Journal of Happiness Studies (2007) 8:99–138
DOI 10.1007/s10902-006-9006-5
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LIFE SATISFACTION, ETHICAL REFLECTION, AND THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

ABSTRACT. Life satisfaction is widely considered to be a central aspect of human welfare. Many have identified happiness with it, and some maintain that well-being consists largely or wholly in being satisfied with one's life. Empirical research on well-being relies heavily on life satisfaction studies. The paper contends that life satisfaction attitudes are less important, and matter for different reasons, than is widely believed.] For such attitudes are appropriately governed by ethical norms and are perspectival in ways that make the relationship between life satisfaction and welfare far more convoluted than we tend to expect. And the common identification of life satisfaction with happiness, as well as widespread views about the centrality of life satisfaction for well-being, are problematical at best. The argument also reveals an unexpected way in which philosophical ethics can inform scientific psychology: specifically, ethical reflection can help explain empirical results insofar as they depend on people's values.

KEY WORDS: ethics, flourishing, happiness, life satisfaction, philosophy, self-reports, subjective well-being, utility, welfare, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Few things are likely to seem more platitudinous than that it matters whether people are satisfied with their lives. Some would even say that this is basically *all* that matters. Thus we find many philosophers, including Robert Nozick and L.W. Sumner, taking something as important as happiness to consist largely or wholly in being satisfied with one's life. Sumner goes further, placing life satisfaction at the center of his account of well-being as "authentic happiness": being happy, where one's happiness is solidly grounded both in reality and in values that are truly one's own; deceived experience machine users and brainwashing victims thus don't count as flourishing (1996). The plausibility of this theory hinges on the conception of happiness Sumner

employs: a view of happiness as a composite of life satisfaction and pleasure that embodies the agent's overall evaluation of her life. The life satisfaction component of this theory clearly gets the most weight, so that Sumner actually refers to it as a "life satisfaction" theory of happiness. Other philosophers, like Robert Almeder go further still, literally identifying well-being with life satisfaction.[1] And in the burgeoning science of subjective well-being, life satisfaction surveys occupy a, perhaps *the*, starring role. Here too we often find 'life satisfaction' used interchangeably with 'happiness'.[2]

Life satisfaction is indeed important. But I will argue that it matters substantially less, and for different reasons, than we tend to think. From a philosophical standpoint, this makes deeply problematical the attempts to identify happiness or well-being with life satisfaction, or even to make life satisfaction a central aspect of human welfare. From the standpoint of empirical researchers studying well-being, and the policymakers who use their results, this raises serious questions about the interpretation of the life satisfaction studies on which they rely so heavily. For instance, do surveys suggesting most people are satisfied with their lives provide strong evidence for thinking people are happy, or doing well?

A second aim of this paper is to show that the philosophy of happiness is important for reasons we may not expect, focusing on what it might contribute to the science of happiness. Of particular interest is the way that specifically *ethical* reflection can inform the science – not just in the familiar manner, by helping us determine the significance of empirical research, but by helping us to understand human psychology itself.

Since life satisfaction is frequently identified with happiness, and widely if not universally thought at least to have comparable value to happiness, I will begin by noting some of the ways in which both life satisfaction and happiness seem, at least intuitively, to be valuable. My argument will then take the form of showing that life satisfaction's significance differs considerably from what we ordinarily ascribe to happiness. This could be taken to show that happiness is not profitably identified with life satisfaction – a conclusion I would not dispute. But here I

will be content to have shown that life satisfaction is misunderstood and overrated.

Before proceeding, a bit of terminology: like most researchers outside philosophy, I will use 'happiness' in its main contemporary psychological sense, where it denotes a psychological condition that is widely valued, as when people say things like "I just want for my children to be happy and healthy." Philosophers often use the term differently, as a rough synonym for 'well-being', and in this sense of the term "happiness" involves mental states only insofar as human welfare does. References to Aristotle's theory of "happiness" use the term in this latter sense: to give a theory of happiness thus construed is not to inquire into the nature of a mental state, but to give a theory of a certain kind of value, namely well-being or flourishing – or, in Aristotle's own terms, *eudaimonia*. In this paper I will use 'happiness' exclusively in the psychological sense, where its meaning more closely resembles those of terms like 'depression' or 'tranquility', and will stick to 'well-being', 'welfare', or 'flourishing' for *eudaimonia*. In my sense of the term, Aristotle seems not to have had a theory of happiness. He had a theory of well-being.[3]

