

## “How’s It Going?”

### Judgments of Overall Life-Satisfaction and Philosophical Theories of Well-Being

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#### 1. Introduction

In the broadest sense, to achieve well-being is to live well, to live a life that is worth living, or to flourish. “Well-being” in this sense is one of the main goals of life for individuals and of social policy for governments and aid agencies.<sup>1</sup> Our interest in well-being is fundamentally practical. We want to know what it is so that we can achieve it for ourselves and help others to achieve their own. At least one of the things we tend to be concerned about when we are concerned about well-being is people’s feelings or subjective assessments of how well their lives are going. Because of this concern, many psychologists have turned to self-reports of life-satisfaction in order to assess well-being, and many philosophers have favored “subjective” accounts of well-being that give a central role to people’s attitudes about their lives. Being happy or satisfied with, or approving of, how your life is going overall may not be the only ingredient of well-being, but it is hard to accept that it isn’t one of them. Moreover, assessments of how life is going are vital to another important aspect of a good life, namely, deliberating about and planning how to live. The assumption that an assessment of one’s conditions of life overall is necessary for well-being – what I will call the Subjective Assumption – has widespread support.

The Subjective Assumption presupposes, of course, that there is something which is “being satisfied with one’s life overall”. It assumes that people make overall assessments of their lives that represent or express something important that answers to the concerns we have when we think about well-being. Further, since our interest in well-being often has to do with increasing it or promoting it, such views assume that whatever is expressed by our assessments of our lives can be compared meaningfully to reports made by other people or to reports made by us at different times.

According to recent empirical studies in positive psychology, however, these assumptions are problematic. Psychological studies tell us that the judgments people make about how their lives are going as a whole are context-dependent.<sup>2</sup> These studies suggest that such judgments are not reports

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<sup>1</sup>It is in this broad sense that I mean to use the term “well-being”. There are distinctions that could be made between ‘well-being’, ‘flourishing’ and other concepts such as ‘prudential value’, but these distinctions are not crucial to my argument.

<sup>2</sup>For a review of this literature see Norberto Schwarz and Fritz Strack, “Reports of Subjective Well-Being: Judgmental Processes and Their Methodological Implications” in *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, eds. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener and Norbert Schwarz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), pp. 61-84. See also Daniel Kahneman, “Objective Happiness,” in Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, *ibid.*; and Shigehiro Oishi, Ulrich Schimmack, and Stanley J. Colcombe, “The contextual and systematic nature of life satisfaction judgments,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, forthcoming.

about objective circumstances and their impact on relatively stable feelings. Rather, such judgments are shaped by the information that is accessible to us at the time of making the judgment and by other factors such as mood. Which facts we remember and think about while making a judgment about our lives shapes the way in which we construct the bits of our lives to be evaluated, and it helps to determine what we take the relevant standard of evaluation to be. Moreover, this phenomenon is confirmed by personal experience. Reflecting on our own lives, most of us can think of ways in which our immediate circumstances have influenced our evaluations of our lives. For example, watching a film about the effects of globalization on poor people in developing countries often makes those of us in positions of relative privilege feel fortunate and happy with our own lives, whereas spending time with a competitive and boastful acquaintance makes us feel worse.

The mutability of overall assessments of one's life conditions raises a problem for philosophical theories that assume that overall life-satisfaction is at least part of well-being. The problem is this: if such theories are supposed to answer to our practical concerns, then they need to make sense of intra- and inter-personal comparisons of levels of well-being. And to do this, the theories need to direct us to the object of comparison. If we are looking for an overall or general assessment rather than one that is time-indexed, and if our subjective assessments of how life is going overall vary with context in the way they seem to do, then it is unclear which assessment we ought to pay attention to in making comparisons. The theory that is supposed to direct our thinking about well-being leaves us with many possible objects of comparison and no way to distinguish between them.

To see the point more clearly, it may help to think of an example. Consider the influence that having a handicapped person in the room has on people's reports about their well-being.<sup>3</sup> People tend to evaluate their lives as going better when there is a handicapped person in the room than they do when the handicapped person is not there, presumably because the handicapped person changes the evaluative standard that the person uses in her judgment. The average person, then, makes two different assessments of the conditions of her life and the question is which (if any) is the one that is relevant to her well-being. One could say that both assessments are relevant because well-being itself is variable from context to context. But this response abandons an important aspect of the concept of 'well-being' and, moreover, it would be a disaster for our practical purposes. Insofar as our interest in well-being is driven by a concern to improve the conditions of our lives, we need to have a definite basis of comparison. In other words, we need to know which of these assessments we should take to form a good basis for comparing her well-being over time or for comparing her well-being to the well-being of others. The purpose of this paper is to defend an answer to this question on behalf of any theory of well-being that accepts the Subjective Assumption.

