The Subjective Good on the Objective List

In this paper, I make a case for how objective list theories of well-being should, in one respect, best be developed. As is evidenced by the fact that they usually identify something like the achievement of one's goals as a basic good, these theories typically claim that at least one basic good is subjective, in that it is necessarily connected to the satisfaction of one's pro-attitudes. I agree that they should posit at least one such basic good, but I think the number and identities of these goods merit more attention than they have received. I will argue that objective list theories should accord the status of a subjective basic good to the satisfaction of one's desires rather than to the achievement of one's goals. I will also defend a novel view about how the basic value of an instance of desire satisfaction is determined—one that captures the value of goal achievement, as well as that of another subjective kind that is often deemed good for us: the fulfillment of one's values. Although my main aim is to defend a view about the subjective basic good that objective list theorists should posit, my argument will also have implications for what the best form of subjectivism about well-being should look like. In particular, I will argue that neither of the two most prominent subjective theories is correct, and I will improve upon an existing response to a notorious problem for desire-satisfaction theories: the problem of "irrelevant" or "remote" desires.

1. Preliminaries

To avoid objectionable double-counting, any theory of well-being must distinguish things that are good or bad for you only in the derivative sense of being appropriately related to other things that are good or bad for you (e.g., by causing, being composed of, evidencing, or preventing such things) from things that are *basically* good or bad for you: good or bad for you, and not just in that derivative sense. Your level or amount of well-being (i.e., how well off you are) is determined by how basically good or bad for you everything is. A *basic good* is a kind all of whose members are basically good for you simply in virtue of being members of that kind. According to hedonism, for example, pleasure is the only basic good: every pleasure of yours is basically good for you simply on account of being a pleasure of yours, and no other kind is such that all of its members are basically good for you simply on account of being members of that kind.

I understand objective list theories of well-being to be ones committed to both *pluralism*—the view that there are a plurality of basic goods—and *objectivism*—the view, roughly speaking, that something can be basically good for you even if you lack (and would, if you were fully informed and rational or otherwise suitably idealized, lack) any favorable attitudes toward it.[1] This definition implies that an objective list theory can postulate some subjective basic goods if it also posits some objective ones. If a theory accords the status of basic goods to both goal achievement and knowledge, for example, then although goal achievement is subjective, this view accepts objectivism because it maintains that every instance of knowledge is basically good for the subject who possesses it regardless of whether she has (or would, if suitably idealized, have) a favorable attitude toward it.[2]

It is difficult to deny that there is at least one subjective basic good because it seems clear that, other things being equal, you are better off if you have favorable attitudes toward your life or the things in it than if you don't. For example, even if knowledge is an objective basic good, so that each instance of it is basically good for the person who has it regardless of whether she has a pro-attitude toward it, it seems evident that a person is better off, other things being equal, if she likes, wants, or values her knowledge than if she doesn't. More generally, even if the satisfaction of your pro-attitudes is not, as subjectivists claim, the *only* thing that directly matters to your well-being, it is hard to deny that it is *one* such thing. To accommodate this, objective list theorists typically posit a basic good that is either wholly subjective (e.g., the achievement of goals) or partly subjective (e.g., the achievement of rational goals). Given this strong and widely endorsed rationale for thinking that at least one basic good is at least partly subjective, I will assume that objective list theorists should posit at least one such good. My aim will be to argue for a view about which such good(s) they should posit, assuming that they should do so.

I will also assume the falsity of *experientialism*—the view, exemplified by hedonism, that a subject's amount of welfare supervenes on the phenomenal character of her experiences. Thus, I will assume that two subjects whose lives are phenomenally indistinguishable could nonetheless differ in well-

[1] It would be more precise to define objectivism in partly explanatory terms, as the negation of claim that, if anything is basically good for you, it has that feature at least partly in virtue of the fact that you have (or would, if suitably idealized, have) a favorable attitude toward it. And even this characterization would need to be further refined in light of the fact that subjective theories of well-being can take a "combo" (as opposed to an "object") form, on which the basically good things are combinations of favorable attitudes and their objects. But since these complications make no difference to my arguments, I will set them aside. For discussion, see Lin (2016a), (2020a), and (2022).

[2] Wall and Sobel (2021) call pluralistic views on which there are both subjective and objective basic goods 'hybrid' views.

being (e.g., because one of them is in an experience machine).[3] Experientialism is compatible with the conjunction of pluralism and objectivism, so an objective list theorist could, in principle, accept it. But, as is shown by the fact that objective list theorists typically posit basic goods that can be had in different amounts by subjects whose lives are phenomenally indistinguishable (e.g., friendship, the achievement of goals), such theorists typically reject experientialism.

Finally, I will remain neutral on whether, assuming that it is a basic good (as objective list theorists typically maintain), pleasure qualifies as a subjective good or an objective one.[4] Even if pleasure is subjective, most objective list theorists posit a distinct subjective basic good—one that can be had in different amounts by subjects whose lives are phenomenally indistinguishable. Since, for reasons that will become clear later, I think they are right to do so, I will ask what subjective basic good(s) *besides pleasure* they should recognize.