WHAT LIFE SATISFACTION IS AND WHY IT IS SUPPOSED TO MATTER

Life satisfaction admits of many definitions, so that any critique is liable to meet objections that what it addresses isn't "really" life satisfaction. We must begin, then, by identifying the target notion and considering why this is the right target. As a first approximation we may define life satisfaction as having a favorable attitude toward one's life as a whole. Opinions vary about the precise nature of this attitude, but typically it is seen as somehow embodying a *global judgment* about one's life taken as a whole: that, all things considered, one's life is satisfactory. Central to life satisfaction for Sumner, for instance, is "a positive evaluation of the conditions of your life, a judgment that, at least on balance, it measures up favorably against your standards or expectations."[4] And a representative example of the scales employed by researchers, for example, asks respondents:

"All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole now . . .?" (From 1, "dissatisfied," to 10, "satisfied.") (Veenhoven, 1997). Another instrument, Andrews & Withey's Delighted-Terrible scale, asks: "How do you feel about your life as a whole . . .?" (From 1, "terrible," to 7, "delighted.") (Andrews and Withey, 1976). The global evaluation embodied in life satisfaction attitudes is important, for reasons to be examined momentarily; hence these questions are distinguished from more specific questions about subjects' satisfaction with particular *domains* of their lives (work, family, etc.).[5] We must also recognize that, as ordinarily understood, life satisfaction is not *merely* a judgment about one's life: we cannot reduce it to the bare judgment or belief that one's life is going well, or to perceived welfare. For it is widely thought to involve *affirming*, *endorsing, appreciating,* or being *pleased* with one's life (E.g., Sumner 1996, p. 145).

There are several reasons why this might matter. First, thinking your life is going well is one thing, and thinking it is going well *enough* quite another. Some people aren't satisfied with merely good lives. Second, a mere belief lacks weight: it is too thin and intellectualized. When you give someone a gift, you don't just want him to think it a good specimen. You want him to *like* it. Similarly, it seems important for us to appreciate our lives, perhaps because it is a way of being wholehearted in our assessments of our lives.[6] Life satisfaction requires being *satisfied*, not just thinking things satisfactory. A third, related point: being satisfied has motivational implications, at least tempering inclinations to seek major changes in where your life is headed.

There are other ways to think about life satisfaction, for instance as the aggregate of one's particular satisfactions and dissatisfactions, but I will postpone discussion of them for later.

Since I will be arguing for a reconsideration of life satisfaction's value, we need first to know how life satisfaction is supposed to be valuable. It will be helpful to focus on one of the more common assertions about life satisfaction, namely that it is identical to, or a central aspect of, *happiness*. Indeed, this is one of the most widely accepted views of happiness; and even among those who do not explicitly identify happiness with life

satisfaction, there appears to be a broad consensus that life satisfaction is centrally important for human welfare. Expressions of serious doubt about its significance are few and far between.

Theories of happiness have traditionally taken either of two basic forms: the life satisfaction view, and *hedonism*, which identifies happiness with pleasure, or more precisely, with having a favorable balance of pleasure over pain.[7] A third view, only recently defended in the philosophical literature but possibly implicit in much of the empirical research, is the *emotional state* theory, which identifies happiness with having a favorable overall emotional condition.[8] This account differs from hedonism mainly by focusing more on mood-related affects and on nonconscious aspects of affect, such as individuals' emotional dispositions. Finally, *hybrid* views combine life satisfaction with hedonism (or possibly emotional condition): roughly, to be happy is to be satisfied and have a favorable balance of pleasure over pain.[9] Life satisfaction clearly bears a lot of weight in such theories, and in Sumner's view is quite central to well-being itself.

So how important is happiness supposed to be? An obvious clue lies in the historical popularity of welfare hedonism, which is normally understood as identifying well-being with happiness hedonistically conceived. This view continues to have important supporters and seems at least to be *close* to the truth. Nozick's experience machine and Sen's happy slaves notwithstanding, the pleasantness of our lives seems generally to correspond to how well we are faring.[10]

Happiness seems intuitively to track well-being closely quite apart from any theoretical convictions, to the extent that it appears in ordinary practical reasoning to serve as a proxy for well-being. On learning that a friend is happy, you may well infer, reasonably, that she is doing well. If you find her to be unhappy, you might just as reasonably conclude she is doing poorly. And when deliberating about important life decisions, the judgment that one option will leave you happier normally suffices to settle the question of which best serves your interests. Note that these inferences are defeasible – we are not relying on the "well-being" sense of 'happiness' here: if you find that

your friend's husband regards her with utter contempt, and that she would be devastated were she to learn the truth, you might well decide she's actually quite unfortunate, though happy all the same.

