account for these basic goods featured in the objective list theory (Griffin 1986: 67-8; Crisp 2006a: 113-25).

The second, and more important observation is that the notion of desirability can in fact be invoked to justify the inclusion of these and other elements in the objective list. The three mentioned items that elicit quasi-universal approval, in fact, clearly satisfy the requirements of desirability. Friendship and other affective relationships, including positive parental and fraternal relations, are typically desired by most human beings; and, as already noted, even people who are scarcely disposed towards affective human relationships generally discover that these relationships provide significant satisfaction once you overcome your psychological resistance. Moreover, people who have experienced such relationships can be brought to see the lasting contribution that they have made to their well-being without their noticing. Finally, even if—due to one's self-restrained character—one doesn't find much enjoyment in relationships with friends and relatives, one is likely to experience a radical existential void, once forsaken by one's acquaintances.

The same can be said for the two other mentioned elements. Knowledge is certainly something that people desire, at least up to a certain level. Admittedly, it seems possible to live and enjoy your life without pursuing this good in a particularly strong manner; however, to live in complete ignorance and with no pursuit of knowledge certainly deprives our lives of much that is of value, including the possibility of devising significant life projects. Certainly, one does not need to be a Nobel prize winner to live a good life; at the same time, one needn't be Socrates to realize that the life of an educated person offers greater occasions of enjoyment and satisfaction than the life of a satisfied pig. Finally, awareness of losing one's cognitive capacities—a process characteristically associated with old age—causes deep anguish and is typically experienced as much less tolerable than impairment in physical capacities.

As for achievement, people characteristically desire to realize some project in their lives: they set goals for themselves and strive to reach them. Provided that such goals have a recognizable place in human life, achieving them durably contributes to the well-being and flourishing of their lives. There is no need to set oneself great undertakings or highly demanding commitments: collecting stamps may well fit, even though counting blades of grass in park squares and well-trimmed lawns does not. Of course, more comprehensive goals that involve complex actions and engage a

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

considerable amount of time, such as becoming a good doctor or parent, can have more impact on overall well-being than more limited or momentary aims. Moreover, even those who hesitate to commit themselves to any project, very often realize the meaning that accomplishing a chosen goal can provide to their lives. And people who complain about their lives being wanting can often be brought to see and experience the good constituted by their having realized some of their life projects. Finally, it is a common observation, especially for elderly people, that being deprived of all objectives or projects makes their lives much less interesting, while having personal projects preserves their well-being (Roe, Blythe, Oliver and Roe 2022).

As mentioned before, the goods of aesthetic experience and autonomy also often feature in standard lists; and these goods also seem to satisfy the requirements of desirability. Most people desire such things as listening to music, reading novels, seeing movies, or enjoying beautiful natural environments. It is a common experience that these things provide satisfaction—a satisfaction that is not extinguished but revived by prolonging the experience and becoming experts in a certain domain. One of the reasons why becoming deaf or blind can be severely impairing is that they can deprive human life of some of its basic aesthetic pleasures. A similar analysis can be offered for autonomy. Most people desire to make choices in life, and those who do not can often be brought to appreciate the importance of living according to one's values and plans. Furthermore, being deprived of autonomy or freedom illuminates its value through the sense of loss one experiences. This is particularly evident in old age, where the loss of autonomy is one of the main causes of the decline of well-being (Heide 2022).

One good that does not always feature on the lists but there is reason to mention, is health. As already noted, we may be tempted to consider it only an instrumental good, that is, something that is good only because it allows us to pursue something else that is intrinsically good. For reasons already mentioned, I believe this is wrong. Health is inherently good, as shown by its satisfying all the conditions of desirability: it is almost universally desired, it promotes satisfaction even if we are unaware of it, and we see its value with utmost clarity when we lose it. Being healthy is indeed sometimes even equated to enjoying well-being: and although there is more to well-being than just being healthy, health is no doubt an objective good of human life.