The plan for the paper is as follows: In the next section, I define terms and provide a partial

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<sup>3</sup>Fritz Strack, Schwarz, Chassein, Kern, and Wagner, "The salience of comparison standards and the activation of social norms: Consequences for judgments of happiness and their communication," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 29, pp. 303-314. This experiment relies on the fact that people *assume* that handicapped people are doing less well than non-handicapped people. This may very well be an incorrect and prejudiced assumption, but it is the view of many people.

defense of the Subjective Assumption. In Section 3 I discuss the way in which overall assessments are context-relative and the problem this presents for theories that accept the Subjective Assumption. I argue that in order to solve this problem we need to articulate a perspective from which judgments of overall well-being are authoritative. I defend a characterization of this perspective in Section 4 and I argue that the perspective is a normative construction rather than an empirical extrapolation from various judgments. As we shall see, in articulating the right perspective we end up with a surprising argument for idealizing constraints on subjective accounts of well-being, constraints that are usually defended on the basis of intuitions about cases.

## 2. Well-Being and Judgments of Life Conditions

Assessments or judgments about life conditions are *global* judgments in the sense that they are supposed to be reports about life overall, not just a particular aspect of one's life, or life at a very specific time. Further, these assessments or judgments are *about* how one's life is going: they are not simple expressions of mood or desire; rather, they represent an evaluation of one's life as a whole. Finally, these judgments are not purely cognitive; they include an affective component of approval or satisfaction (or disapproval/dissatisfaction). I will call these assessments "judgments of overall life-satisfaction", or JOLS, for short.<sup>4</sup>

The Subjective Assumption is the claim that JOLS are necessary for well-being. One might accept the Subjective Assumption by claiming that a positive assessment of how one's life is going is a necessary ingredient of well-being. Well-being, in other words, requires a willingness or disposition to express satisfaction with the conditions of your life. Another way to accept the assumption is to hold that JOLS (positive or negative) are necessary for the kind of practical reasoning that is necessary for a good life. To argue conclusively for the Subjective Assumption would be a tall order. What I hope to do here is to demonstrate its appeal by showing that it is compatible with many views of the nature of well-being and that rejecting it has some high costs.

One way to reject the assumption that judgments of overall life-satisfaction are necessary for well-being would be to accept an account of well-being according to which overall life-satisfaction is nothing but a kind of average of momentary affective experiences. This is the approach taken by hedonists who want to replace global self-reports with moment to moment hedonic reports.<sup>5</sup> Overall

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<sup>4</sup>Here I use both words ("assessment" and "judgment") to convey that I am not relying on a particular view about what this state is. I will continue to use the word "judgment" in order to emphasize that the relevant response to our life conditions seems to have an important cognitive component, but I do not mean to take a stand here between various philosophical views of what evaluative judgments are. On my view, recent philosophical theories according to which evaluative judgments are expressions of sentiments or commitments are sophisticated enough to accommodate the sense of 'judgment' I intend. For defenses of such views see Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>For a psychologist's defense of this position see Kahneman, "Objective Happiness," *op. cit.*

life-satisfaction, on this view, amounts to the average of our hedonic experience in each moment. On this view, we need not rely on *judgments* about life conditions; everything that is relevant to well-being can be discovered by assessing hedonic levels at particular times. But there is reason to doubt that hedonism can serve the purposes we have in philosophical investigations of well-being. As many philosophers have argued, hedonism does not do justice to the deep and important goal of life that well-being is supposed to represent; there are things we care about, for the sake of our own well-being and the well-being of others, that are not the same as pleasure.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is not a conclusive argument against hedonism. The point here is just that hedonism is an alternative with its own problems.

Alternatively, one could reject the necessity of judgments of overall life-satisfaction by claiming that while overall life-satisfaction is necessary for well-being, *judgments* about it are not. On such a view, JOLS are merely evidence of overall life-satisfaction and, given the context relativity of such judgments, they are not very good evidence. This view would be immune from the worries about the context relativity of JOLS because it would maintain that what we ought to be interested in, from a practical point of view, is actual overall life-satisfaction, which can be measured in ways that do not rely on variable subjective judgments.

The problem with this position is that it is unclear what overall life-satisfaction is supposed to be if it is not an average or sum of positive affective experiences and it is not dependent on judgment. I suggest that insofar as we move away from hedonism, we will be forced to accept the necessity of judgment or assessment because judgments or assessments of life-satisfaction are intimately tied to overall life-satisfaction itself. The view that overall life-satisfaction is the sum or average of certain affective experiences requires that the relevant experiences are discreet and quantifiable. This may be true of pleasure and desire satisfaction, but it is not true of the other affective experiences we tend to associate with well-being, such as contentment and fulfillment. To assess how fulfilled or content you are requires attending to more than the immediate present. Contentment and fulfillment extend through time and cannot be sensibly divided into discreet bits that can be added together or averaged.