This, at least, is how we tend to think about happiness: in ordinary practical reasoning we treat it as so closely aligned with well-being that, for the most part, we can use it as a stand-in for well-being.[11] One reason for doing so may be that the notion of well-being is highly abstract and formal, whereas happiness is a concrete, substantive good, and may thus be easier to assess and discuss. While this practice may ultimately prove misguided, there is no reason to think that those tending to identify happiness with life satisfaction would be inclined to challenge it.

So life satisfaction seems to be widely regarded as a central aspect of well-being, or at least to correlate very strongly with it. The next question is *why* it is supposed to be so important. Its value is partly hedonic, but this fails to account for why life satisfaction seems distinctively significant. We seem to care about life satisfaction mainly as an *evaluation*: as an ostensibly authoritative verdict on the overall quality of one's life. It seems important whether our lives go well by our standards, and what better measure of this than our own judgments? Note that life satisfaction and pleasure can diverge quite radically, and in fact this is part of life satisfaction's appeal: even dysthymic philosophers could be satisfied with their lives, and thus perhaps achieve a measure of well-being, insofar as they see their pursuits as worthwhile and value such things more than pleasure. Conversely, small-town residents might sometimes be dissatisfied with their lives, longing for the fast life of the city, despite having favorable emotional conditions and leading pleasant lives. This sort of dissatisfaction seems important, at least partly because of what it tells us about how individuals' lives measure up in relation to their own priorities.

The global nature of life satisfaction attitudes also contributes to their appeal: they provide a holistic perspective on our lives, in sharp contrast with the hedonistic reduction of happiness to the mere aggregate of many moments. What matters to

us, arguably, is not just having a plurality of good moments, but having a good *life*. And we see our lives as more than just the sum of their parts. Thus the pains suffered in boot camp, or in pursuit of some other achievement, might be seen as a good thing in the context of one's life as a whole. They will at least take on a different significance from the pains considered individually, as mere pains.

The question now is whether life satisfaction really does matter in the ways we've been discussing. Most important for our purposes will be whether it tracks well-being closely enough to serve as a proxy for it. If not, then we may need to reconsider the importance ordinarily ascribed to it; and we will need to reconsider either the importance of happiness or the common practice of identifying it with life satisfaction.

HOW LIFE SATISFACTION DEPENDS ON ETHICAL NORMS AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING[12]

> *Just being alive, having a wonderful family, good friends, watching the sunrise morning after morning – that's what makes me feel good. I think people take their lives for granted. Some just haven't hit that part of their lives where they stop and say, "I am such a lucky person to have the life that I have."*

Sgt. Michael A. DiRaimondo, in a letter home from Iraq[13]

Life satisfaction's norms

Life satisfaction is a paradigm subjectivist good, though of course one need not be a subjectivist about welfare to think it important. In what follows I will assume that some fairly strong form of subjectivism about well-being is correct: that what counts toward an individual's well-being is fixed solely by *her* priorities, what she wants, likes, or cares about. We will thus address life satisfaction where its appeal is strongest.

Granting the subjectivity of welfare does not mean that anything goes when it comes to life satisfaction. For even the most ardent subjectivist will want to grant that there's something wrong with someone who views her life favorably on patently irrelevant grounds, say because three is a prime number. At the very least, our attitudes toward our lives ought to reflect our

priorities. If they were completely arbitrary, or otherwise bore no interesting relation to what we care about, it is doubtful that anyone would take them seriously. Life satisfaction attitudes probably should also be grounded in reality, reflecting the conditions of our lives; at a minimum, they should at least be grounded in our *experience* of our lives. For example, we will not want it to reflect only a tiny fraction of the things in one's life that one cares most about. (I once heard a researcher relate a story about his teenage daughter reporting being very dissatisfied with her life. This was, she explained, because they lacked cable TV.) At a bare minimum, our attitudes toward our lives should reflect our priorities and our experience of life. One might question how far these conditions are actually met,[14] but I will assume in what follows that people's attitudes toward their lives do meet them.[15]