I will build on existing work, starting with the view most often held among objective list theorists: that the achievement of one's goals is a basic good. Having explained why the case for this view is inconclusive, I will argue that the satisfaction of one's desires is a basic good. Then, I will explain why, given the necessary connections among one's desires, goals, and values, we can employ a novel view about how the value of an instance of desire satisfaction is determined to capture what is good about achieving one's goals or fulfilling one's values. Equipped with this view, objective list theorists need only posit one subjective basic good to accommodate the multitude of ways in which our well-being depends on the satisfaction of our pro-attitudes.

2. Goal Achievement

You *achieve* a goal, *p*, of yours if and only if (i) you have *p* as a goal, in the sense that you not only desire it but intend to put some effort into bringing it about, (ii) *p* obtains, and (iii) *p*'s obtaining results at least partly from your efforts to bring it about.[5] The subjective basic good that objective

[3] Lin (2016b).
[4] This turns on whether the correct account of the nature of pleasure is a purely phenomenological one, such as the one defended by Bramble (2013), or an at least partly attitudinal one, such as those defended by Feldman (2004), Heathwood (2006) and (2007), and Lin (2020b).
[5] Keller (2004), pp. 32-33. Perhaps *p*'s obtaining must also (at least partly) result from your efforts *in the right way* (e.g., not via a deviant causal chain): see Hurka (2011), p. 98 and Bradford and Keller (2016), p. 274.

list theorists most often posit is the achievement of one's goals, understood either unrestrictedly[6] or with some restriction in place (e.g., the achievement of one's "significant"[7] or "rational"[8] goals). I will now argue, following Simon Keller, that other things being equal, achieving a goal of yours makes you better off regardless of what the goal is—at least if your desire for the goal is intrinsic rather than merely instrumental and involves a disposition to imagine the goal with pleasure or attraction. However, against Keller, I will argue that it is unclear that goal achievement, even so understood, really is a basic good. This is because it may be a mere subcategory of a broader basic good: desire satisfaction.

For any case in which a subject, *S*, achieves one of her goals, Keller has the intuition that *S* is at least somewhat better off than a subject, *S**, whose life is exactly like *S*'s except that *S** fails to achieve the goal of hers that corresponds to *S*'s achieved goal (because *S**'s goal doesn't obtain despite her efforts to achieve it). Suppose, for example, that Bill and Steve both have the goal of writing a best seller, that only Bill achieves this goal, and that their lives are otherwise exactly alike because they don't differ in any of the ways that would usually attend the fact that only one of them achieved the goal: for example, Steve wins the lottery and gets as much money, fame, and happiness from this as Bill does from his book's being a best seller, and he feels no regret about failing to achieve his goal. Bill seems at least somewhat better off than Steve even though the only difference between the two is that Bill has achieved more of his goals than Steve has. The same seems true, Keller argues, even of worthless, crazy, or immoral goals. If Jane and Mary both have the goal of accurately counting the blades of grass in their neighborhood, and only Jane achieves this goal, then even if their lives are otherwise exactly alike (e.g., because Mary is just as happy as Jane is even though she fails to get an accurate count), Jane seems at least somewhat better off than Mary. And if Roger and Barry both have the goal of successfully plotting and executing a deadly terrorist attack, and only Roger achieves this goal, then even if their lives are otherwise exactly alike (e.g., because they are equally happy, and because Barry inadvertently kills as many innocent people as are killed in Roger's terrorist attack in some other way), Roger seems at least somewhat better off than Barry. On this basis, Keller argues that every instance of goal achievement is basically good for the subject who achieves the goal—regardless of what the goal is, and even if the goal is worthless, crazy, or immoral.[9] Since he claims

[6] Keller (2004); Hurka (2011), ch. 5; Fletcher (2013), p. 214.
[7] Hooker (2015), pp. 21-22.
[8] Scanlon (1998), pp. 118-23.
[9] Keller (2004), pp. 29-32.

that goal achievement is only "one among several aspects of welfare," he accepts an objective list—or, at least, a pluralistic—theory on which goal achievement is a basic good.[10]

I share Keller's intuitions about those cases, at least if we understand them in the way that it is most natural to. Presumably, we're meant to think that the relevant goals are intrinsic rather than merely instrumental (because the subjects' desires for them are intrinsic rather than merely instrumental): even if the subjects want those goals partly because of what they believe their attainment will lead to or promote, they don't want them *only* for such reasons. It's also natural to suppose that the subjects' desires for these goals are not mere behavioral dispositions that could, in principle, be instantiated in phenomenally unconscious zombies: instead, they involve dispositions to imagine their objects with pleasure or attraction, as paradigmatic desires do. So long as we have in mind only goals of this sort, I agree with Keller that, other things being equal, you are better off if you achieve a goal of yours—regardless of what the goal is, and even if it is worthless, crazy, or immoral—than you are if, because the goal doesn't obtain, you do not achieve it.[11] The *ceteris paribus* clause here is crucial, because it lets us accommodate the plain fact that, if the consequences of your achieving a particular goal of yours are sufficiently bad for you (e.g., because it is the goal of killing yourself), achieving the goal could leave you worse off overall than you would have been if you hadn't achieved it. It also allays some concerns about the claim that one is benefited even by the achievement of one's immoral goals. If you think that achieving immoral goals leaves one worse off rather than better off, you can still agree that achieving them makes one better off other things equal: perhaps virtue is a basic good or vice a basic bad (as some objective list theorists hold[12]), and the benefit to the subject of the achievement is outweighed by the harm to the subject of the immorality.

