

Why Subjectivists about Welfare Needn’t Idealize

Every theory of welfare purports to identify the facts, events, or obtaining states of affairs that are *basically* good or bad for you—good or bad for you, but not solely in virtue of being appropriately related to other things that are good or bad for you. *Subjectivists* about welfare claim that something is basically good (bad) for you if and only if and because it satisfies (frustrates) a favorable attitude that you have under the right conditions.¹ Furthermore, they claim that the extent of something’s basic goodness (badness) for you is determined by, and proportional to, the strength of the attitude that it satisfies (frustrates). According to the most prominent subjectivist views, the right conditions are *idealized* ones—ones in which you are fully informed, fully rational, or in some other way cognitively ideal. One example of such a view is one on which something is basically good for a subject if and only if and because it satisfies a desire that he would have “were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses in instrumental rationality.”²

Idealizing subjectivist views face many objections. It has been argued that since you might have a bizarre profile of attitudes if you were idealized in the relevant way, such views wrongly render the facts about your welfare hostage to empirical fortune.³ It has also been claimed that such views accord too much authority to the subject’s existing personality: perhaps a rigid person would remain rigid if idealized and therefore wouldn’t want her actual self to become more carefree, but it doesn’t follow that it wouldn’t be good for her actual self to become more carefree.⁴ Moreover, different philosophers have independently argued that no one can be fully informed.⁵ Although it has been many years since these objections were first raised, they have not been answered. Nevertheless, it is widely assumed that subjectivists must appeal to idealized conditions.⁶ This is because there appears

¹ For the time being, we can say that for something to *satisfy* a favorable attitude is for it to be the obtaining object of that attitude: if I have a pro-attitude whose object is that I am a professor, then the fact that I am a professor satisfies that attitude. Likewise, for the time being, we can say that for something to *frustrate* a favorable attitude is for it to be the obtaining negation of its object: if I have a pro-attitude whose object is that I am a millionaire, then the fact that I am not a millionaire frustrates that attitude. In Section 4.1, I will amend these definitions in response to some complications having to do with conditional pro-attitudes.

² Railton (1986a), p. 16. As I explain in the next section, however, this is not exactly Railton’s view.

³ Gibbard (1990), Hubin (1996), Arneson (1999).

⁴ Velleman (1988), Rosati (1995b)

⁵ Sobel (1994), Rosati (1995a).

⁶ Although he once argued that it is impossible for anyone to be fully informed, Sobel (2009, p. 345n16) says that “informed desire accounts of well-being remain the most plausible account on the table.”

to be no plausible alternative to idealizing. If every non-idealizing subjectivist view is implausible, then it seems that subjectivists must accept some kind of idealizing view, even though existing views of this sort face serious unresolved problems.

In this paper, I argue that subjectivists can plausibly claim that the right conditions are not idealized ones. I begin by giving some examples of idealizing subjectivist views and explaining what they have in common. Then, I introduce a simple non-idealizing subjectivist view, *Same World Subjectivism*, and I argue that it accommodates the two main rationales for idealizing: those given by Peter Railton and David Sobel. I also explain why a recent argument from Dale Dorsey fails to show that subjectivists must idealize. After answering some objections, I conclude that because Same World Subjectivism is a plausible non-idealizing theory that avoids the problems that idealizing is intended to circumvent, subjectivists about welfare needn’t idealize.

1. Idealizing Subjectivist Views

Peter Railton defends an idealizing subjectivist view on which the right conditions are ones in which you are fully informed and free from cognitive error and instrumental irrationality.⁷ Other theorists have characterized the right conditions somewhat differently. According to John Rawls, for example, “a person’s good is determined by what is for him the most rational long-term plan of life,” where this is “the plan that would be decided upon as the outcome of careful reflection in which the agent reviewed, in the light of all the relevant facts, what it would be like to carry out these plans.”⁸ And according to Richard Brandt, the right conditions are ones in which you have undergone cognitive psychotherapy: the process of vividly and repeatedly representing to yourself every piece of available information that might affect what desires you have.⁹

Though they differ in their details, idealizing subjectivist views agree that one kind of idealization that the right conditions involve is the possession of a great deal of information and/or experience. (This is essential to the main rationales for idealizing that have been proposed in the literature.) Moreover, they all say that—special cases aside—whether x is basically good for you at a world W

⁷ Railton (1986a), p. 16.

⁸ Rawls (1999), pp. 79-80, 366, 370.

⁹ Brandt (1979).

depends not on what your attitudes toward x are at W , but what your attitudes toward x are at some other possible world.¹⁰ More specifically, they all accept something like the following claim:

Ideal World	x is basically good (bad) for you at possible world W if and only if and
Subjectivism	because it satisfies (frustrates) a favorable attitude that you have at I , a possible world where you are suitably idealized.

Railton’s view does not exactly fit this schema: it says that the favorable attitudes whose satisfaction benefits you are not the ones that you have at I , but the ones such that, at I , you want your non-idealized self to have them. But since this detail does not bear on my argument, it will be convenient to proceed as though all idealizing subjectivists accept Ideal World Subjectivism.

There is disagreement about which favorable attitude is relevant to welfare. Most subjectivists claim that it is *desire*, but some believe that it is *valuing*,¹¹ and a subjectivist theory could be centered on a different attitude. For simplicity, I will assume the majority view, except at junctures in the argument where accepting a different view would make a difference.¹²

2. Railton’s Case for Idealizing

Let me turn now to the first of the three existing arguments that subjectivists must idealize. Railton claims that subjectivists need to idealize to handle cases like the following one:

Beth, the accountant. Beth is “a successful and happy accountant, who nonetheless wants above all to quit and devote herself full time to writing.” Unbeknownst to her, writing doesn’t suit her. After she switches to writing, her life worsens: she has a hard time writing anything, what little she does write gets rejected, and she becomes “increasingly bitter, unproductive, and indebted.” After several miserable years, she realizes that she would have been better off if she had stayed in accounting.¹³

¹⁰ The special cases are ones in which W is itself a world at which you are idealized in the relevant ways.