Life satisfaction attitudes, in short, are governed by norms: they can be more or less reasonable. But no one should be troubled by the fact that epistemic norms like these govern life satisfaction attitudes. Otherwise it is hard to see how they could be expected to correspond in any interesting way with well-being, at least in their capacity as evaluations. If these were the only norms appropriate to life satisfaction attitudes, we might reasonably expect them to track closely, or even be definitive of, human welfare. But they are not: life satisfaction attitudes are not simple assessments of well-being, or otherwise evaluations of a sort that are supposed to correspond straightforwardly to well-being.[16] For they crucially have an *ethical* dimension: our attitudes toward our lives reflect on our characters, embodying more or less virtuous or unvirtuous ways of responding to our lives.[17] They ought to reflect, not merely how well our lives are going for us, but also *virtuous* ways of responding to our lives. They are therefore subject to ethical norms. So even if life satisfaction attitudes should reflect well-being, they quite appropriately track ethical and perhaps other concerns as well, with the result that inferences from life satisfaction to welfare should be problematical at best. In short, they are not even *supposed* to track well-being in any reasonably straightforward manner.

Consider, for example, our admiration for driven individuals who seem never to be satisfied. Or how we admire the fortitude or gratitude of those who, like Sergeant DiRaimondo, somehow manage to appreciate their lives, and even embrace them, while facing adversity. The former individuals' tendency not to be satisfied with their lives can be part of what we admire about them, just as the latter's propensity to *be* satisfied with their lives may be part of what we find estimable in them. And someone who expresses dissatisfaction with his life amid great achievement and other manifest blessings, simply because things aren't better still, can strike us as an ingrate or whiner. These examples suggest a couple of points, the most obvious being that our attitudes toward our lives can reflect various virtues and vices, such as gratitude, fortitude, ambition, pride, complacency, smugness, softness, low self-regard, etc.

What this means is that you might reasonably be satisfied with your life, *not* because it is going well for you, but because you have or aspire to such virtues as gratitude or fortitude. (Some theists may believe this to be their duty.) Indeed, you might reasonably be satisfied with your life even when saddled with terrible hardship and a bleak future, and even when you *believe* things are going badly for you.[18] Maybe you're glad just to be alive and able to enjoy even life's smallest pleasures. None of this is to forget the requirement that life satisfaction attitudes be firmly grounded in our priorities and experience of life, for these individuals may still be taking such matters firmly into account.

These points already suggest that life satisfaction attitudes should not be expected to correspond neatly to well-being. Such attitudes embody, not just our view of how well our lives are going, but also our sense of how it is appropriate to respond to our lives. (Similarly, should you be pleased with the dreadful poem your child affectionately composed for you? Or should you be dissatisfied with your life if you have an autistic child? Clearly, such attitudes should not depend simply on whether things satisfy your preferences.) Complicating matters further is that we have no reason to suppose that norms will impact attitudes *consistently*. The examples we started with make this clear: while

one person might emphasize norms of gratitude and thus be satisfied, another might just as reasonably focus on norms of non-complacency, and thus be dissatisfied. Still others may rely on different norms. (I will focus on gratitude and complacency for simplicity.) And so different persons' attitudes will connect with well-being in different ways.

I sometimes refer to people "emphasizing" or "choosing" ethical norms when evaluating their lives, which can make it seem as if we are supposed to be deliberately shaping our attitudes. Obviously, our conduct is not always shaped so self-consciously by ethical concerns. Someone with the virtue of fortitude, for instance, might tend to evaluate her life favorably for a variety of reasons related to the virtue: perhaps her acquisition of the virtue has so shaped her various psychic dispositions that she naturally tends to see her difficulties as nothing to complain about. And even the attitudes of someone with an avowed commitment to fortitude can reflect this commitment in uncalculated ways: simply aspiring to a virtue can alter your desires, perceptions, valuations, etc. so that you become more likely to have the appropriate responses, and this hardly needs to involve thinking explicitly about the virtue whenever the situation makes it relevant.[19] In fact there are risks in being *too* self-conscious in applying our ethical commitments: it can reek of artifice or self-deception. Deep down you might hate your life but nonetheless deem it satisfactory because you think gratitude requires you to. But such a judgment is probably insincere or a product of self-deception. The fact that such cases are possible scarcely shows that *genuine* satisfaction with one's life cannot be guided by ethical norms.[20]