We must be careful, however. Even if, as I believe, Keller's intuitions are correct, it doesn't follow that the achievement of goals is a basic good. Since having something as a goal requires desiring it, and since you do not achieve a goal unless it obtains, the achievement of one of your goals entails that one of your desires is satisfied, in the sense that the object of that desire obtains. So, perhaps what is basically good when a goal is achieved is just the satisfaction of one of the subject's desires.

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[10] Keller (2004), pp. 34-36.
[11] I remain neutral on whether, if you desire a goal merely instrumentally or merely behaviorally, you would be better off, other things being equal, achieving this goal than not achieving it. Keller doesn't distinguish among goals or desires in the way that I am doing, so it's unclear what he would say about this.
[12] Hurka (2011), ch. 6; Fletcher (2013), p. 214.

Keller rejects this possibility when he writes that "the intuition in support of the [basic goodness of achievement] does not seem to extend to cases in which an individual's goals are attained through no contribution of her own."[13] Imagine a trio of scenarios that fit the following schemas and that don't differ in any ways besides those entailed by them:

Goal Achieved You put effort toward achieving a goal of yours, and it obtains at least partly because of your efforts.

Goal Merely Obtains You put effort toward achieving a goal of yours, and it obtains, but not even partly because of your efforts.

Goal Doesn't Obtain You put effort toward achieving a goal of yours, but it doesn't obtain.

Keller's claim is that, while you are better off in Goal Achieved than in Goal Doesn't Obtain (as was shown by the cases above) and than in Goal Merely Obtains, you are no better off in Goal Merely Obtains than in Goal Doesn't Obtain. Because your desire for the goal is satisfied in Goal Merely Obtains but not in Goal Doesn't Obtain, this entails that desire satisfaction is not a basic good.

As I've already noted, I agree that you are better off in Goal Achieved than in Goal Doesn't Obtain. I also agree that you are better off in Goal Achieved than in Goal Merely Obtains: intuitively, it is better for you if a goal of yours obtains partly because of your efforts than if it obtains for entirely unrelated reasons. In other words, not only are you better off if you achieve your goal than if you fail to achieve it *because it doesn't obtain*, you are also better off if you achieve your goal than if you fail to achieve it *because it obtains, but not even partly because of your efforts*. However, unlike Keller, I think that you *are* better off in Goal Merely Obtains than in Goal Doesn't Obtain, as would be predicted by the view that desire satisfaction is a basic good. For example, if your goal is that a particular candidate for office be elected, and if she is elected after you campaign tirelessly for her but her election is not even partly due to your efforts, it seems to me that you are better off than you would be if she were not elected. However, there is no difference in goal achievement between the actual scenario and the counterfactual one: there is only a difference in desire satisfaction. Of course, discovering that one's

[13] Keller (2004), p. 33.

preferred candidate has won usually has very different effects on one's experiences than discovering that she has lost, and such differences surely make a difference to well-being. Recall, however, that the cases under consideration are supposed to differ only in the ways specified above. That is, we're meant to think that the actual scenario and the counterfactual one don't differ experientially in the way that they normally would, perhaps because you falsely believe your candidate to have won in the counterfactual scenario. Even with this stipulation in mind, it seems to me that you are better off if your desire that she win is satisfied than if it is frustrated, in the sense that its object doesn't obtain.

These considerations might suggest that desire satisfaction is a basic good alongside the achievement of one's goals. This would explain why, although Goal Merely Obtains is better than Goal Doesn't Obtain (as I have argued against Keller), Goal Achieved is even better than Goal Merely Obtains (as he and I agree): while both Goal Merely Obtains and Goal Achieved contain a desire satisfaction that is absent from Goal Doesn't Obtain, only Goal Achieved contains a goal achievement. Another possibility, however, is that desire satisfaction is a basic good but that goal achievement isn't. After all, since goal achievement entails desire satisfaction, we could capture all of the relevant intuitions by holding that desire satisfaction is a basic good and that, other things equal, a desire satisfaction has more basic goodness if the object of the relevant desire is a goal of the subject's that the subject achieves than if it isn't. On this view, we would need to posit only one basic good to explain why the three cases are ranked as they are.