I submit that these six goods—friendship and other affective relationships, knowledge, achievement, aesthetic experience, autonomy or freedom, and health—are highly plausible elements of a good life; they share the characteristic of being desirable elements of human life and human life is made worse by the absence of one of them. Of course, they can be possessed in different degrees by different individuals; there is no need to possess all the items to a high degree to live a sufficiently good life. Moreover, it is even not necessary to always prioritize these main elements: there may be other goods on the list that may be less necessary than these but still provide important contributions to an individual life's well-being, and it can be reasonable to sacrifice some share of friendship, knowledge, or achievement to pursue them.

The objective list theory is not committed to the assumption that all objective goods are good for everyone to the same degree, or good in all circumstances. Some goods may be less suitable for certain people, due to their psychological inclinations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These people may be reluctant to acknowledge the goodness of some items on the list. Autonomy is a good example. The capacity to make decisions for oneself, and to direct one's life according to one's values and projects, is good for the individual; nonetheless, for cultural or individual reasons, some people may suffer from uncertainty and lack of self-confidence in decision-making and planning. For these people, autonomy may be less valuable than for others. This does not mean that it has no value for them, or that they cannot be brought to appreciate the value of conducting their lives in accordance with their goals and deicsions; it is just that a learning process may be needed to appreciate this good, and this may require some support from caring others.

Some may object that there is no need to define a list of the basic objective goods, as I have endeavored to do: we might simply use the notion of desirability to establish whether individual states of affairs satisfy the conditions for being objectively good, abandoning the idea of a predefined list. However, basing our judgments of objective goodness on the individual application of the criterion of desirability in every circumstance would open up the view to inaccurate or mistaken judgments. This does not mean that we should consider our list of goods as closed and not improvable; new circumstances of human life may, with time, suggest the addition of some new item, when experience shows that it satisfies our conditions of desirability.

5. Desirability and 'the Alienation Problem'

A standard objection to objective list theories is that saying that something x is good for an individual A when A has no pro-attitude to x, looks counterintuitive: if A neither desires x, nor chooses it, approves it, nor takes pleasure in it, then to say that it is good for them surely misses the mark. Indeed, it seems to alienate individuals from their desires and motivations, in the name of an ideally good life that is quite foreign to them. The attitude-independence of the objective list theory seems to condemn it to this sort of alienation: for it holds that objective goods do not enhance people's well-being because they desire them or enjoy them, but *irrespective of* what they desire or enjoy.

One standard reply to what we may call 'the alienation problem' is to say that the basic goods on the list do not completely exclude reference to the individual's attitudes: for example, it is common to note that friendship and other affective relationships cannot do without desires for the other person's happiness and pleasure to be in her company (Rice 2013: 207; Fletcher 2013: 212). The problem with this reply is that the fact that desiring our friend's happiness is an element of the objective good of friendship does not imply the existence of any desire for friendship in the first instance. I may simply find myself involved in a friendship relationship without having desired it; in this case, the fact that, consequently, I have some desire for my friend's happiness is no evidence that the friendship relationship is connected to my deepest and most authentic desires.

Grounding the goodness of objective goods in their desirability helps solve, or at least weaken, the alienation problem. According to this account friendship (as well as other objective goods) is, in fact, inherently desirable; therefore, it can be predicted

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that, should some individuals not desire it, they would in all likelihood acquire a pro-attitude towards it once they have experienced it. This tends to remove the alienation problem by creating a stable connection between the basic goods and the subjects' pro-attitudes: for it assumes that the experience of all the goods on the list can elicit pro-attitudes in people, independently of their antecedent desires. Of course, the individual who has not yet experienced the objective good in question will have some initial feeling of being alienated from their desires in being told that something they don't desire is nonetheless good for them; the theory, however, assumes that most reasonable individuals can be brought to see that such goods would make their lives go better once they have experienced them.[4] This may take some time, so that one may not initially appreciate some objectively good experience—say, acquiring worthwhile knowledge—but later in life realize that the presence of this good has made them better off than they thought.