Furthermore, summing or averaging does not seem to be what we are doing when we assess how our lives are going. When we report on how life is going *in general* we are making a judgment about whether all of our cognitive and affective experiences (our pleasures, pains, attempts, efforts, successes, failures, accomplishments, disappointments, and so on), taken together in the order they occurred, count as things having gone well. Generalizing in this way, moving from the particular to the “overall” where this is not a matter of averaging or summing, requires judgment. There is no discreet experience of “overall life-satisfaction” that we are reporting; rather, we construct the facts about whether things have gone well through this process of judgment and reflection. How life is going overall, then, includes judgment in a deep and important way; if overall life-satisfaction is not the sum or average

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<sup>6</sup>See for example James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 7-8; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45; and L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 92-98.

of affective experiences, then there is nothing to how life is going *overall* that is entirely independent of our judgments and assessments.<sup>7</sup> Of course, people may not be aware that they are engaged in this kind of reflective process when they assess “how it’s going”, but my point is that insofar as there is something that is *overall* life-satisfaction as distinct from an average of affective experiences, it must be the kind of thing that essentially involves our assessments and judgment.

Finally, a third way to reject the Subjective Assumption would be to reject judgments of overall life-satisfaction and life-satisfaction itself as necessary components of well-being. For example, one could argue for a eudaimonistic theory according to which well-being is defined in terms of deep human needs rather than subjective assessments or feelings. But this too is a costly option if it is supposed to exclude subjective assessments entirely. It is intuitively compelling to think that approving of or endorsing the way in which one’s needs are being satisfied is part of living well, even if it is not the only part. More plausible eudaimonistic theories would include life-satisfaction as one component of well-being, while denying that this subjective element is sufficient for well-being.<sup>8</sup>

Even aside from this point, however, taking the eudaimonistic position does not remove the need to rely on JOLS entirely. It would be difficult for eudaimonistic accounts of well-being to deny that judgments about how one’s life is going are necessary because of the emphasis on practical reasoning in such theories.<sup>9</sup> For reflective creatures like human beings, living well seems to include reflecting on and making judgments about how your life is going and changing your choices and plans in response to this reflection. In order to reason about how to live our lives and to make decisions and plans, we need to know which responses to our life conditions are the relevant basis for such planning and choice. If this is right, JOLS are necessary for well-being because they are necessary for practical reasoning; on this view such judgments are necessary as a means to something else that is intrinsically valuable, but they are necessary all the same. Moreover, if I am right about the close relationship between life-satisfaction and judgments of life-satisfaction, then it is unlikely that there will be a different means to discovering the information we need for practical reasoning about our lives. Theories that emphasize practical reasoning about one’s life accept the Subjective Assumption, then, although in quite

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<sup>7</sup>Sumner, whose theory of well-being is a paradigm of a subjective philosophical theory, argues that well-being is constituted by a kind of endorsement of one’s conditions of life where endorsement includes a component of judgment. *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-183.

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle, for instance, claims that taking pleasure in the activity of virtue is necessary for flourishing. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 1099a5-30.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 78-83; Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 217-226; and John Rawls’ account of the good for a person in terms of deliberative rationality in his *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), chapter 7. Rawls’ theory is not a eudaimonistic theory, however, it is a good example of a theory that takes practical reasoning to be an important component of a person’s good.

a different way from theories that take positive JOLS to be an ingredient of well-being. Still, insofar as eudaimonistic theories require JOLS as inputs to practical reasoning, they will face the same problem that faces theories that take JOLS to be an ingredient of well-being.

Even for many objective theories of well-being, then, JOLS are an important part of well-being. They are either a component of it or a necessary condition for our capacity to engage in practical reasoning about it. To reject the Subjective Assumption, then, one would have to reject both the view that overall life-satisfaction is a component of well-being and the view that practical reasoning about one's life as a whole is a necessary part of well-being.

### 3. Context-Relativity and the Problem for Practical Questions

Judgments of overall life-satisfaction are dependent on several variables: what information (memories, facts about oneself and one's options, and so forth) is accessible at the time of making the judgment, how the information is used (whether it is assimilated into the target of judgment or used as a point of comparison), one's perception of social norms, and one's mood.<sup>10</sup> When psychologists manipulate the information that is accessible to subjects, they can change the kinds of judgments subjects tend to make. For example, priming subjects so that they are thinking about excitement makes these subjects more likely to evaluate their own lives in terms of how much excitement they have.<sup>11</sup> Strongly valenced experiences influence people's judgments of overall life-satisfaction based on how they are used. Extreme negative experiences can cause people to evaluate their lives more positively if they are seen as the contrast class to how things are now, or they can cause people to evaluate their lives negatively if they are seen as part of the target of the judgment. How we attempt to answer questions about how our lives are going also has effects on our answers. For example, the act of trying to explain a negative experience can cause people to become self-pitying and depressed and so to evaluate their lives as going less well than otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

Judgments of overall life-satisfaction are also influenced by the comparison class a person constructs for herself. What a person chooses as a point of comparison is again influenced by the information that is accessible at the time and also by the goals she is pursuing at that moment.<sup>13</sup> These various effects of context are not ones that are only perceivable by psychologists. Anyone who reflects on the matter can probably recall making different assessments of how his or her life is going depending on the context. Spend a little time with friends or family who are struggling, whose marriage is falling apart, whose children are in danger, and one may feel very fortunate and happy about one's own life. Or, if one feels very close to these people and responsible for them, spending time with them may make one feel worse about one's own life in the short term.