¹¹ E.g., Dorsey (2012) and (2017), and Yelle (2014).

¹² Most proponents of the majority view would claim that only desires of certain kinds (e.g., *final* desires) count. But since my arguments do not depend on any such restriction, I won’t assume such a restriction.

¹³ Railton (1986a), pp. 12-13. See also Railton (1986a), p. 12 and Railton (1986b), pp. 174-75 for two similar cases.

Railton thinks that unless they idealize, subjectivists must say that since Beth had a stronger desire to be a writer than she did to stay in accounting, she was better off having switched to writing than she would have been if she had stayed in accounting. By contrast, he believes that an idealizing view can get the right result about this case because if Beth had been fully informed and fully instrumentally rational, she would have most wanted her non-idealized self to remain an accountant. (Cases of this sort abound, and they needn’t involve big decisions: you might more strongly desire to order the lobster than to order the steak, not knowing that you would be better off getting the steak because you would get food poisoning if you were to get the lobster.)¹⁴

I don’t deny that idealizing subjectivist views can deliver the right result about Beth. I merely claim that a non-idealizing subjectivist view can also do this. Consider the following non-idealizing view:

Same World Subjectivism x is basically good (bad) for you at possible world W if and only if and because it satisfies (frustrates) a favorable attitude that you have at W . The extent of x ’s basic goodness (badness) for you at W is determined by, and proportional to, the strength of the satisfied (frustrated) attitude.

Unlike Ideal World Subjectivism, which says that we typically need to look at what attitudes you have at a different world to determine whether something is basically good for you at W , this view says that to determine whether something is basically good for you at W , we need only look at the attitudes that you have at the very same world, W .

Same World Subjectivism has the resources to say that Beth would have been better off if she had stayed in accounting. Think of basic goodness (badness) as something that you accrue from the things that are basically good (bad) for you, in proportion to how basically good (bad) for you they are. As is standardly assumed, welfare facts are grounded in facts about basic goodness and badness: the larger the *net amount* of basic goodness you accrue (i.e., the amount of basic goodness you accrue, minus the amount of basic badness you accrue), the higher your welfare.¹⁵ Now, let W_w be the actual

¹⁴ This is also the rationale for idealizing invoked by Griffin (1986, p. 10): “It is depressingly common that when even some of our strongest and most central desires are fulfilled, we are no better, even worse, off.”

¹⁵ This standard assumption is compatible with the hypothesis that the shape of your life can affect your lifetime well-being (Velleman (1991)). For it allows that the shape of your life can itself be basically good or bad for you, and that it

world, where Beth becomes a writer, and let \mathcal{W}_A be the closest possible world in which she stays in accounting. The claim that Beth would have been better off staying in accounting is true if and only if the net amount of basic goodness that Beth accrues at \mathcal{W}_A is higher than the net amount of basic goodness that she accrues at \mathcal{W}_W . Thus, if Same World Subjectivism can deliver this judgment about the net amounts of basic goodness that Beth accrues at \mathcal{W}_A and \mathcal{W}_W , it can say the right thing about her: that she would have been better off staying in accounting.

Same World Subjectivism can, indeed, say that the net amount of basic goodness that Beth accrues at \mathcal{W}_A is greater than the net amount of basic goodness that she accrues at \mathcal{W}_W . Although \mathcal{W}_W is a world where she has a very strong satisfied desire (viz. the desire to be a writer), it is surely also a world at which relatively few of the other desires that she has are satisfied and many of them are frustrated. After all, at \mathcal{W}_W , all of her manuscripts are rejected, she is consumed by feelings of worthlessness and despair, and she struggles to make ends meet: surely, this is a world where, on balance, she gets very little of what she wants. By contrast, although \mathcal{W}_A is a world at which she has a very strong frustrated desire (viz., the desire to be a writer), it is surely also a world at which relatively few of the other desires that she has are frustrated and many of them are satisfied. After all, at \mathcal{W}_A , she possesses the goods of financial stability, the satisfaction of doing work that she is good at, and the respect of her friends and colleagues: on balance, she gets a great deal of what she wants. Assuming, as we are, that desire is the favorable attitude whose satisfaction (frustration) is basically good (bad) for you, Same World Subjectivism implies that, on the most plausible way of filling in the details of the example, Beth accrues a greater net amount of basic goodness at \mathcal{W}_A than at \mathcal{W}_W . It therefore says that she is higher in welfare at \mathcal{W}_A than at \mathcal{W}_W : she would have been better off if she had stayed in accounting.¹⁶

can amplify or diminish the basic prudential values of other things that are good or bad for you. The assumption is also compatible with the view that your life is an organic unity—a whole whose value is not equal to the sum of the values that its parts would have had if they had existed alone (Hurka (1998)). For the basic prudential values that things have when placed together in your life needn’t be the same as the values that they would have had if they had existed alone: a thing’s basic prudential value isn’t necessarily fixed by its intrinsic properties.

¹⁶ I have been construing the claim that Beth would have been better off staying in accounting as a claim about *lifetime* welfare: her lifetime welfare at \mathcal{W}_A is higher than her lifetime welfare at \mathcal{W}_W . But we could construe it instead as a claim about welfare during a *sub-interval* of her life: she is worse off at \mathcal{W}_W during the interval in which she is a writer than she is during the corresponding interval at \mathcal{W}_A . Same World Subjectivism can accommodate this judgment, too, because it can say that the net amount of basic goodness that Beth accrues at \mathcal{W}_W *during that interval* is less than the net amount of basic goodness that she accrues at \mathcal{W}_A during the corresponding interval. There are many views available to subjectivists concerning the *times* at which the things that satisfy (frustrate) your favorable attitudes are basically good (bad) for you, some of which I discuss in Lin (2017a). But on any credible view about this, Same World Subjectivism could plausibly claim that Beth accrues a lower net amount of basic goodness during the interval in which she is a writer at \mathcal{W}_W than she does during the corresponding interval at \mathcal{W}_A .