This leaves open the possibility that some individuals may experience a lingering feeling of alienation in being told that something they refuse to experience would objectively make their lives better. The objective list theory need not deny this possibility, but it will have removed feelings of alienation in most individuals. In any case, as already mentioned, the theory is not committed to the view that *all* reasonable individuals will *necessarily* welcome *all* the goods on the list; its claim is that *most* reasonable people will eventually value those goods. It does not even require that reasonable people attach value to all the goods on the list, or attribute the same high value to all of them. The fact that some reasonable individual eventually does not accept one or another objective good does not detract from its goodness; moreover, the inherent pluralism of the objective list theory and the fact that the theory is not committed to any hierarchy in the list of goods ensures that different individuals can assign different priorities to the various items, and some items may be absent, or barely represented, in some individual's life. The theory can adopt a liberal stance on these points since it does not lay any claim to define the only ideally good human life.

6. On Objective List Theory and Perfectionism

I have defended the claim that the notion of desirability can provide the required explanatory account for the objective list theory: desirability is the common feature of the entries on the list, and the condition for inclusion in it. But I have also referred to the special satisfaction that these goods elicit, and have linked it to the 'fitness' of such experiences as friendship or knowledge with the life of social and rational animals such as human beings. Since human beings are inherently social animals,

[4] This may seem to bring my position near to accepting 'the weak endorsement constraint', according to which "nothing can intrinsically enhance the quality of a person's life unless that person has some positive, affirmative attitude toward that element of her life" (Arneson 1999: 139). My view, however, is not that one must have some positive attitude towards the good beforehand, but rather that they will in all likelihood develop it when experiencing it. Arneson rejects the requirement based on the imaginary case of Samantha, who experiences reciprocal love but lacks a positive attitude toward it. My suggestion is that, unless she somehow endorses her loving relationship, saying that "She deeply loves another who loves her in return" (141) simply cannot be true.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

friendship and other intimate human relationships are good for us; since human beings are intelligent animals, being in touch with reality, and knowing our environment is good for us, and helps us to better navigate our world; since human beings are endowed with a capacity to make decisions based on their beliefs and choices, autonomy is good for us, even if at times we choose to be guided by others' judgments. And the same holds for all the goods on the list. The objective goods on the list—it seems—are desirable because they are needed for a flourishing human life.

This may suggest that the intrinsic desirability of the objective goods must eventually be grounded in a perfectionist account of human nature: the reason for the goodness of the items on the list is their jointly realizing human perfection (Finnis 1980; Hurka 1993; Kraut 2007). Perfectionism seems to offer a deeper ground for the objective list theory. In this sense, perfectionism is compatible with it (and with hedonism and desire fulfillment as well), since it can be considered a second-order theory that explains why the good-making properties appealed to in first-order judgments are good-making, whereas the three standard competitors are first-order theories that tell us why particular things are good for a person (Prinzing 2020).

I do not mean to deny the plausibility of this connection; however, I wish to stress that the objective list theory can be defended without reference to any specific perfectionist view, and particularly without reference to some of the controversial elements that are found in traditional perfectionist accounts. This makes the theory inherently more plausible than those accounts. The connection between the objective list theory and perfectionism is provided by the fact that both accounts are based on the existence of certain 'conditions of flourishing' for human life. However, both the traditional and some contemporary versions of perfectionism are characterized by three features that make it a much bolder theory than the objective list theory. First, these theories are grounded on a metaphysical theory of human nature that is potentially at odds with naturalistic views of human life. Second, they generally defend the existence of *one single* account of human perfection—e.g. *the* rational life, or *the* life of self-realization—that all individual lives should struggle to realize (Green 2003: 199-205; Hurka 1993: 39-44); in doing this, they often slide from a theory of well-being to a complete conception of the good life that goes beyond prudential good, as witnessed by the inclusion of virtue among the objective goods to realize. Third, several perfectionist theories are committed to a view of human perfection grounded on elements that are unique to humans: human perfection is the embodiment—say—of rationality which is a feature of human and only human life. These features can be found in nearly all classical forms of perfectionism, including the ethics of Aristotle and subsequent Aristotelians such as Aquinas, early modern philosophers such as Spinoza, and late idealists such as F. Bradley and T.H. Green. Contemporary versions of the theory also sometimes share some of these features (see, for example, Finnis 1980 and Hurka 1993).