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<sup>10</sup>See footnote 2 for citations.

<sup>11</sup>See Oishi, Schimmack and Colcombe, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup>L. L. Martin and A. Tesser, "Toward a motivational and structural theory of ruminative thought," as cited in Schwarz and Strack, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup>See Schwarz and Strack, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

It should be noted that some very recent studies show that there is stability over time in judgments of overall life-satisfaction. Ulrich Schimmack has argued that this stability is due to the fact that people rely on relevant and chronically accessible information in order to form such judgments.<sup>14</sup> But studies that demonstrate some stability do not solve the philosophical problem described above. The problem caused by context variability for philosophical theories exists as long as people in real life situations (as opposed to testing situations) are sometimes influenced by context to make different JOLS. There are good reasons to think that this is true, despite the evidence of stability. First of all, it is difficult for psychological studies to ascertain people's judgments outside of testing situation. It is easy to imagine that the mere fact of filling out a questionnaire on life-satisfaction could have the effect of focusing a person's attention on the relevant information. In real life when we are busy and distracted, we may be more likely to make JOLS when we are not focused on relevant sources.<sup>15</sup> Second, the studies that demonstrate stability due to reliance on relevant sources also recognize that there are causes of variability in JOLS. For example, the studies are consistent with variation in JOLS that has to do with a person's mood.<sup>16</sup> The studies are also consistent with variation due to a person's own chosen standard of comparison, which seems to be a frequent source of variation in everyday experience. Changes in comparison class may cause variations in everyday judgments even if the person forms her life-satisfaction judgments on the basis of the same sources.

Our practical interests in well-being require that we be able to make inter-personal and intra-personal comparisons between different levels of well-being. Whether we are concerned to improve our own lives or those of others, in order to make plans that will result in an increase of well-being we need to have a baseline of comparison for any changes we might make. If judgments of overall life-satisfaction are a necessary part of well-being, and if such judgments vary with context, it is unclear which judgments form the relevant basis for comparison. We can think of the problem this way: Think of each judgment as a data point. Given context-relativity, these points are scattered and each particular point taken in isolation is a somewhat arbitrary and biased expression of a person's overall life satisfaction. Given this context relativity, it is difficult to know what an individual judgment taken in

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<sup>14</sup>Ulrich Schimmack, Ed Diener Shigehiro Oishi, "Life-Satisfaction Is a Momentary Judgment and a Stable Personality Characteristic: The Use of Chronically Accessible and Stable Sources," *Journal of Personality*, 70:3, June 2002, pp. 345-384.

<sup>15</sup>Insofar as psychologists construct questionnaires with the intention of getting people to think about the relevant facts, they are making an assumption about the solution to the problem I have outlined. I do not at all intend this as a criticism of psychologists' methods. In fact, as will become clear from the position I ultimately defend, I think that if people become focused on relevant sources when they fill out questionnaires, then they will give better, more authoritative information about their life-satisfaction.

<sup>16</sup>In fact, Schimmack has shown that people can be successfully eliminate the effects of mood when they are asked to do so. In my terms, when psychologists ask subjects not to consider mood in their judgments they are making an assumption about the appropriate perspective from which to make these judgments. See Schimmack et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 359.

isolation means, that is, whether it reports something significant about the person's life or whether dissimilar judgments are more significant.

The problem for the Subjective Assumption is that the arbitrariness of individual judgments makes it impossible to use these judgments for measurement and comparison. After all, if the various judgments express different levels of satisfaction with life, whether a change in plans makes one's life go better or worse will depend on which of these judgments is used as a point of comparison. We need, then, a way of sorting the judgments in order to have an expression of a clearly defined level of well-being that we can compare to other such expressions. One way of putting the point is that we need to know the perspective from which assessments of life-satisfaction are relevant to our practical questions about well-being. I intend to argue that this perspective is a normative construction rather than a scientist's extrapolation of the data. Before we get to this argument, let me say a little bit more about this notion of a "perspective".