We can make this more concrete using a toy model. Imagine that, on Same World Subjectivism, the basic prudential value of something that satisfies a desire of strength n is n , while the basic prudential value of something that frustrates a desire of strength n is $-n$. (This is a simple precisification of the claim that the extent of x ’s basic goodness or badness for you at W is proportional to the strength of the desire it satisfies or frustrates.) And suppose that your level of welfare at a world is just equal to the net amount of basic goodness that you accrue there. Now imagine, for simplicity’s sake, that the following are the only desires that Beth has at W_w and W_A :

Beth’s desires at W_w (the actual world, where she becomes a writer)

<i>Object</i>	<i>Satisfied or frustrated?</i>	<i>Strength</i>	<i>Basic Value of Object</i>
That Beth is a writer	Satisfied	10	+10
That Beth does work that she is good at	Frustrated	5	-5
That Beth makes ends meet	Frustrated	4	-4
That Beth is respected	Frustrated	4	-4

Beth’s desires at W_A (the closest possible world where she stays in accounting)

<i>Object</i>	<i>Satisfied or frustrated?</i>	<i>Strength</i>	<i>Basic Value of Object</i>
That Beth is a writer	Frustrated	10	-10
That Beth does work that she is good at	Satisfied	5	+5
That Beth makes ends meet	Satisfied	4	+4
That Beth is respected	Satisfied	4	+4

On this model, Beth’s welfare at W_w is -3, whereas her welfare at W_A is +3. Thus, she would have been better off if she had stayed in accounting (W_A) instead of switching to writing (W_w).

Of course, it is implausible that Beth has so few desires at either world and that she has exactly the same desires at both worlds. Moreover, some might doubt that her level of welfare at a world is just equal to the net amount of basic goodness that she accrues there. But these assumptions, which are

not required by Same World Subjectivism, were there for the sake of simplicity. Even if we were to drop them, Same World Subjectivism would be able to deliver the right verdict about Beth.

The key point is that, according to Same World Subjectivism, it can be the case that although you have a stronger desire for an outcome X (e.g., being a writer) than you do for an outcome Y (e.g., staying in accounting), you would accrue a greater net amount of basic goodness if Y were realized than if X were realized.¹⁷ After all, on this view, the net amount of basic goodness that you would accrue if a particular scenario were realized is proportional to the net amount of desire satisfaction that you would accrue (from the desires that you would have in that scenario) if that scenario were realized. And it doesn’t follow from the fact that you have a stronger desire for outcome X than for outcome Y that you would accrue a greater net amount of desire satisfaction (from the desires that you would have in X) if X were realized than you would accrue (from the desires that you would have in Y) if Y were realized. Because you could accrue a greater net amount of basic goodness if Y were realized, you could be higher in welfare if Y were realized—even though you have a stronger desire for X . This is all that Same World Subjectivism needs to get the right result about Beth.¹⁸

Why might one think that the case of Beth necessitates idealizing? I speculate that because it centers on a crucial action available to the agent, it tempts people into thinking that subjectivists must accept the principle that how well off you would be if you were to perform an action is just a function of how strong your desire is (in the right conditions) toward *performing that action*. But as Same World Subjectivism shows, subjectivists needn’t accept that principle. Indeed, the principle is implausible. A hedonistic view that accepted an analogous principle would implausibly claim that how well off Beth would be if she were to switch to writing is solely a function of how pleasant or painful *the act of switching to writing* would be. Clearly, what the hedonist should say instead is that how well off Beth would be if she were to switch to writing depends on *all* the pleasures and pains that she would feel if she were to do this (i.e., all the pleasures and pains she would feel at W_w). Similarly, a subjectivist view should claim, as Same World Subjectivism does, that how well off Beth would be if she were to switch to writing depends, roughly speaking, on how strong and well-satisfied *all* of the desires that

¹⁷ Relatedly, it could be that although you more strongly desire to perform action A (e.g., switch to writing) than action B (e.g., stay in accounting), you would accrue a greater net amount of basic goodness if you were to perform B .

¹⁸ Heathwood (2005) gives a similar treatment of desires whose satisfaction would leave the subject worse off, but as I will explain, his view is unclear as between Same World Subjectivism and the less plausible Actual World Subjectivism, and he leaves the door open to Sobel’s case for idealizing precisely because he does not distinguish those views.

she has in the right conditions would be if she were to switch to writing (i.e., how strong and well-satisfied all of those desires would be at W_w).

Railton’s rationale for claiming that the right conditions are idealized ones is that subjectivists cannot accommodate cases like that of Beth unless they idealize. But as Same World Subjectivism reveals, this is not true. Thus, Railton has not shown that subjectivists must idealize.

3. Sobel’s Case for Idealizing

A different reason to idealize is given by David Sobel, who focuses on the basic goodness of facts or events instead of on levels of welfare.¹⁹ In Sobel’s view, subjectivists must idealize to accommodate the fact that your actual desires don’t determine what is basically good for you at all possible worlds. In particular, he argues, idealizing is required by the following two principles:

Desired, Wouldn’t Be Good It can be the case that even though you actually desire x , it wouldn’t be basically good for you to get x .

Not Desired, Would Be Good It can be the case that even though you don’t actually desire x , it would be basically good for you to get x .