Thus, although I agree with Keller that people in cases like Goal Achieved are better off than they are in otherwise exactly similar cases like Goal Merely Obtains or Goal Doesn't Obtain (at least if they desire their goals intrinsically and in a way that involves a disposition to imagine them with pleasure or attraction), I don't think he has shown that the achievement of one's goals is a basic good or that the satisfaction of one's desires isn't. The issue requires more consideration.

3. Desire Satisfaction

Should objective list theorists maintain that desire satisfaction is a basic good? Richard Arneson is, to my knowledge, the only such theorist who has said so, and even he doesn't argue for this view.[14]

[14] Arneson (1999), p. 124. He just writes that it is "surely plausible" that desire satisfaction will "end[] up being an entry on the objective list."

Moreover, the intuition that you are better off in Goal Merely Obtains than in Goal Doesn't Obtain isn't decisive, because it's compatible with the view that what is basically good is something halfway between desire satisfaction and goal achievement: the satisfaction of those desires of yours whose objects you have as goals and have put some effort toward achieving. We should therefore consider cases without goals or effort. I will now argue that we should indeed conclude, given what seems true about such cases, that the satisfaction of desires is a basic good. As part of this argument, I will consider a notorious problem for the basic goodness of desire satisfaction: the problem of "remote" or "irrelevant" desires. This problem might tempt some objective list theorists to deny that desire satisfaction is a basic good, but I will argue that they should resist this temptation.

Before I proceed, notice that I've already undermined what may be the most natural and plausible rationale for an objective list theorist to deny the basic goodness of desire satisfaction: the idea that the basic goodness of goal achievement can, when combined with that of pleasure, accommodate everything that we have reason to want to capture by holding that desire satisfaction is a basic good. The view that goal achievement is a basic good can explain why we benefit in many cases of desire satisfaction—namely, those that are also cases of goal achievement. It cannot, however, explain why we benefit in so many cases of desire satisfaction without goal achievement—why, for example, you are made better off when something that you want just falls in your lap. But since paradigmatic cases of desire satisfaction involve awareness that one's desire is satisfied and some associated pleasure, it might seem that the view that pleasure is a basic good can explain this. If I'm right about otherwise exactly similar cases conforming to Goal Merely Obtains and Goal Doesn't Obtain, however, then the basic goodness of achievement and pleasure can't capture everything we have reason to want to capture: the subject is better off in Goal Merely Obtains than in Goal Doesn't Obtain even though, because the only difference between the two cases is that the object of her desire obtains in the first but not in the second, she has no more goal achievement or pleasure in the first than in the second. Thus, I take myself to have already made a case for the basic goodness of the satisfaction of at least *some* desires—namely, those that one has as goals and has put some effort toward achieving—that withstands this natural response based on the basic goodness of goal achievement and pleasure. I will now extend this argument to all cases of desire satisfaction.

Suppose you remember a park you once strolled through and hope (and thus desire) that the flowers there are now in bloom. It appears to me that, regardless of whether the object of this desire is a

goal of yours, you are at least somewhat better off if this desire is satisfied than if it is frustrated—even if, because you have no way of knowing whether it is satisfied, you feel the same way either way. More generally, at least if we use 'desire' to refer to desires that are intrinsic rather than merely instrumental and that involve a disposition to imagine their objects with pleasure or attraction, it seems to me that in pairs of otherwise exactly similar cases of the following kind, you are at least somewhat better off in the first:

Desire Satisfied You have a satisfied desire, and you haven't put any effort toward making its object obtain.

Desire Frustrated You have a frustrated desire, and you haven't put any effort toward making its object obtain.

Since these cases don't differ with respect to the amounts of goal achievement or pleasure that they contain, the evaluative difference between them can't be explained by the basic goodness of goal achievement or pleasure. And because they needn't involve desires whose objects you have as goals, that evaluative difference suggests that desire satisfaction—and not just the satisfaction of desires whose objects you have as goals and have put some effort toward achieving—is a basic good.

Besides delivering intuitive verdicts about cases, the claim that desire satisfaction is a basic good is itself intuitively plausible. Recall the reason why it is hard to deny, and widely agreed, that there is at least one subjective basic good even if there are also objective ones: it seems clear that how well off you are is, at least in part, a matter of whether you have pro-attitudes toward your life or the things in it. It would be odd if, even though that generic claim about pro-attitudes is true, it were false that you are better off, other things equal, if a desire of yours is satisfied than if it is frustrated. After all, desire is the most basic pro-attitude: wanting something is the most basic way of being in favor of it—a more basic way than, for example, having it as a goal. It would be odd if, whereas how well off you are is, at least in part, a matter of whether you have relatively sophisticated pro-attitudes toward things in your life (e.g., whether you have them as goals), it is not even partly a matter of whether you have the most basic pro-attitudes toward them. What would explain why only pro-attitudes with more than a certain degree of sophistication count? The view that you are better off, other things equal, when you achieve a goal of yours than when you don't, even though you are not better off,

other things equal, when a mere desire of yours is satisfied rather than frustrated, seems arbitrarily exclusive: it resembles the view that, although you are better off, other things equal, when you feel an intellectual pleasure, you are not better off, other things equal, when you feel a bodily pleasure. In the same way that the generic intuition that, other things equal, you are better off the more pleasant your life is makes it highly plausible that you are benefited even by the most basic bodily pleasures, the generic intuition that, other things equal, you are better off the more you favor the things in your life makes it highly plausible that you are benefited even by the satisfaction of mere desires of yours.