Arbitrariness: norms

Not only can different individuals exhibit virtue in different ways; the same individual can at different times emphasize different virtues, and the choice can be substantially *arbitrary*. For there are many ways to be virtuous, and in many cases we lack well-defined personal ideals highlighting particular virtues. A typical person might, for example, value both gratitude and non-complacency without having any special commitments

regarding either ideal. For such a person it can be somewhat arbitrary how much to emphasize each virtue. This arbitrariness leaves room for the individual to draw on pragmatic considerations, emphasizing whichever virtue seems most helpful in the context. Not only can this be perfectly wholesome, but doing it well may itself mark a kind of virtue. Hence a successful researcher might find it useful normally to stress the value of non-complacency and thus avoid becoming too satisfied for her own good; but when her spouse develops Alzheimer's and requires intense care, this strategy may cease to be functional. She may now find it wiser to count her blessings instead of discounting them. This progression may strike us as not only reasonable but admirable.

Notice that in examples like this the considerations animating the choice of norms actually push life satisfaction in the *opposite* direction from well-being: emphasizing norms that will make you less satisfied when things are good, and more satisfied when things are bad.[21] We might even have good reasons to be satisfied primarily when things are going badly, and dissatisfied mostly when they are going well: it could be reasonable for one's life satisfaction attitudes systematically to have the opposite valence of one's well-being. Which of course would turn the usual view of the relation between life satisfaction and welfare almost precisely on its head.

Arbitrariness: perspective

Arbitrariness infects life satisfaction attitudes in a deeper way owing to the inherently *perspectival* character of these attitudes. Crudely, whether you are satisfied with your life depends on how you look at it. And there is no uniquely authoritative perspective from which to assess one's life. Each of us can reflect on our lives from any number of different perspectives, each liable to yield a different level of life satisfaction, and it is substantially arbitrary which perspective we take. Perspective affects our attitudes in several ways, but I will focus on its role in determining the information we attend to and the standards of comparison we use.

Consider an example. Emma, a healthy 64, has recently lost her beloved husband of many years. Several months into her grief, she finds her attitude toward her life vacillating between two extremes. For on some days she thinks about her life in relation to those she regards as truly unfortunate, like her divorced friend whose own health is failing and whose children are estranged. (Whereas Emma remains close to her children, all of whom are doing well.) On such occasions she feels genuinely lucky and takes real pleasure in contemplating her fortunes; while her husband's death at 68 was obviously unwelcome, she knows many others have died much younger, and few have marriages as gratifying as theirs. She feels wholeheartedly satisfied with her life. But on other days she reflects more on the enormous gap her husband's passing has opened in her life and wonders how she can go on. The future is a blank. At these times she feels acute loneliness, grief, and anger. She is deeply dissatisfied.

Because she looks at her life from different perspectives at different times, Emma's attitude toward it alternates among highly disparate verdicts. Which is more authentic or otherwise authoritative? Clearly, neither needs be. Both perspectives are fully her own, and both attitudes express responses to her life that are wholly hers, and equally authoritative.[22] Which perspective she takes is, to some extent, arbitrary. And we of course are in the same situation – all of us can adopt any of a variety of perspectives on our lives, with no compelling reasons for preferring one or the other. Moreover, all of us *do*: most of us, for instance, assess our lives at one time or another in relation to the lives of those whom we most admire. This perspective focuses attention on how well we are living – are we making the most of our lives, living as well as we could? From this perspective most of us will find our lives wanting, and perhaps be dissatisfied. It may be judgments made from this perspective that Julia Annas had in mind when she claimed that ethical reflection, at least for the ancients, takes as its starting point the fact that most of us are dissatisfied with our lives. This assertion may seem to fly in the face of the evidence, since a solid majority of people give favorable answers when asked

how satisfied they are with their lives.[23] Yet this is perfectly compatible with the possibility that all of us do sometimes assess our lives from this more demanding perspective, and usually find them less than satisfactory.

Probably all of us have at times examined our lives in relation to the less fortunate and found our lives to be pretty good. This perspective will naturally tend to generate relatively favorable attitudes toward our lives. Doubtless other perspectives are quite common as well. This does not mean some perspectives aren't better than others: broader perspectives, for instance, tend to yield more meaningful judgments than narrower ones (for instance, focusing only on the negatives). And an individual may have commitments that favor certain perspectives over others, say if one's religion dictates keeping an eye always on the fates of those less fortunate. But for most of us such commitments are likely to underdetermine our choice of perspective. Nor am I suggesting that we always choose perspectives consciously; we tend automatically and naturally to take the perspectives we do, and may not even be aware that other options exist.