In support of the latter principle, Sobel writes: “suppose that I would love the taste of pineapple if I were to taste it but now have no desire to do so. My current lack of desire for pineapple does not entail that I would not be benefited by eating it.”²⁰ He doesn’t give a case supporting the former principle, but we can easily imagine one. Suppose that, having never tried sushi, I have a strong desire to eat it—but only because I am under a serious misapprehension about what it tastes like. It could be that it wouldn’t be basically good for me to eat it even though I actually desire to do so.

¹⁹ Sobel (2009). At times, Sobel appears to endorse Railton’s rationale for idealizing: “a woman may desperately want to marry her high school sweetheart, but unbeknownst to her they are not compatible, and the marriage would be doomed and unsatisfying. The moral is that getting what we actually want can fail to benefit us” (2009, p. 336). But my reply to this case should be obvious, given what I said earlier. I will focus on those of Sobel’s remarks that go beyond Railton’s.

²⁰ Sobel (2009), p. 336. Why do I read him as claiming that eating pineapple might be *basically* good for me, rather than as claiming that I might be *better off* eating it than not eating it? Because otherwise, his rationale would be very similar to Railton’s, and it could be answered with the observation that, even assuming that actual desires are the ones that matter, you might be better off getting something you don’t actually desire because you would thereby also get *other* things that you do actually desire.

The cases that most obviously support the two aforementioned principles are ones in which your actual profile of desires depends on ignorance about the felt quality of certain experiences. In the case I just described, for example, I actually desire to eat sushi only because I don’t know what it’s like to eat it. And on one reading of the pineapple case, the subject lacks a desire to eat pineapple because he doesn’t know what it tastes like. Sobel has cases of exactly this sort in mind, for he writes that “the rationale for granting the idealized agent information and experience is to provide her with a more accurate understanding of what the option she is considering would really be like.”²¹

Sobel thinks that unless the subjectivist idealizes, she will get the wrong result about this kind of case: she must say that since I actually desire to eat sushi, it would be basically good for me to eat it, and that since I don’t actually desire to eat pineapple, it wouldn’t be basically good for me to eat it. The view that the right conditions are idealized ones in which you have full information, including information about the felt quality of all possible experiences, avoids this problem. After all, if I were to know what all experiences are like, I would perhaps desire to eat pineapple, and I would perhaps not desire to eat sushi.

But to assume that a subjectivist must idealize to get the right results about these cases is to assume that the only alternative to saying that the right conditions are idealized ones is to say that they are the *actual* ones. It is to assume, in other words, that any subjectivist who doesn’t idealize must accept

Actual World	x is basically good (bad) for you at possible world W if and only if and
Subjectivism	because it satisfies (frustrates) a favorable attitude that you have at @, the actual world.

That Sobel is assuming this is suggested by the way in which he introduces idealizing subjectivist views: “Subjectivists tend to acknowledge that the agent’s *actual* proattitudes can fail to point her toward that which *would* benefit her.... The satisfaction of *actual* desires does not seem to correlate with what is good for one. Informed desires seem to have a better claim to do so.”²²

²¹ Sobel (2009), p. 343.

²² Sobel (2009), p. 336. Italics added.

However, Actual World Subjectivism isn’t the only alternative to idealizing. As I have explained, subjectivists could instead accept

Same World Subjectivism x is basically good (bad) for you at possible world W if and only if and because it satisfies (frustrates) a favorable attitude that you have at W .²³

Clearly, this view implies that your actual desires do not determine what is basically good for you at all possible worlds, and it accommodates Sobel’s two principles. It implies that it can be the case that although you actually desire x , it wouldn’t be basically good for you to get it: for perhaps you *wouldn’t* desire it *if you were to get it*. It also implies that it can be the case that although you don’t actually desire x , it would be basically good for you to get it: for perhaps you *would* desire it *if you were to get it*. Trying sushi might eliminate my desire for it by ridding me of my misconceptions about what it tastes like. Trying pineapple might give me a desire for it, in the usual way that new experiences often do this.

Of course, idealizing views on which the right conditions include full information and experience can also accommodate Sobel’s principles. But those views are more complicated. Whereas Same World Subjectivism says that we should determine whether x is basically good for you at W by looking at the attitudes that you have at the very same world (viz., W), full information views say that we should look instead at the attitudes that you have at a world that is typically very distant from W —one at which you know everything and have had every experience. There is no need for Sobel to accept such a complicated view: he can get what he wants with Same World Subjectivism.

Indeed, Same World Subjectivism is *better* than full information views are at explaining why it would be basically good for me to eat pineapple even though, having never tasted it, I have no desire to eat it. The natural subjectivist explanation of this fact is that I would desire to eat it if I were to know what it is like to eat it. It is Same World Subjectivism, not full information views, that accommodates this explanation. The closest world where I know what eating pineapple is like is the closest world where I eat it, not a world where I know everything and have had all possible experiences.

Actual World Subjectivism and Same World Subjectivism are easily conflated, and this may be why Sobel doesn’t consider the latter view. For it is tempting to gloss Same World Subjectivism as the

²³ I omit what the view says about the *extent* of x ’s basic goodness (badness) because it is irrelevant for present purposes.

view that the favorable attitudes that determine your welfare are not the ones that you would have if you were idealized, but the ones that you *actually* have. This is harmless when we want to determine whether some x that you have at the actual world is basically good for you there. For in such cases, Same World Subjectivism says the same thing as Actual World Subjectivism: it tells us to determine whether x satisfies a favorable attitude that you actually have. But the gloss is misleading when we want to determine whether some x that you actually lack *would* be basically good for you if you were to have it. Same World Subjectivism says that what matters in such cases is not your *actual* attitudes toward x , but the attitudes that you would have toward it if you were to have it. This is why it can deliver the right results about Sobel’s cases.