Keller might object that what seems good for the subject in cases of goal achievement—namely, that the subject "imposes his will upon the world"—is absent in cases of mere desire satisfaction.[15] But why think that the fact that the subject imposes his will upon the world is the only thing that's good for the subject in the former cases, as opposed to being one of a plurality of such things or a fact that amplifies the value of such a thing? Another thing that seems good for the subject in such cases is just that the world is, in a certain respect, the way the subject wants it to be: that the world and his will are aligned. This factor is equally present in cases of mere desire satisfaction.

Some theorists would object that many desires, including the one I described above, are so irrelevant to, or "remote" from, the lives of the people who have them that these people are no better off if they are satisfied than if they are frustrated. This *problem of irrelevant or remote desires* is often illustrated with a case from Derek Parfit: if you meet a stranger who tells you that he has a serious illness, and you form a desire that he be cured but you never see or hear from him again, it seems doubtful that you are benefited if, years later, he is cured unbeknownst to you.[16] The view that goal achievement is a basic good doesn't appear to face an analogous problem of irrelevant or remote goals, however. If you not only form a desire that the stranger be cured but adopt it as a goal, and his being cured years later results in part from your efforts to cure him, then even if you never learn that he is cured, it is not implausible that you are benefited by the achievement of your goal.[17] Because this problem arises for the view that desire satisfaction is a basic good but not for the view that goal achievement is one, and because it's unclear that there is any principled way to exclude all and only the desires that seem

[15] Keller (2004), pp. 30, 33-34.
[16] Parfit (1984), pp. 494. For another classic statement of this problem, see Griffin (1986), pp. 16-17.
[17] Scanlon (1998), pp. 113-14, 120-21; Keller (2004), p. 32.

irrelevant or remote from the scope of the claim that the satisfaction of desires is basically good[18], this might suggest that objective list theorists should deny the basic goodness of desire satisfaction and hold that only goal achievement is a subjective basic good.

This objection isn't convincing, however. Notice that, as the remarks above imply, the problem with irrelevant or remote desires isn't that their subjects do not know whether they are satisfied or that their satisfaction makes no difference to the phenomenology of their subjects' experiences. After all, people can achieve their goals unbeknownst to them and without this affecting the phenomenology of their experiences, but there is no problem of irrelevant or remote goals. That is, the problem for the view that desire satisfaction is a basic good isn't that it is incompatible with experientialism: it is a problem that is supposed to arise even if, as we are assuming, experientialism is false.[19] If we keep this firmly in mind, then it's far from clear that you fail to benefit from the satisfaction of your mere desire that the stranger be cured. I myself don't find it counterintuitive that you benefit. Moreover, as Mark Lukas argues, any inclination we might have to think that you fail to benefit could well be due to a failure to distinguish the presence of only a small benefit from the absence of any benefit: since the desires that we are inclined to deem irrelevant or remote are ones that are weak and brief, and since the satisfaction of such desires is less valuable, other things equal, than the satisfaction of stronger and longer ones, we might be overlooking the small quantities of basic goodness that the subjects of such desires accrue from their satisfaction.[20]

This bullet-biting response to the problem of irrelevant or remote desires can be bolstered in two ways.[21] First, notice that no analogous problem arises in cases like Goal Merely Obtains, just as no

[18] The most natural restriction would say that *self-regarding* desires are the only ones whose satisfaction is basically good. But, as Parfit admits (1984, p. 494), it's unclear how exactly to draw the boundary between self-regarding desires—ones that are about oneself or one's own life—and other desires. Moreover, even if we accept Mark Overvold's (1980, p. 118) view that a self-regarding desire is one whose object can obtain only at times when the subject who has the desire exists, this restriction appears to exclude too much: as Chris Heathwood (2016, p. 141) argues, the satisfaction of a sports fan's desire that his favorite team win shouldn't be excluded, even though the object of this desire can obtain even at a time at which he doesn't exist. Another restriction would say that *self-interested* desires are the only ones that count (Sumner 1996, p. 134; Barrett 2025). But besides inviting the charge of circularity (though see Barrett 2025, pp. 471-72 for a reply), this proposal seems to exclude too much—e.g., by mishandling the sports fan's desire, as well as parents' non-self-interested desires for their children's success (Kriegstein 2018, p. 421). Indeed, since the achievement of even non-self-interested goals (e.g., that the stranger be cured) plausibly makes one better off, it's unclear why desires should be disqualified for being non-self-interested.

[19] For this reason, I find unconvincing the solution the problem proposed by Heathwood (2006), pp. 543, 550: that the satisfaction of a desire is basically good for its subject only if the subject is aware of its satisfaction.

[20] Lukas (2010).