The effects of norms and perspectives are different, but not unrelated. Taking up a certain perspective may well remind us of the importance of certain norms. For instance, a visit to a hospital may induce a shift in perspective, which in turn can direct your attention to the importance of counting one's blessings. Conversely, reflection on the importance of a certain virtue can prompt us to adopt a perspective that will foster it. Thus a person's desire to avoid complacency may lead him to assess his life in relation his most successful peers.[24]

I also have not explained just how perspectives influence life satisfaction attitudes. In the preceding discussion they appear to work by altering the *standards* we use in evaluating our lives: how good is good enough?[25] Different perspectives involve assessing our lives in relation to different individuals or groups: relative to Tiny Tim my life looks great, but if I look at my life in relation to Socrates it can seem pathetic, since I naturally apply a different and higher standard in the latter case than in the former. Again, there is more to perspective-taking than this, and other ways that perspective shifts can alter life satisfaction attitudes. For instance,

our satisfaction with our lives might depend on whether we focus on, say, the entire span of our lives, the current "chapter," the current year, etc. And it is not clear that, say, the "entire life-span" perspective will yield an attitude that is more authoritative, important, or indicative of our welfare – especially our *current* welfare – than any other perspective.[26]

Arbitrariness: summary

So life satisfaction attitudes are substantially arbitrary, due to the arbitrariness of the perspectives we take and the ethical norms that drive our judgments. As a result many of us could, like Emma, just as reasonably and authentically be either satisfied *or* dissatisfied with our lives. Certainly all of us could at least be significantly *more or less* satisfied or dissatisfied with our lives than we actually are.[27] Your being satisfied with your life may thus say more about the perspective you are taking, or your values or character, than about how well your life is going. Indeed, you may reasonably become *more* satisfied with your life when things are plainly going much *worse* for you. A diagnosis of cancer, for instance, may induce a shift in perspective that causes you to judge your life more favorably than you did before. You might correctly believe yourself to be much worse off than you were – it's just that you are more appreciative of the good things now. (You need not see your earlier dissatisfaction as mistaken; you may simply feel that there is more than one reasonable way of looking at your life.)

A similar perspective shift, or perhaps a related shift in norms, might explain one of the more curious results in the empirical literature on life satisfaction. A survey of African-Americans found that reported life satisfaction increased during the 1980's even as objective indicators of welfare (like health, education and income) and self-reported happiness – which tends to track affect more closely than life satisfaction – declined (Adams, 1997). We cannot be sure what explains this result, and it is after all only a single study. But one possibility is that the respondents' lives really were getting worse, yet they coped by changing how they looked at their lives, or by focusing on different virtues like fortitude or gratitude. (It would be

interesting to know whether they really believed their lives had gotten better.)

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE SATISFACTION

Life satisfaction and well-being

The relation between life satisfaction and well-being is far looser, and far more complicated, than people tend to suppose. Life satisfaction is inherently ill-suited to serve as a proxy for well-being, for it is not *supposed* to mirror well-being. Not even roughly. It is not merely an assessment of welfare but an expression of the individual's stance toward, and response to, her life. As such it is subject to ethical norms that have nothing to do with well-being. And because each of us can reasonably and authentically take a variety of stances toward our lives, and respond to our lives in a wide range of ways, our life satisfaction attitudes are substantially arbitrary. For most of us, the stance we happen to take at any given moment is no more authoritative than any of a range of alternatives. So not only do life satisfaction attitudes reflect matters other than personal welfare; *they need not bear any discernible relationship to well-being at all*. Possibly, one could reasonably go through life being satisfied at some times, and dissatisfied at others, without any clear pattern relating the attitudes to one's actual welfare.[28] As I noted earlier, *these arguments in no way presuppose an objectivist conception of well-being*: they are perfectly compatible with quite strong forms of subjectivism. Unless, that is, someone wants to defend a type of "subjectivism" according to which well-being relates only arbitrarily and very weakly to how people's lives are going relative to their own priorities, can conflict dramatically with agents' own assessments of their well-being, and can fluctuate wildly from one moment to the next without any significant change in the individual's condition.[29]

It may be objected: "But when I feel satisfied with my life, that attitude expresses *my* stance – however arbitrarily chosen – and so my attitude embodies a response to my life that is uniquely and authoritatively *mine*." Some people may well be right in saying this, but not most of us. The objection assumes

that we ordinarily resolve the arbitrariness in how we assess our lives by embracing a particular stance, much as an existentialist might commit herself to a certain set of values. But normally we don't *resolve* the arbitrariness at all: we exploit it. Like Emma, we shift stances as it suits us, considering our lives sometimes from one perspective, sometimes from another. Reflecting on our lives in varied ways helps keep us balanced; it helps us to keep things, well, in perspective. To commit firmly to a particular stance seems dogmatic.