One way to interpret the phenomenon of context-relativity is that it reveals that people have different *perspectives* on their lives depending on what thoughts are present when they make the judgments about overall life satisfaction. A perspective on one's life is constituted by one's norms, values and commitments and the relative importance one gives to them at the time.<sup>17</sup> We take a perspective when we make assessments of how our lives are going, or when we make specific judgments in the service of deciding, choosing or planning. Because our attention to various things that are important to us waxes and wanes, and because our particular circumstances can make some things seem more important at a particular time, we can change our perspective and it can also be manipulated or changed for us. For example, a person who has just overcome a threat to her health might evaluate her life from a perspective in which health is very important and she might think that her life is going very well. At another time, when she is equally healthy, but the value of health has become less vivid to her, she may think that life is going less well.

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Now I want to argue that the solution to the problem that the context relativity of judgments of overall life-satisfaction raises for the Subjective Assumption is to define a specific perspective from which JOLS should be made.

First, as we have discussed, judgments about life-satisfaction vary with factors such as mood, accessible information and comparison class. Unless there were a way of obtaining assessments that are completely uninfluenced by these variables, evaluative judgments have to be made about which factors create undesirable bias and which do not. Refusing to discriminate by accepting all JOLS does not remove the problem because to do so is itself to make the normative judgment that all JOLS count equally. Second, if evaluative judgments must be made, then we have left the domain of simple extrapolation from the data. Talking in terms of the "perspective" from which the judgment is made is one way to represent our evaluative standpoint in the context of judgments about life-satisfaction. So,

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<sup>17</sup>By "values" I mean the objects of people's concerns, cares and commitments. No particular view about the nature of values is implied. For my own view of what values are see my "Humean Heroism: Value Commitments and the Source of Normativity," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 81, No. 4, December 2000, pp. 426-446.

the argument for defining *some* perspective is, in a nutshell, that accepting an evaluative perspective cannot be avoided.

The conclusion of this argument, just to clarify, is that articulating a particular evaluative perspective is necessary for the purpose of using theories of well-being to address the kinds of practical questions I've mentioned. A consideration of perspective is not necessarily required for theories of well-being that are not intended to address these practical questions. Insofar as one's interest is in the nature and shape of people's self-reports, or in how various features of context change people's immediate perceptions of their well-being, there is no need to articulate an evaluative perspective.<sup>18</sup>

To summarize, the context-relativity of JOLS causes a problem for theories according to which such judgments are necessary for well-being. This is so because if such theories are to be used to answer our practical concerns, they need to provide the foundation for comparisons of levels of well-being, but if judgments are relative to context, it is unclear which judgments are the relevant point of comparison. One way to solve this problem is to specify the perspective from which one makes the judgment, thereby narrowing the range of JOLS that count as necessary for well-being. Just as we might discount visual perceptions that occur when the perceiver is wearing dark glasses or taking hallucinogens, so too we might discount a person's judgments of overall life-satisfaction when she does not occupy the proper perspective. In the next section I defend a subjective account of the appropriate perspective.

## 4. The Reflective Perspective

### 4.1. Subjective Perspective

In thinking about the right perspective to have, there are two important considerations. First, the relevant perspective must address the practical purposes we have in using JOLS. Second, if we think that *positive* assessments of how life is going are necessary for well-being, then the relevant perspective must be one from which we are more likely to make positive judgments. A good place to begin is with the question of whether the perspective we should occupy when assessing how our lives are going is one that gives weight to specific values that are identified independently of subjects (e.g., health, intimate relationships, achievement) or one from which the weight given to various values is entirely up to the individual. I will argue for a version of the latter, subjective, position, according to which the values that ought to have pride of place in a person's perspective are ultimately determined by that person.

A subjective view is favored by both of the above considerations. It is an empirical question what perspective will be more likely to produce positive judgments, and so I will not focus on this issue. Nevertheless, there is an obvious reason to think that a subjective perspective will be more likely to produce positive judgments, that has to do with the nature of such judgments. If a person is asked to take up a perspective that gives weight to externally imposed values that she really does not share, while she may recognize that her life is going well with respect to these standards, her assessment of her life

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<sup>18</sup>I take it that these interests are at least sometimes the interests that drive psychologists. Philosophical theories of well-being, however, are often intended to serve the practical purposes I mentioned.

will not be a full response to her life conditions that includes a positive affective response to them.

The second reason we should accept a subjective view of the correct perspective, and the most important one for my purposes, is that this perspective makes the most sense for answering practical questions from the first person point of view. If theories of well-being are to be action-guiding for individuals interested in improving their lives, such theories need to connect their recommendations to things that people already take to give them reasons to act. If this were not the case, people would not take the theories as giving them advice that they had any reason to follow.

It is less obvious that the subjective perspective also makes sense when the theory of which it is a part is meant to answer other-regarding practical questions. Nevertheless, it seems that if we believe that subjective endorsement of life conditions is a necessary component of well-being, then the subjective perspective is still the right one. If life-satisfaction is a component of well-being, then imposing external values on the perspective of judgment will not tell us what we want to know about other people. People may make different judgments about how their lives are going from a perspective that features certain externally imposed values, but these judgments will not express their satisfaction with their lives.