[21] For a different way to reinforce this response that I lack the space to discuss, see Yu (2022).

such problem arises in cases like Goal Achieved. If you adopt as a goal of yours that the stranger be cured and put much effort into bringing this about, and the goal eventually obtains (unbeknownst to you) but not even partly because of your efforts, then it isn't implausible that you benefit from the goal's attainment. That is, the problem doesn't arise for those among your desires whose objects you have as goals and have put some effort toward achieving. This supports Lukas's diagnosis. After all, the difference between Goal Merely Obtains and Desire Satisfied isn't that you achieve a goal in the former (since you don't): it's just that, in the former, you are more fully and strongly in favor of the object of your desire (viz., by intending to put, and actually putting, some effort toward bringing it about) than you are in the latter. In light of that fact, it is reasonable to suppose that you benefit—though to a smaller, and perhaps negligibly small, degree—even from the satisfaction of your mere desire that the stranger be cured. For the simplest account of the difference between the two cases seems to be that you accrue benefits of different sizes in them, depending on how strongly or fully you are in favor of the object of the desire.[22]

The second way of bolstering the bullet-biting response focuses on possible subjects with few or no sources of welfare besides, perhaps, the satisfaction of seemingly irrelevant or remote desires. If it's more plausible that such subjects benefit from the satisfaction of such desires than it is that normal subjects do, this suggests that the intuition that normal subjects don't benefit from the satisfaction of such desires is misleading: they appear to get no benefit only because the small benefits that they get from the satisfaction of such desires pale in comparison to the larger benefits and harms that they get from other sources, such as the satisfaction and frustration of stronger and longer desires. It does seem even more plausible to me that possible subjects of the kind I described benefit from the satisfaction of their supposedly irrelevant or remote desires than it does that normal subjects do. It may seem doubtful, for example, that you benefit from the satisfaction of the aforementioned desire that the flowers in the faraway park are now in bloom. But if we imagine a subject whose *only* desire is for this and whose life contains nothing else that could plausibly give it any welfare, it seems more plausible that this subject benefits from the satisfaction of that desire. I suggest that this is because, since this subject has no other sources of welfare, the satisfaction of that desire increases its welfare by a much larger percentage than the satisfaction of the same desire would increase the welfare of a normal subject. Although the satisfaction of the desire yields the same small benefit in either case,

[22] These considerations put pressure on Kriegstein (2018)'s solution to the problem of irrelevant desires, because his solution seems in tension with the fact that merely desiring something is just a weaker and more partial way of being in favor of it than having it as a goal.

the benefit is more noticeable in the case of the abnormal subject because it doesn't occur against the background of much larger benefits that dwarf it.

I argued in the previous section that the satisfaction of desires that one has as goals and has put some effort toward achieving is basically good, at least if those desires are intrinsic and involve a disposition to imagine their objects with pleasure or attraction. In this section, I generalized that argument to desires that one either doesn't have as goals or has not put any effort toward achieving, and I replied to what I consider the most compelling reason to deny the basic goodness of desire satisfaction: the problem of irrelevant or remote desires. Although I have not yet resolved the question of whether, since one is better off in Goal Achieved than in Goal Merely Obtains, goal achievement is a basic good, I conclude that desire satisfaction is a basic good.

4. Value Fulfillment

To *value* something is to be in favor of it in a richer and more robust way than merely desiring it, and also in a different way than having it as a goal. You may want to eat a hamburger and even have this as a goal without valuing it, for example. The things that we value are the things "that we care about, …that are important to us, [that] we organize and plan our lives around."[23] To my mind, the best account of the nature of valuing says that valuing something requires being stably in favor of it (i.e., stably positively oriented toward it) in a way that involves one's desires, emotions, and judgments.[24] For example, to value living in a free society involves wanting to live in one, being disposed to feel positive emotions at the prospect of living in one (if one doesn't already) and negative ones at the prospect of no longer doing so (if one does), and being disposed to judge that freedom-related facts give you reasons to act in certain ways (e.g., that the fact that a particular candidate has authoritarian tendencies is a reason for you to vote against him). On this view, desiring something is necessary but insufficient for valuing it.[25] Moreover, having something as a goal is not only insufficient but also unnecessary for valuing it: you might value living in a free society even though, since you live in one already, you don't intend to put any effort into bringing this about.

[23] Tiberius (2018), p. 10.
[24] Tiberius (2018), pp. 11, 40; Raibley and Tiberius (2026), §2.1.
[25] Dorsey (2021, chs. 5 and 6) defends a judgment-based account on which desiring something is not necessary for valuing it. While I lack the space to defend this claim here, it seems to me that this account is too purely cognitive.