Perhaps some opponents of idealization mean to endorse Same World Subjectivism when they claim that the right conditions are just the actual ones. But none of them explicitly formulates Same World Subjectivism and distinguishes it from Actual World Subjectivism.²⁴ Mark Murphy defends “the theses that only the satisfaction of an agent’s actual desires contributes to that agent’s well-being and that no actual desire is to be excluded from relevance to an agent’s well-being on the ground that the agent would lack that desire in a hypothetical desire situation.”²⁵ Chris Heathwood defends what he calls an “actualist” version of desire satisfactionism, on which “[s]o long as you are getting what you actually want—whatever it is—things are going well for you.”²⁶ This language may suggest that the views being defended are forms of Actual World Subjectivism rather than Same World Subjectivism. Moreover, the practice of casting the debate about idealization as being between proponents of “hypothetical” pro-attitudes and proponents of “actual” ones may reinforce the false impression that any subjectivist who doesn’t idealize must accept Actual World Subjectivism.²⁷ This impression is what leads Sobel to think that his principles necessitate idealizing.

4. Additional Details

Before I move on, let me address two rather subtle issues that arise from my discussion of Sobel.

²⁴ Parfit (1984, pp. 495-96) and Bricker (1980, pp. 393-97) discuss something like the distinction between Same World and Actual World Subjectivism, and Bykvist (2010, pp. 21-25) endorses a form of Same World Subjectivism. But these authors do not discuss these views in relation to the issue of whether subjectivists must idealize.

²⁵ Murphy (1999), p. 249. Strictly speaking, he only argues that those theses are true *if* the desire theory of welfare is true.

²⁶ Heathwood (2005), p. 487.

²⁷ For examples of this practice, see Murphy (1999), p. 247 and Feldman (2004), p. 16.

4.1 Temporal Concurrence

Suppose that I actually desire sushi, but that trying it would extinguish my desire for it: at the closest world where I try it, I go from desiring it (before I try it) to having no desire for it (as soon as I try it). According to Same World Subjectivism, the desires that are relevant to my welfare at that world are the ones that I have at that world. It might seem, however, that this does not settle whether my eating sushi is basically good for me there. Is my eating sushi basically good for me at that world because I desired to eat it before I ate it, or does it fail to be basically good for me there because I do not desire to eat it while I am eating it? The latter view seems correct, and I assumed as much earlier. This might suggest that Same World Subjectivism can accommodate Sobel’s rationale only if it accepts a *temporal concurrence* requirement, on which x is basically good for you only if it satisfies a favorable attitude of yours with which it overlaps temporally.²⁸

Same World Subjectivists can avail themselves of such a requirement, and I will remain neutral on whether they should. But they need not do this to answer Sobel’s argument for idealizing. It is a familiar fact that we often want something only provided that a particular condition is met.²⁹ If a *conditional* desire’s condition is not met, then the desire is neither satisfied nor frustrated, regardless of whether its object obtains. If you want to have a beer tonight on the condition that you don’t have a headache at that time, and you do have a headache at that time, then your having a beer then would not satisfy that desire, and your not having a beer then would not frustrate it. A conditional desire is satisfied (frustrated) just if its object obtains (fails to obtain) *and its condition is met*.³⁰

Now, my desire for sushi is not unconditional, since it is based on a false impression of what sushi tastes like: I want to eat sushi on the condition that it tastes the way I think it does (or perhaps on the condition that I still want to eat it when I eat it). At the closest world where I eat it, the relevant condition is not met—either because sushi does not taste the way that I expected, or because I no longer want to eat it when I eat it. Thus, at the closest world where I eat sushi, my desire for sushi

²⁸ Heathwood (2005, p. 490) endorses such a requirement.

²⁹ Parfit (1984, p. 151) mentions desires that are conditional on their own persistence. Obviously, though, a desire can have a condition distinct from its own persistence.

³⁰ This view is ably defended by McDaniel and Bradley (2008). Also see Dorsey (2013), p. 165. In light of this view, we must amend our earlier account of what it is for something to satisfy or frustrate a favorable attitude. For something to *satisfy* a pro-attitude is for it to be the obtaining object of that attitude and for that attitude’s condition to be met. For something to *frustrate* a pro-attitude is for it to be the obtaining negation of the object of that attitude and for that attitude’s condition to be met.

(which I possess before I eat it and which I lose when I eat it) is never satisfied. Even if x can be basically good for me in virtue of satisfying a merely past desire of mine, my eating sushi does not satisfy any of my desires, so it is not basically good for me. Same World Subjectivism gets the right result about this case even if it does not accept a temporal concurrence requirement.³¹

4.2 *Actual World Subjectivism*

Earlier, I claimed that Sobel thinks that subjectivists must idealize because he assumes that Actual World Subjectivism is the only non-idealizing subjectivist view. This may have suggested that this view is altogether incapable of handling any of the cases that motivate him to idealize.

We can now see that the truth is more complicated. If my actual desire for sushi has a condition that isn’t met at the closest world at which I eat sushi, then my actual desire is not satisfied at that world. So, even if what benefits me at that world is what satisfies the desires that I have at the actual world, my eating sushi there is not basically good for me there. Thus, even Actual World Subjectivism can handle some of the cases that interest Sobel: it can say that although I actually desire to eat sushi, it wouldn’t be basically good for me to eat it.

What about the case in which, while I actually have no desire to eat pineapple, it would be basically good for me to eat it? I have no actual desire for pineapple that is satisfied at the closest world at which I eat it. However, one might argue that my eating pineapple at that world satisfies another actual desire of mine (e.g., a desire to eat things that I want to eat while I am eating them).

This move will only work for some versions of the case, however. As Sobel would surely observe, there could be a subject who actually lacks *any* desire that would be satisfied by his eating pineapple (e.g., a young creature who has no innate desires and who has acquired very few desires). It could be true that eating pineapple would be basically good even for this subject. Actual World Subjectivism cannot deliver this result, but Same World Subjectivism can. For it could be that if he were to eat

³¹ What if we change the case so that my desire to eat sushi is *unconditional*? In that case, Same World Subjectivism must require temporal concurrence to get the result that it wouldn’t be basically good for me to eat sushi. But if my desire is unconditional, then it is not clear that its satisfaction wouldn’t be basically good for me. Thus, Same World Subjectivism may not need a temporal concurrence requirement to handle this case either.

pineapple, he would have a desire that this would satisfy (e.g., a desire to eat pineapple that is elicited by the act of eating it).