Because its connection to well-being is so tenuous, life satisfaction lacks the kind of significance that happiness appears to have, and indeed seems much less important. While most people will grant that happiness can diverge substantially from well-being, we tend to expect major divergence only in "problem" cases involving pronounced ignorance, manipulation, or extreme adaptation (e.g., happy slave cases). The trouble with life satisfaction is that radical divergence is more or less *supposed* to happen; we should expect it in a wide range of perfectly ordinary and unproblematical cases. We should not expect it to function as a proxy for well-being, like happiness seems to. This in turn suggests either that life satisfaction theories of happiness are false, or that happiness is less important, and important for different reasons, than is commonly believed.[30] If it is problematical to identify life satisfaction with happiness on account of its convoluted relationship with well-being, still more problematical is it to equate life satisfaction with *well-being*, or even a central part of it. To give it a starring role in our conception of well-being would be to misunderstand its nature. Indeed, life satisfaction has a voluntary aspect that makes it dubious candidate for a major life goal. To be satisfied, just think of Tiny Tim.

Now some may object that issues concerning perspectives and norms don't necessarily drive a wedge between life satisfaction and well-being: those who count their blessings don't just report higher life satisfaction; they really *are* better off. To some extent this is surely true. At the very least, being satisfied with our lives can make them more pleasant and temper the forces of discontent. Moreover, we may find value just in the fact of appreciating the good in our lives: it is good not just to have good things

in our lives and know about them, but also to *appreciate* them. (Consider how sad it can be when a person of great talent fails utterly to appreciate her merits, even if at some level she knows about them.) Similarly, there is a connection between life satisfaction and self-esteem, particularly insofar as we feel responsible for the way our lives go, or to the extent that our identities are literally constituted, in part, by our life histories. Such considerations can make it seem like a kind of self-repudiation to be dissatisfied with one's life, and a kind of self-affirmation to be satisfied. Consider this excerpt from a recent newspaper article:

> Only two months after Stacey and Justin Smith amassed $20,000 in credit card debt to pay for their May 2001 wedding, Mr. Smith was laid off from his job as a laboratory technician. Ms. Smith said that because of their wedding debt, the couple had to move into her aunt's house to save on rent. They also parted with their two leased cars in favor of sharing a used car, and they enlisted a financial planner to monitor their spending, even submitting their credit card statements for review each month. "Everything was just a mess," Ms. Smith said. *Still, she considers the wedding well worth it:* "It was such a fun day, I didn't care how much we put on our credit cards."[31] (Emphasis added.)

We can readily imagine this woman going on to express great satisfaction with her life. It is tempting to chalk this story up to nothing more than sheer stupidity. But it is arguably an illustration of the lengths to which people can go to affirm their lives, virtually come what may. To regard the wedding as a mistake might feel to her like a repudiation of one of the most meaningful episodes in her life, and thereby (perhaps) a kind of self-repudiation.[32] While her judgment seems obtuse all the same, we can sympathize with the likely motive behind it. In fact we would probably think something wrong with her were she to come *too lightly* to the conclusion that such an important moment in her life was a colossal blunder.

Finally, life satisfaction attitudes can eventuate from the critical task, for most of us, of stock-taking: reflecting on our lives to see whether they have gone, and are heading, in a direction we can gladly affirm. For at least these reasons life satisfaction seems important.

Are all conceptions of life satisfaction vulnerable?