Though some perfectionist theories have much in common with the objective list theory, it should be stressed that these elements of perfectionism are in no way part of the objective list account. For one thing, even though the objective list theory refers to the basic conditions of human flourishing, it does not presuppose any metaphysical

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theory of human nature and is quite compatible with an entirely naturalistic (rather than a perfectionist) account of a flourishing human life. Moreover, the pluralism of the theory ensures that there is no need for a single picture of human perfection: in fact, the various entries on the list can have different importance and stress in the lives of different flourishing individuals, and it is also possible that some entry is substantially absent from an individual's life, without that life failing to reach a measure of real flourishing.[5] Moreover, the objective list theory is not committed to the view that being virtuous is necessarily good for the agent, even though it contributes to their moral goodness. While it is true that a disposition to act rightly may be desirable in many contexts, including this in a list of prudential goods is controversial. Indeed, since the items on such a list usually promote an individual's well-being, including it would imply accepting a stable—if not universal—connection between virtue and happiness. But it seems to me that such a connection is unfortunately much looser, and that too often virtue is not rewarded by happiness. Finally, the objective list theory does not claim to have found what is unique to human life. Health, friendship, knowledge, autonomy, achievement, and aesthetic experience are elements that make human life better, but there is no implication that any or all these items are the unique possessions of human individuals. High levels of rational agency and friendship, for example, can be found in some non-human animals, and presumably make *their* lives better, just as much as they improve ours.[6] All of this supports the claim that the objective list theory is distinct from traditional forms of perfectionism.

A related worry is that the objective list theory cannot satisfy the 'strong-tie requirement', that is, the constraint that events directly benefiting someone must have a strong tie with their life. According to William Lauinger (2013), when your friend sticks up for you when others are belittling you behind your back, objective list theorists must say that you have benefitted since the event is an instance of friendship; but this violates the requirement since that event does not affect you. Lauinger believes that objective list theorists can avoid this implication only by appealing to a perfectionist framework that views the exercise or development of some capacities belonging to the person as the feature that benefits you. The idea is that since no capacity of yours is involved in the mentioned example, no direct benefit is accrued by you. My suggestion, on this point, is that you do indeed benefit from the event: were your friend to remain silent when others are belittling you, she would prove disloyal to you, and others would be justified in believing that she only pretends to be a friend to you. Your friend's intervention has consequences on your well-being, because it protects the authenticity of your friendship, and defends you from the bad consequences of being fooled.

[5] This is not to deny that, were that individual's life to also embody the missing entry, it would be a *better* life than it is.

[6] Here I implicitly assume an invariabilist account of welfare (Lin 2018), although I take the objective list theory as basically a theory of *human* well-being.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

7. Conclusions

I defended the claim that desirability for human flourishing is what explains the goodness of the goods in the objective list theory and that the satisfaction of the five basic requirements of desirability is what justifies the inclusion of any item in the list. This improves on the standard account of the theory that denies the existence of any feature common to objective goods and declares that each good is its own good-maker. Moreover, I argued that the explanation centering on desirability can effectively defuse the alienation problem; that it is not committed to some objectionable features of perfectionist theories; and that it does not require a perfectionist framework to satisfy the strong-tie requirement. All of this helps to support the claim that the objective list theory provides the most reasonable account of well-being.[7]

MASSIMO REICHLIN
FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY, VITA-SALUTE SAN RAFFAELE UNIVERSITY,
VIA OLGETTINA 58, 20132 MILAN (ITALY)
reichlin.massimo@unisr.it

Funding. This article is part of the research project Age-It: Ageing Well in an Ageing Society, for which funds have been provided by the Italian Ministry of the University and the European Union to Vita-Salute San Raffaele University.