Actual World Subjectivism gets this case wrong because it says that what is basically good for you at *any* world is what satisfies a desire that you have at the *actual* world. Sobel rejects precisely that idea: he thinks that subjectivists must idealize because he is rightly convinced that your actual desires do not determine what is basically good for you over the entirety of modal space. Although Actual World Subjectivism can handle some of the examples that interest him, it cannot truly accommodate his rationale for idealizing. Same World Subjectivism can, because it does not grant your actual desires authority over your welfare at all possible worlds. Instead, it says that what is basically good for you at any world depends on the desires that you have at that world.

Besides, Actual World Subjectivism is too implausible to be a credible alternative to idealizing views. Consider a possible world at which, because you had a completely different upbringing, your desires are diametrically opposed to your actual desires. (For example: you actually love surfing, but at that world, you detest it.) Same World Subjectivism says, plausibly enough, that what is basically good for you at that world is what satisfies the desires you have there. But Actual World Subjectivism says that what is basically good for you at that world is what satisfies your *actual* desires, even though they contradict the ones you have at that world. This is highly implausible, and it would give subjectivists sufficient reason to reject this view even if it could handle all of Sobel’s cases.

Thus, while I glossed over some details in my earlier discussion, the fact remains that Actual World Subjectivism cannot accommodate Sobel’s reasons for idealizing. Moreover, even if it could do this, it would not be a plausible alternative to idealizing subjectivist views. This is why I have taken pains to distinguish it from Same World Subjectivism. The availability of the latter view is what answers Sobel’s argument that subjectivists must idealize.

5. Dorsey’s Case for Idealizing

Let me now consider the third and final argument for idealizing that can be found in the literature. Dale Dorsey has recently argued that all plausible subjectivist theories accept the following claim: a thing, x , is basically good for you at a world, W , only if you value it at W . Moreover, he has argued

that you *value* x only if you are such that, if your beliefs about what is good or bad for you were made coherent and you had considered a sufficiently large range of the possible ways that x might be, you would believe x to be good for you. Those claims entail that, on pain of implausibility, “a subjectivist theory of well-being must idealize.” For they imply that any plausible subjectivist view will say that whether x is basically good for you at W depends on whether, at a world, I , at which you are idealized in certain ways, you believe x to be good for you.³²

On one way of looking at it, none of this suggests that subjectivists must idealize in the sense that I have had in mind. After all, Dorsey is effectively advocating a version of Same World Subjectivism on which the favorable attitude whose satisfaction is relevant to well-being is not desire, as I have been assuming thus far, but valuing. On his view, whether x is basically good for you at W depends not on whether you value it at a world at which you are idealized, but on whether you value it at the very same world, W . Thus, unlike Railton and Sobel, he does not think that the conditions under which you must have the favorable attitude whose satisfaction is relevant to well-being are idealized ones. Nevertheless, on his account, the relevant attitude must itself be understood in terms of the evaluative beliefs that you would have in idealized conditions. Thus, if he is right, subjectivists must implicitly idealize, since they must say that whether x is basically good for you ultimately depends on facts about your attitudes in idealized conditions.

Dorsey’s case for idealizing depends crucially on the claim that any plausible subjectivist theory must say that the favorable attitude whose satisfaction is relevant to well-being is *valuing*. If this claim is false, then even if his account of valuing is correct, it can be true that some subjectivists (e.g., those who take the relevant attitude to be desire) can plausibly refrain from idealizing. As I will now argue, he has not adequately defended this claim, and indeed, it is false.

Dorsey’s argument appeals to what he regards as the basic thought at the heart of subjectivism: that what is basically good for you cannot *alienate* you but must instead *resonate* with you.³³ This thought can be accommodated only by subjectivist views on which valuing is the attitude whose satisfaction matters to well-being, he argues. After all, something can alienate you even though it satisfies one of your desires: taking heroin is alienating to the recovering addict who desperately wants to quit, even

³² Dorsey (2017), pp. 200-01, 203-09, 211.

³³ Dorsey (2017), pp. 198-99.

though he desires to take it. The only pro-attitudes whose satisfaction is guaranteed not to alienate you are your values. Thus, any subjectivist theory that accommodates the basic subjectivist thought will deem valuing to be the attitude that is relevant to welfare. Since a theory of welfare is plausible, at least by subjectivists’ lights, only if it accommodates that thought, any plausible subjectivist theory will take valuing to be the attitude that matters to well-being.³⁴

This argument is unpersuasive, however. A desire-based subjectivist theory might indeed imply that it is basically good for the recovering addict to take heroin. But this claim is not implausible. As I explained in my discussion of Railton, something can be basically good for you even though you would be better off if it hadn’t obtained or occurred. A desire theorist can say that the addict would be better off quitting, but she can plausibly claim that taking heroin still has *some* basic goodness for him—a quantity of goodness that is outweighed by the basic badness that he accrues from the many desires that taking the drug frustrates. Moreover, the claim that taking the drug is basically good for the addict is not at odds with the basic subjectivist thought, properly understood. After all, taking the drug does resonate with the addict: he is drawn to it, he feels an urge to take it, he is attracted to it, etc. He is not unmoved by it or indifferent to it; it does not leave him cold. Of course, he is also repelled by the prospect of taking the drug, and attracted to states of affairs that are incompatible with his continuing to take it. (This is why he would be better off quitting, on the desire theory: he would get a better balance of desire satisfaction over desire frustration if he were to quit.) But this merely means that he is *conflicted* about the drug. It does not suggest that taking the drug does not resonate with him at all. Thus, the desire theorist’s verdict about the addict is consistent with the thought that what is basically good for you must resonate with you.