To say more about the application to other-regarding practical problems raises complex issues that are beyond the scope of this paper. The view that we simply rely on others' subjective perspectives to tell us how to increase their well-being is problematic because we are not always in a position to know what others' perspectives are. In such cases *we* have to make assessments of how people's lives are going on their behalf. When we do this, the question becomes whether we should evaluate their lives from their points of view or whether we should impose our own values on them. Even if we hold that positive assessments of one's life are necessary for well-being, there is no easy answer here for several reasons. First, we do not always have access to others' values or perspectives: sometimes these others do not yet exist (as in the case of future generations) or have not yet developed values (children, for instance) and sometimes we are too far (culturally or geographically) from the others to grasp their perspectives. Second, in some cases we have reason to believe that the values people express are not really the values they endorse. This may be due to oppression, lack of knowledge of options, or other factors. Notice, however, that these reasons for forgoing the subjective perspective are compatible with taking this perspective to be of primary importance although we recognize that we cannot always access it in other people.

#### *4.2 Constraints on the Subjective Perspective*

Importantly, the subjective interpretation of the appropriate perspective for JOLS does not imply that there are no constraints on these judgments at all. In fact, we ought to avoid taking the extreme view that there are no constraints on appropriate perspective. If there were no constraints on the judgments at all, we would be back where we started with a widely dispersed collection of various judgments and no specific pattern to count as our point of comparison. So, our perspective needs to have some constraints, but these constraints must not be ones that allow the person making the judgment to be motivationally detached from the recommendations that follow from the judgment. We will now consider what these constraints might be.

The perspective that a person has on her life overall includes more than just her values. Values (what a person cares about or is committed to) have different degrees of importance and, therefore, different weights in decision making. Further, norms of reflection also play a role in perspective. The

weights of various values would not make a difference in decision making if we did not hold that decisions ought to be made by paying most attention to what has most importance. These three features of perspective – values, their degrees of importance, and norms of reflection – shape each other in important ways. Therefore, without importing objective standards into our procedure, we can formulate an appropriate perspective from which to assess our lives by attending to all three of these features at once.

The way these three features of perspective shape each other can best be seen by thinking through some examples. For instance, studies that reveal correlations between discontentment and putting high priority on gaining material goods can help shape the perspective it makes sense for us to have.<sup>19</sup> If we are fairly certain that discontentment is a bad thing that we want to avoid (and this is a disvalue about which most of us are confident), then it will make sense to take up a perspective of evaluation in which we downplay, or give less weight to, the importance of material goods and the facts about how to achieve them.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, we can see that the norm of reflection that tells us to attend to the facts in our assessments is supported by a commitment to choosing things that we will not regret later (in other words, a commitment to the importance of our future). Ignoring the facts in making decisions makes it more likely that the world will frustrate one's plans and choices.

The perspective we've described now is one in which a person considers her values to the right degree and on the basis of relevant information, given what she values most as determined by reflection in accordance with the norms of reflection she accepts. Let us call this perspective "the reflective perspective". It will be useful to forestall two misconceptions one might have about the reflective perspective. First, the reflective perspective need not be a highly intellectual perspective that is devoid of emotion and affect. Our value commitments require emotional attachment and much of the information that is important to our evaluative stance is derived from our emotional responses to the world. Second, the reflective perspective is not necessarily static. Core values may change, mature and develop and this is consistent with reflection. The reflective perspective is likely to have some stability over time because changes in core values do not happen over night; nevertheless, the exact makeup of the reflective perspective can change over time. The important point is that the reflective perspective will not change dramatically across contexts that cause variance in JOLS. My suggestion, then, is that the judgments of overall life-satisfaction made from the reflective perspective are the ones that are relevant to well-being.<sup>21</sup>

It is important now to consider how the above account of perspective solves our problem: how does the reflective perspective narrow the range of JOLS to be considered relevant to well-being? One might think that this account doesn't narrow the range of relevant judgments at all, since it is necessarily

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<sup>19</sup>For such evidence see Tim Kasser, *The High Cost of Materialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup>Of course, this is true on the assumption that having materialistic *causes* discontentment and not, or at least not entirely, the other way around.

<sup>21</sup>I argue that such a perspective counts as a virtue in my "Perspective: A Prudential Virtue," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 39, No. 4, Oct. 2002, pp. 305-324.

the case that a person will bring her *own* values and norms to bear on judgments of overall life-satisfaction. While it is true that people can't escape their own values in some sense, it is also true that people do not always employ their values in making judgments in the right way. People sometimes forget the values that they hold most dear or they forget the relative importance they think their values have. Distractions and changes in context can make us give inappropriate weight to what is most important to us when we think about it, and instead evaluate our lives on the basis of desires for things that do not represent abiding values. For example, the thrill of new romantic relationships can cause us to ignore our friends and our work and to make decisions that sacrifice some of the things we care most about. This isn't necessarily inappropriate if we care deeply about having a romantic relationship, but it can be inappropriate if the sacrifices are, as they sometimes are, great and the rewards of the relationship small.