Competing interests. The author declares none

Bibliography

Arneson, Richard J. (1999) Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16(1), 113–142.
Bradley, Ben (2009) *Well-Being and Death*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Crisp, Roger (1990) Sidgwick and Self-Interest. *Utilitas* 2(2): 267–280.
Crisp, Roger (2006a) *Reasons and the Good*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Crisp, Roger (2006b) Hedonism Reconsidered. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53(3), 619–645.
de Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna and Singer, Peter (2014) *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Feldman, Fred (2004) *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Feldman, Fred (2010) *What is This Thing Called Happiness?* New York: Oxford University Press.
Finnis, John (1980) *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Fletcher, Guy (2013) A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being. *Utilitas* 25(2), 206–220.
Fletcher, Guy (2016) Objective List Theories. In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher. London: Routledge, 148–160.
Green Thomas H. (2003) *Prolegomena to Ethics*, New Edition with Introduction by David O. Brink. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[7] This article is part of the research project *Age-It: Ageing Well in an Ageing Society*, for which funds have been provided by the Italian Ministry of the University and the European Union to Vita-Salute San Raffaele University. I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for pressing me to clarify many of the points discussed in this article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Griffin, James (1986) *Well-Being. Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Harsanyi, John (1977) Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior. *Social Research* 44(4), 623–656.
Heathwood, Chris (2005) The Problem of Defective Desires. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83(4), 487–504.
Heathwood, Chris (2016) Desire-Fulfillment Theory. In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher. London: Routledge, 135–147.
Heide, Sarah K. (2022), Autonomy, Identity, and Health: Defining Quality of Life in Older Age. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 48(5), 353–356.
Hooker, Brad (2000) *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Hooker, Brad (2015) The Elements of Well-Being. *Journal of Practical Ethics*, 3(1), 15–35.
Hurka, Thomas (1993) *Perfectionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Hurka, Thomas (2011) *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kagan, Shelly (1992) The limits of well-being. *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 9(2), 169–189.
Kraut, Richard (2007) *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
Lauinger, William (2012) *Well-Being and Theism: Linking Ethics to God*. New York: Continuum.
Lauinger, William (2013) The Strong-Tie Requirement and Objective-List Theories of Wellbeing. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16(5), 953–968.
Leriche, René (1936), Introduction générale; De la santé à la maladie; La douleur dans les maladies; Où va la médecine?. In *Encyclopédie française. Tome VI: L'être humain*, eds. Lucien Febvre and Gaston Berger. Paris: Societé de Gestion de l'Encyclopédie Française.
Lin, Eden (2017a) Against Welfare Subjectivism. *Noûs* 51(2): 354–377.
Lin, Eden (2017b) Enumeration and Explanation in Theories of Welfare. *Analysis* 77(1): 65–73.
Lin, Eden (2018) Welfare Invariabilism. *Ethics* 128(2): 320–345.
Mariqueo-Russell, Atus (2023) Well-being and the Problem of Unstable Desires. *Utilitas* 35(4), 260–276.
Mill, John Stuart (1985), Utilitarianism. In *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume* X - *Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, ed. John M. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 205–260.
Moore, Andrew (2000) Objective Human Goods. In *Well-Being and Morality: Essays in Honour of James Griffin*, eds. Roger Crisp and Brad Hooker. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 75–89.
Nussbaum, Martha C. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Parfit, Derek (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Prinzing, Michael (2020) Explanatory Perfectionism: A Fresh Take on an Ancient Theory. *Analysis* 80(4), 704–712.
Rice, Christopher M. (2013) Defending the Objective List Theory of Well-Being. *Ratio* 26(2), 196–211.
Roe, Jenny, Blythe, Mark, Olver, Caroline, and Roe, Alice (2022) Flourishing 'Older-Old' (80+) Adults: Personal projects and their Enabling Places. *Wellbeing, Space and Society* 3(1), 1–11.
Sarch, Alexander (2011) Internalism about a Person's Good: Don't Believe It. *Philosophical Studies* 154(2), 161–184.
Scanlon, Thomas (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Sidgwick, Henry (1962) *The Methods of Ethics*. 7th ed., London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Sobel, David (1994) Full Information Accounts of Well-Being. *Ethics* 104(4), 784–810.
Sumner, L. Wayne (1996) *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press