What about Dorsey’s observation that taking the drug alienates the addict? We can distinguish two senses in which something can be alienating. In the first sense, something alienates you just if it fails to resonate with you: it leaves you cold, you are indifferent to it and unmoved by it, etc. The basic thought at the heart of subjectivism does say that nothing is basically good for you if it alienates you in this sense. But since nothing that you desire alienates you in this sense, this is no problem for the desire theory. (Taking the drug does not alienate the recovering addict in this sense, even though he is strongly opposed to taking it.) In the second sense, something alienates you just if it is at odds with your values or deepest aspirations. Since the recovering addict has a deep longing to stop using

³⁴ Dorsey (2017), p. 201.

heroin, taking heroin does alienate him in this sense. However, when properly understood, the basic thought at the heart of subjectivism does not say that nothing is basically good for you if it alienates you in this sense. After all, the desire theory is the paradigmatic subjectivist theory. Since you clearly can desire something that is at odds with your values or deepest aspirations, the desire theory plainly implies that something can be basically good for you even though it is at odds with your values or deepest aspirations. Surely, the basic subjectivist thought is not so obviously incompatible with the paradigmatic subjectivist theory. When properly understood, the basic thought is just that something is basically good for you only if it resonates with you (i.e., does not alienate you in the first sense).

Dorsey claims that all subjectivists must idealize because (i) they must all agree that the favorable attitude whose satisfaction matters to well-being is valuing and (ii) valuing must be understood in terms of idealized conditions. But as I have just argued, subjectivists can plausibly claim that the attitude that matters is desire. Thus, even if Dorsey is right about the nature of valuing, he has not shown that subjectivists must idealize.

6. Objections and Replies

I have argued that Same World Subjectivism can accommodate Railton’s and Sobel’s rationales for idealizing. I have also explained why Dorsey has not shown that subjectivists must idealize. I will end by arguing that because Same World Subjectivism is a plausible non-idealizing view that avoids the problems that idealizing is meant to circumvent, subjectivists needn’t idealize. But let me first consider three objections.

6.1 Does Same World Subjectivism Idealize?

It might be objected that Same World Subjectivism itself involves idealization. For on this view, the attitudes that determine how well off Beth would be if she were to switch to writing are those that she would have if she were to switch. Since she would know what it’s like to switch to writing if she switched, this might sound like idealization in the form of additional information and experience.

But Same World Subjectivism does not involve idealization. It tells us that, in order to assess Beth’s level of welfare at the closest possible world where she switches to writing, we should look at the

attitudes that she has at that world. This claim is analogous to the hedonist’s claim that in order to assess Beth’s level of welfare at that world, we should look at the pleasures and pains that she has at that world. Hedonism is a “same world” view in the same sense that Same World Subjectivism is: it says that to determine your level of welfare at W , we must look not at some other world but at W itself. Hedonism cannot credibly be charged with idealizing on the grounds that the closest world where Beth switches to writing is one at which she eventually knows what it is like to have switched to writing. Nor can it be claimed that hedonism idealizes because that world might not be the *actual* world. A non-idealizing hedonist needn’t accept the absurd view that your welfare at counterfactual worlds is determined by the pleasures and pains that you feel at the actual world. Likewise, Actual World Subjectivism is not the subjectivist’s only alternative to idealizing. Same World Subjectivism does not idealize any more than hedonism does.

It is also worth emphasizing that Dorsey’s account of valuing does not suggest that Same World Subjectivism is an idealizing view. If Dorsey is right, then a Same World Subjectivist who thinks that valuing is the attitude that matters to well-being must hold that whether something is basically good for you depends on whether you would believe it to be good for you if you were suitably idealized. But the source of this idealization is not Same World Subjectivism, but Dorsey’s view of valuing and the view that valuing is the attitude that matters. While Same World Subjectivism can be combined with views that idealize, it is not itself an idealizing view. A Same World Subjectivist who thinks that desire is the attitude that matters does not appeal to idealized conditions.

6.2 *The Willing Drug Addict*

Imagine someone who spends her life in a pleasant stupor induced by a drug of which she has a lifetime supply. Unlike the addict that I described earlier, this person is a wholehearted and willing user of this drug: all of her values are aligned with this activity. Assuming, once again, that desire is the pro-attitude whose satisfaction matters to well-being, Same World Subjectivism implies that, as long as she is getting a great deal of desire satisfaction and very little desire frustration, she is very high in welfare. Indeed, it implies that if her desires are sufficiently strong, sufficiently numerous, and completely satisfied, then she is higher in welfare than any actual people are. Many would find this implausible, and some might wonder whether idealizing offers protection against such cases.

Idealizing views are also threatened by this kind of case, however. After all, the drug user *could already be idealized*: we needn’t suppose that there are things she hasn’t experienced, that there are facts she doesn’t know, that she is instrumentally irrational, or that she is cognitively imperfect in any other way. (To claim otherwise would go against the spirit of subjectivism, since it would pack substantive evaluative judgments into the description of the idealization.) If she is already idealized, the desires that she would have if she were idealized are just the desires that she actually has. Thus, idealizing subjectivism implies that if her desires are sufficiently strong, sufficiently numerous, and completely satisfied, then she is higher in welfare than any actual people are.