The reflective perspective corrects for these forms of bias and removes many of the sources of variation in judgments of overall life-satisfaction. It does this by drawing a person's attention to the facts that are most relevant to her core commitments. The reflective perspective provides a framework for evaluating how one's life is going that forces one to pay attention to certain things that one might otherwise ignore or downplay. For example, from the reflective perspective a person who values physical health more than money will think about her good fortune as compared to others with respect to health, and will not dwell on facts about how her possessions compare to what the Joneses have.

One might object to the above description of the way in which we can discover and refine the perspective from which we ought to assess our lives that people do not have any finely worked out views on this matter. So, if it is only judgments made from such a perspective that count toward well-being, most people will just be missing this element and this seems unsatisfactory.

There are two ways to respond to this objection. First, the fact that we can articulate the reflective process by which one can define the appropriate perspective does not mean that everyone must engage in this kind of explicit reflection in order to have such a perspective. People do have values and norms of reflection, even if they are not terribly articulate about them, and we can and do improve our perspectives without thinking very explicitly that this is what we are doing. Nor should we think it is impossible for people to improve their perspective by engaging in reflection about it. For one thing, people can learn from others what the right perspective is, as in the example above about materialistic values and various markers of happiness.

Second, a reflective perspective can limit the range of JOLS that are relevant to well-being, and therefore it can direct us to a determinate point of comparison, without its being an ideally appropriate perspective. What we need from the notion of perspective is a way to sort the data points, as we might call them. Reflective perspectives certainly come in degrees and a less than fully reflective perspective still gives us a mechanism for this sorting. We need not be at the end of the process of coming to a perspective that is most coherent and most likely to lead to positive judgments for the addition of perspective to provide a solution to the problem of context relativity.

#### 4.3. *Justifying Idealizing Constraints on JOLS*

A surprising result of the previous discussion is that we have ended up with a novel argument for idealizing constraints on judgments about well-being, and hence on well-being itself. Usually, such arguments rely on intuitions about what counts as contributing to a person's good. For example, take

Peter Railton's case of dehydrated Lonnie who needs clear fluids, but wants milk which will make him sick.<sup>22</sup> The intuition Railton pumps in this case is the intuition that uninformed Lonnie does not know what is good for him: his desire for milk misleads him and his judgments about what is best for him are false. Such cases are used as the basis for arguments that only fully informed desires are relevant to well-being.

What we have established in the above discussion is an argument for idealizing constraints on judgments about well-being that relies on the need – both psychological and philosophical – for a specification of the relevant assessments of how our lives are going. This argument circumscribes a subset of assessments of overall life-satisfaction by appeal to sources of variation in the whole set of such judgments. In essence, the argument for perspective is that in deliberation we use our assessments about how things are going now to form plans to make life go better (or continue to go well) in the future. If there is no particular fact of the matter about how things are going now, such reflection cannot be very fruitful. Articulating the relevant perspective from which such judgments are to be made gives us a fact of the matter upon which to base our judgments. While the defense of particular constraints may rely on intuitions about cases, the argument for thinking there must be some constraints does not.<sup>23</sup> Instead, we have an argument for idealizing constraints on people's responses to the conditions of their lives that is based on a practical need for a determinate perspective of assessment. This is, at least, a different argument from the argument based on intuitions about cases and, therefore, it adds independent justification to the view that such constraints are necessary.

Of course, it is not enough to limit the range of judgments we consider, we also need a justification for limiting them in this particular way. If our justification is solely that limiting consideration to a subset of judgments solves a problem for the application of philosophical theories, the justification will be *ad hoc*. For example, we could narrow the range of relevant JOLS by insisting that a person compare her life to the life of someone being tortured for eternity, but this would be arbitrary and unilluminating about the nature of well-being. The second task, then, is to *motivate* this perspective as the perspective from which it makes sense to assess how our lives are going. I take it that this is a normative question: how is the perspective defined one that we have good reason to try to occupy?

This question has a ready answer: the reflective perspective cannot seem arbitrary from the point of view of the person taking it up because it is made up of the very values and norms to which she is already committed. The reasons we have to take up the reflective perspective derive from the norms and values that constitute it. There are also some intuitively plausible practical reasons for taking up the reflective perspective. These reasons necessarily make assumptions about what well-being is, but these assumptions are widespread enough that it makes sense to mention them. One practical reason to take up the reflective perspective derives from the difficulty of attending to the right things when we evaluate how our lives are going. Given this difficulty, *cultivating* a perspective from which our core values are given appropriate weight can help us to make better decisions and plans and, therefore, to assess our

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<sup>22</sup>“Moral Realism,” *The Philosophical Review* XCV, No. 2, April 1986, pp. 163-207.