The concept of valuing makes salient two worries that one might have about my argument so far. The first concerns my claim that you are better off in Goal Merely Obtains than in Goal Doesn't Obtain, and even better off in Goal Achieved: because the examples that I adduced in favor of this claim can be read as involving valued goals, one might worry that they support only a version of that claim that is restricted to such goals. We can answer this worry by considering examples involving subjects who clearly do not value the relevant goals, however. You might suddenly be gripped by a desire that your kitchen countertops be spotless and intend to bring this about by cleaning them, even though you don't assign enough importance to this outcome to qualify as valuing it, and even though you don't value cleanliness more generally. It seems that you would be better off if this goal were to obtain despite your ineffectual attempts to achieve it (e.g., because your spouse cleans the countertops after you try but fail to do so, though not because they have noticed your efforts) than you would be if it were not to obtain after you made the same attempts, and even better off if it were to obtain partly because of your attempts.

The second worry is that perhaps the satisfaction of your desires and the achievement of your goals leave you better off (other things equal) only if they do not conflict with your values. Some think, for example, that if a drug addict desperately wants to quit and not only fails to value taking the drug but positively disvalues taking it, he gets no benefit at all when he achieves his goal of taking it and thereby satisfies his desire to take it.[26] It seems to me, however, that the satisfaction of such desires and the achievement of such goals does leave you better off, other things equal; it's just that other things aren't equal. Plausibly, it is bad for you when something you positively disvalue comes about, and not just because of the unhappiness that you likely feel upon discovering this (if you do). The drug addict does seem worse off on the whole than he would be if he were not to take the drug, but this could be because the benefit of taking it is outweighed by its harm. If we compare the scenario in which he takes the drug with one in which he fails to achieve any of his goals or satisfy any of his desires even though something that he disvalues as strongly as taking the drug comes about, it seems to me that he is better off in the first scenario than in the second.

[26] Raibley (2010), pp. 599, 613-64; Raibley (2013), pp. 207-08; Dorsey (2021), ch. 4; Raibley (2025), §6.2.

Some philosophers accord the status of a basic good to what they call the *realization* or *fulfillment* of one's values.[27] At times, they proceed as if the fulfillment of a value is analogous to the satisfaction of a desire: for a value to be fulfilled is for its object to obtain.[28] At others, they suggest that value fulfillment, like goal achievement, requires effort or activity on the part of the subject—though not necessarily activity intended to bring about or sustain the valued object.[29] On this view, if you value your relationship with your spouse, your value is fulfilled not just because the relationship persists but because it is sustained by various actions of yours—ones that aren't intended to bring it about (since it already exists) and that you likely perform simply out of love for your spouse rather than with the intention of sustaining it. Let's call the first of these two conditions 'value satisfaction' and the latter 'value fulfillment'. What should objective list theorists say about them?

If I am right that desire satisfaction is a basic good, then clearly, neither value satisfaction nor value fulfillment is the only subjective basic good. However, other things being equal, it does seem better for you to have a satisfied value in addition to having a satisfied desire or an achieved goal than to have only a satisfied desire or an achieved goal. In other words, it does seem that you are somewhat worse off in Desire Satisfied (understood as a scenario in which you have a satisfied desire whose object you don't value) than in

Value Satisfied — You have a satisfied value, and you haven't put any effort toward making its object obtain.

And it seems that you are somewhat worse off in Goal Achieved (understood as a scenario in which you achieve a goal that you don't value) than in

Valued Goal Achieved — You put effort toward achieving a goal of yours that you value, and it obtains at least partly because of your efforts.

[27] Raibley (2010); Raibley (2013); Yelle (2014); Tiberius (2018); Raibley and Tiberius (2026). Dorsey (2021, ch. 4) defends the similar view that *the things that one values* constitute a basic good.
[28] For example, Tiberius (2018, p. 34) writes: "If your values include your own enjoyment, relationships with family and friends, accomplishing something in your career, and contributing to certain morally worthwhile projects, then your life goes well for you insofar as you have good relationships and career success, make a moral contribution, and enjoy what you're doing…."
[29] Raibley (2010), pp. 608-09; Raibley (2013), pp. 192, 194-95; Yelle (2014), pp. 374-75.

For example, if you not only desire that the flowers in the faraway park are in bloom but value this (perhaps because you have fond memories of playing there as a child), then even if you play no role in bringing this about, the fact that the flowers are in bloom there benefits you more greatly, other things being equal, than it would have if you had merely desired this. And if the flowers are in bloom there because you wanted them to be and arranged for them to be planted and cared for, you benefit more, other things being equal, if you value the goal that you achieved than if not.

The intuition that you are worse off in Desire Satisfied than in Value Satisfied is incompatible with the view, occasionally suggested by the relevant theorists, that whereas the fulfillment of one's values makes one better off, their mere satisfaction doesn't.[30] We should reject that view not only for that reason but because it is arbitrarily exclusive in the same way as is the view that you are made better off by the achievement of your goals but not by the mere satisfaction of your desires. However, I find attractive a weaker view that those theorists might be willing to settle for: that it is better, other things equal, to have a fulfilled value than to have a merely satisfied one. For example, other things equal, you benefit more from your relationship with your spouse than from living in a free society because, although your value for the former is fulfilled (i.e., satisfied in part due to some activity on your part), your value for the latter is merely satisfied (assuming that you have always lived in a society that is so robustly free that nothing you have done has contributed to its remaining free).