Same World Subjectivism and idealizing subjectivism both imply that someone can be extremely high in welfare even though she spends her life doing something pointless, base, or deplorable—so long as her favorable attitudes (or the ones that she would have if she were idealized) are sufficiently strong and well-satisfied. Since subjectivists believe that people are *authoritative* or *sovereign* over their own well-being, this is unsurprising.³⁵ If this implication is implausible, then this may be a reason to reject subjectivism altogether, but it is not a reason for subjectivists to idealize. I am not arguing that Same World Subjectivism, or any subjectivist view, is *true*. Indeed, I have argued against subjectivism elsewhere.³⁶ I am merely arguing against the claim that anyone who accepts subjectivism needs to idealize. Same World Subjectivism’s implications about cases like that of the willing addict do not undermine my argument, since subjectivists cannot avoid those implications by idealizing.

6.3 Final Desires

Someone who agrees that subjectivists needn’t idealize might wonder whether my arguments were necessary. Most subjectivists think that only the satisfaction or frustration of your *final* (i.e., *intrinsic*) desires is basically good or bad for you. But it might seem obvious that if only final desires matter, then idealizing is unnecessary. To see why it wouldn’t be basically good for me to satisfy my desire to own a Ferrari, we don’t need to observe that if I were idealized in the right ways, I would have no such desire. We merely need to notice that my desire is not final but merely instrumental: I want a Ferrari only because I believe that having one would promote my getting other things that I want. Since final desires are the only ones whose satisfaction is basically good, it would not be basically

³⁵ Arneson (1999), p. 116.

³⁶ In Lin (2017b), I argue against a variety of subjectivist theories. In Lin (2014) and Lin (2016a), I give arguments against desire satisfactionism.

good for me to satisfy my desire for a Ferrari.³⁷ It might seem that these simple considerations reveal my arguments to have been unnecessary.

My arguments were not unnecessary, however. To begin with, not all subjectivists believe that only final desires are directly relevant to welfare. In recent work, Heathwood distinguishes desires in the *merely behavioral* sense from desires in the *genuine attraction* sense. In his view, some genuine-attraction desires are merely instrumental, but all genuine-attraction desires are directly relevant to welfare.³⁸ Since my arguments are compatible with any plausible restriction on the attitudes that matter to welfare (though they don’t require any such restriction), they apply even to subjectivists who think that some merely instrumental desires are welfare-relevant. By contrast, the view that only final desires matter does not explain why those subjectivists needn’t idealize. Relatedly, it does not answer Dorsey’s argument that because subjectivists must think that valuing is the attitude that matters, they must idealize. To show that a subjectivist can plausibly refrain from idealizing, one must respond to that argument, as I have.

Moreover, even if final desires are the only attitudes that matter to well-being, this doesn’t explain why Railton’s case for idealizing fails. After all, we can suppose that Beth’s desire to be a writer is a final desire. Why don’t non-idealizing views imply that since this desire is stronger than her desire to be an accountant, she would be better off switching to writing? The answer, as I argued, is that an agent can accrue a greater net amount of desire satisfaction in outcome *Y* than in outcome *X*, even though she more strongly desires *X* than *Y*. My discussion of Railton’s argument is not obviated by the view that final desires are the only attitudes that count.

Likewise, even if that view is correct, it doesn’t explain why Sobel’s case for idealizing fails. Recall the version of the pineapple case in which the subject has no actual desire (and thus no actual final desire) that would be satisfied by his eating pineapple. Suppose that if the subject knew what eating pineapple is like, he would have a final desire to eat it. As Sobel would surely argue, this could be a case in which it would be basically good for the subject to eat pineapple even though this would not satisfy any of his actual desires. The view that only final desires matter to welfare cannot explain why subjectivists needn’t idealize to accommodate this fact. The explanation, as I argued, is that a non-

³⁷ Hubin (1996) and Murphy (1999) give arguments along these lines.

³⁸ Heathwood (forthcoming). I discuss a similar view in Lin (2016b).

idealizing subjectivist can accept Same World Subjectivism instead of Actual World Subjectivism: she can say that the right conditions are not the actual ones, but the ones in which the subject gets the thing whose basic goodness is in question (e.g., the ones in which he eats the pineapple).

7. Conclusion

I have argued that Railton’s, Sobel’s, and Dorsey’s arguments do not show that every non-idealizing subjectivist theory is implausible. To my knowledge, there are no other reasons to think that this is true. If I am right, then subjectivists need not idealize: they can accept a plausible non-idealizing view, Same World Subjectivism.

Indeed, something stronger is true: given the availability of Same World Subjectivism, subjectivists have strong reasons not to maintain that the right conditions are idealized. This is because Same World Subjectivism has two significant advantages over idealizing views. First, it is simpler: instead of looking at a potentially very distant possible world, it looks at the very same world at which we want to assess your welfare. Second, it evades the many serious, unresolved problems for idealizing views that I mentioned at the outset. For example, the fact that it may be impossible for anyone to be fully informed poses no threat to it. Likewise, the fact that the idealization process might leave you with a bizarre profile of attitudes doesn’t create a problem for it. Since these and other problems for idealizing theories have not been answered and may be unanswerable, the fact that Same World Subjectivism evades them is a major advantage. Subjectivists can avoid some serious problems and avail themselves of a simpler view by accepting Same World Subjectivism instead of idealizing.³⁹

My argument has important implications concerning the prospects of subjectivist theories of well-being. In light of the many problems that idealizing introduces, the conviction that subjectivists must idealize might lead some to suspect that there is no acceptable subjectivist theory. If, as I have argued, subjectivists can plausibly embrace Same World Subjectivism instead of idealizing, those

³⁹ Of course, if Dorsey’s account of valuing is correct, then those subjectivists who think that valuing is the attitude that matters to welfare will need to idealize even if they accept Same World Subjectivism. But even they have good reasons to reject the view that something is basically good for you if and only if you would value it if you were suitably idealized. For if Dorsey is right, that view idealizes twice, and it therefore exposes itself to the aforementioned problems twice.

problems do not afflict every minimally plausible subjectivist view. Even if subjectivism should ultimately be rejected, it should not be rejected on the grounds that it requires idealization.⁴⁰

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