<sup>23</sup>At least not entirely. The arguments against hedonism – an important alternative to the perspective solution – may rely on intuitions or considered judgments about cases.

own lives as going better when we next reflect on the matter. By considering our deepest values (the ones we are most certain about) and by discovering what other values and commitments facilitate these, we can tailor our perspective to one from which these values will be promoted in our decision making. In this way, the tailoring and cultivation of perspective can help us to achieve more of something we value with great certainty (in this case, contentment).<sup>24</sup>

Further, cultivating a healthy perspective from which to evaluate our lives may have the good effect of focusing our energy and attention on these core values even when we are not in the reflective mode. It is a common experience to reflect on what really matters and to find that the things that are occupying most of our attention are not the things we really think are important. We often say that a person in this situation “has no perspective”. The fact that we’ve made an effort to construct and inhabit a perspective from which to evaluate our lives that we approve and that is consistent with our core values may help to make these core values more present when we are simply reacting to daily events.

#### 4. Conclusion

Psychological studies show us that our judgments of overall life-satisfaction are relative to context. Our own experience supports this finding. This might seem to be disturbing news for those who think that life-satisfaction is the essence of, or at least a part of, well-being, but I think that these findings should instead be seen as an opportunity to reflect on the perspective we ought to have when thinking about how our lives are going. I have argued that judgments made from a perspective characterized by attention to core values and norms of reflection are the ones we should focus on when we are engaged in the practical project of thinking about how to live well. Happily, there is reason to expect that taking such a perspective will contribute to people’s well-being in other ways too. This lends support to the idea that this informed and reflective perspective is the one we should attend to in theorizing about well-being.

One interesting implication of the argument of this paper is that thinking about the practical purpose of a theory of well-being might affect how we think of well-being itself. If well-being is something that is supposed to provide a goal for us, and if in order to figure as a goal in our planning and reasoning we need to make judgments from a particular perspective, then occupying this perspective is important for well-being itself. This is to say that the kind of concept ‘well-being’ is supposed to be imposes constraints on its content. Does this mean that whether or not achieving positive JOLS from a reflective perspective contributes to our well-being is not an empirical question? Of course, if well-being is pleasure, or if it is defined in terms of low rates of drug addiction, suicide and so on, then this certainly is an empirical question. But if we have no preconceived notion of what ‘well-being’ consists in – if that is the subject of investigation – then the question may not be empirical. To clarify, if well-being is to be (as a conceptual matter) a key goal of life, then it has to be something that can function as a goal. This means that it has to be possible to achieve it and that we have to know what counts as

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<sup>24</sup>Empirical studies, then, can be useful in the process of tailoring one’s perspective. In fact, this is one way to interpret what psychologists are doing when they use multiple measures to establish correlations that are relevant to well-being: they are trying to connect their findings to something that most people value and care about so that these findings will have a practical point.

moving towards or away from it. Positive JOLS made from the reflective perspective can function as this kind of goal.

The move from thinking that positive JOLS from the reflective perspective can function as this goal to the claim that such positive JOLS are constitutive of well-being invites two important questions. First, are there other things that could function equally well as a goal? Some may decide that the problems with JOLS warrant giving up on overall life-satisfaction as a component of well-being and finding something to put in its place. I think the popularity of overall life-satisfaction as a measure of well-being among psychologists speaks to its intuitive appeal, but I have not ruled out the possibility that there are other goals that could fill the bill. Others may think that the introduction of perspective is the right way to go, but disagree with the particular perspective I have articulated. For example, Stephen Darwall might argue that the right perspective from which to assess one's life is the perspective of a person who cares about you.<sup>25</sup>

Second, if there are other ways of filling out the details of 'well-being' such that it can function as a goal, what does overall life-satisfaction from a reflective perspective have going for it? What makes it a better goal than the others? I have suggested that the reflective perspective is one that people already see themselves as having a reason to take up; it is therefore a natural choice for a practical goal. I have also suggested that there is reason to think that taking up the reflective perspective will eliminate some common sources of unhappiness such as obsessing about what you don't have and comparing yourself to those who have more on some dimension that you don't actually care about.

When it comes to explaining why positive JOLS from a reflective perspective are an attractive goal, there are certainly important empirical questions to ask: First, do people really have core values and are they capable of discovering them? The answer to this question may depend on how stable core values are meant to be and on whether core values are subject to context effects in the same way that JOLS are subject to context effects. Second, does reflective endorsement of life on the basis of one's core values correlate with other aspects of well-being? For example, will reflective endorsement track mental health, low suicide rates, low rates of drug addiction, and so on? Here we can see that just as philosophical reflection on findings in psychology might shape the way philosophers think about well-being, so too philosophical analysis that is informed by empirical psychology might suggest future avenues for empirical research.

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<sup>25</sup>See his book, *Welfare and Rational Care*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002) and his paper for the workshop, "The Concept of Welfare".