5. The Subjective Good on the Objective List

Objective list theorists could capture all of the judgments that I have endorsed by maintaining that desire satisfaction, goal achievement, and value satisfaction are all basic goods. This would explain why, although it is good for one to have a satisfied desire and even better for one to achieve one's goal or to have a satisfied value, it is best for one to achieve a goal that one values. Because a value qualifies as fulfilled rather than merely satisfied only if the subject has performed actions that are appropriately related to it, and since performing such actions typically involves achieving goals, this would also explain why, at least typically, it is better to have a fulfilled value than a merely satisfied one. But although the view that desire satisfaction, goal achievement, and value satisfaction are all basic goods would accommodate all this, the fact that each of the latter two entails the first makes a more elegant position, partly alluded to earlier, available to us:

[30] Raibley (2013), pp. 192, 195.

(1) Desire satisfaction is a basic good.
(2) Other things being equal, the satisfaction of a desire has more basic goodness for its subject if the object of the desire is a goal of the subject's that the subject achieves than if not.
(3) Other things being equal, the satisfaction of a desire has more basic goodness for its subject if the subject values the object of the desire than if not.

This position is compatible with the standard view among desire-satisfaction theorists of well-being that the stronger a desire is, the more basically good its satisfaction is, as well as with the plausible (though perhaps not standard) view that the longer-lasting a desire is, the more basically good its satisfaction is—so long as those views are read as holding *ceteris paribus*. However, it might seem less unified than the view that the amount of basic goodness you get from the satisfaction of one of your desires is *wholly* determined by how strong (and perhaps how long-lasting) that desire is. For, on that view, it seems that the amount of basic goodness you get from the satisfaction of one of your desires is just the amount of desire satisfaction you get from it—in the same way that, on standard forms of hedonism, the amount of basic goodness you get from a pleasure is just the amount of pleasure you get from it. By contrast, a view that accepts (2) and (3) seems analogous to a non-standard version of hedonism on which the amount of basic goodness you get from a pleasure is determined not only by the amount of pleasure you get from it but by other properties of the pleasure (such as whether its object is true, or the degree to which its object is worthy of pleasure).[31] Thus, the position that I am defending might seem disunified in the same way that such non-standard forms of hedonism are. I consider this an acceptable cost to pay for extensional adequacy and for the right to posit only one subjective basic good instead of three.

Moreover, if we recast my position from the top down rather than the bottom up, it appears more unified than it initially seemed. There is a subjective condition that is maximally instantiated when (i) you are, as strongly and fully as possible, in favor of the world's being a particular way, and (ii) the world is that way entirely because of your efforts to make it so. This condition is instantiated to a high but less than maximal degree when, as is typically the case when you achieve a valued goal of yours, you are relatively strongly and fully in favor of the world's being a certain way and the world

[31] Feldman (2004), ch. 5. Another structurally similar view is the project-oriented subjectivism defended in Dorsey (2021, ch. 7).

is that way only partly because of your efforts to make it so. As the strength and fullness of your positive orientation toward the world's being that way decreases, so does the degree to which this condition is instantiated. And the less the world's being that way is due to your efforts to make it that way, the less this condition is instantiated. For lack of a better term, we can call this condition *attraction-driven agency*. When recast from the top down, my position says that attraction-driven agency is a basic good and that how basically good an instance of it is for you is proportional to the amount of attraction-driven agency in it.

6. Conclusion

I have framed this paper in terms of what subjective basic good(s) objective list theorists should recognize not only because I accept an objective list theory but because this made things, in one way, harder for me: while the view that desire satisfaction is a basic good is widely deemed plausible, it is typically rejected by objective list theorists, who appear to think that it is obviated by the basic goodness of pleasure and goal achievement. But my arguments should be of interest to anyone who rejects experientialism—as nearly all non-hedonists, subjectivist or objectivist, do. My attempts to bolster the bullet-biting response to the problem of irrelevant or remote desires make it less urgent for us to find a principled way to separate desires that are irrelevant or remote from ones that are not, and they therefore make it more credible that desire satisfaction is a basic good. My arguments also put pressure on the two most prominent subjective theories of well-being. Against the desire-satisfaction theory as it is standardly developed, I have argued that the basic goodness of a desire satisfaction is determined not only by how strong (and perhaps how long) the desire is, but also by two features of the object of the desire: whether the subject of the desire values it, and whether it is a goal of the subject's that the subject achieves. Against the value-fulfillment theory, I have argued that even the satisfaction of desires for non-valued or disvalued objects and the achievement of non-valued or disvalued goals is basically good. Philosophers have thought too narrowly about subjective basic goods—either by ignoring the basic goodness of bare desire satisfactions or ignoring the fact that it is even better to have your values satisfied or to achieve your goals than to merely have your desires satisfied. We should hold that the subjective basic good is desire satisfaction, understood in accordance with (2) and (3)—or, perhaps equivalently, that it is attraction-driven agency.[32]

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