I have not argued that just anything we might call life satisfaction has these difficulties. I have assumed throughout the usual understanding of life satisfaction as somehow embodying a global judgment about one's life as a whole. But life satisfaction may be conceived otherwise. Consider an *aggregative* view of life satisfaction that rejects the need for a global judgment altogether, constructing life satisfaction attitudes out of the aggregate of an agent's attitudes to various items. So, for example, life satisfaction could be viewed as the aggregate of one's narrower satisfactions with what one takes to be the important domains of one's life – one's job, family, friendships, leisure activities, health, etc. Whatever else may be said for or against such a view, it remains vulnerable to the concerns raised in this paper. Many academicians, for instance, have found themselves wavering in their attitudes toward their jobs, much as Emma does regarding her life: looked at one way, an absurdly demanding grind that leaves little time to get off the clock and enjoy one's personal life; from another perspective, a deeply gratifying way of making a living essentially at doing one's favorite hobby. (And shouldn't you be ashamed for complaining about a job that gives you such freedom?) In short, domain satisfactions are susceptible to the same issues concerning perspectives and ethical norms that confront global satisfactions.

A different form of aggregation, one that probably accounts for much of our ordinary interest in satisfaction, constructs the attitude out of an agent's more particularized *felt* satisfactions and dissatisfactions: one's active likes and dislikes regarding the things in one's life. For instance, a restless youth pining to quit her small-town home for the city might count as dissatisfied with her life even if she lacks any global attitude toward it. Perhaps she's never stepped back to reflect on her life as a whole. A similarly unreflective companion, pleased with many things in his life and lacking any real urge for major change in it, might thereby qualify as satisfied with his life. Aggregating felt (dis)satisfactions yields an interesting and important notion: this sort of satisfaction will tend to have substantial motivational and affective ramifications, for instance facilitating predictions

about the likelihood that individuals will seek major changes in their lives. And it embodies a way of appreciating or endorsing things in our lives.

I will not try fully to assess the merits of such a view here, but will note a couple of points. First, the notion in question seems to involve not life satisfaction but *contentment*. The restless and unreflective youth might properly be described as discontented or dissatisfied, period; but to say she is dissatisfied *with her life* seems wrong, save perhaps in a loose manner of speaking. For she seems to have no opinion concerning her life at all, and would have to reflect and *come* to a judgment if asked about her life as a whole. (Note that she might well come to a resolutely *favorable* judgment and affirm her life despite her discontent.) Second, the resulting conception of life satisfaction cannot really be considered a substitute for the sort of "global judgment" view that concerns this paper and the majority of work that has been written on life satisfaction. Its significance is quite different, as are the proper instruments for measuring it. Perhaps this kind of satisfaction is actually more important; but its importance still seems less than what many would hope for global life satisfaction: it hardly seems suitable, for instance, as a proxy for well-being. Consider just the fact that many people have resigned themselves to miserable lives; they are not particularly discontented, but neither do they regard their lives as satisfactory. Felt satisfactions can only tell us so much about how people's lives are going in relation to their priorities, since many of the things we care most about don't affect how contented we are at all. Conversely, much of what exercises us is, even by our own lights, trivial.

We might secure a tighter connection between satisfaction and individuals' priorities by aggregating not felt satisfactions but mere *opinions*, however inert or infrequently brought to mind, regarding the various things in one's life: e.g., what believes to be undesirable, would like to be different, etc. This approach would also avoid the concerns raised in this paper, likewise at the cost of losing the global judgment and additionally sacrificing the *satisfaction* aspect of life satisfaction – the appreciation of one's life. But even if it could yield an intuitively

plausible understanding of life satisfaction – which seems unlikely – it would make life satisfaction deeply inscrutable. Not only would it be difficult for others to ascertain how satisfied I am; it would probably be mysterious even to me. I haven't the foggiest idea what the aggregate of my opinions concerning my life would look like. (Consider all the deficiencies in your own life that you rarely if ever think about.) Not to mention that, absent a global judgment, somehow a scheme must be devised for deciding how to aggregate my opinions.

We need to consider one further way of understanding life satisfaction, suggested by a popular scale for assessing it: Diener et al.'s Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), which assesses respondents' level of agreement with five statements (Diener et al., 1985):

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am satisfied with my life.
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

For our purposes the interesting thing about this instrument is that only the third statement straightforwardly asks respondents about their satisfaction with their lives. How far do my arguments apply to the states measured by the SWLS? In essence, this scale assesses two types of state: first, ways of endorsing or being pleased with one's life – in short, types of life satisfaction as we've been discussing it; and second, assessments of personal welfare – ways of believing one's life is going well.[33] Statement 3 clearly falls into the first category, and statement 5 arguably does as well. Statement 2 seems to belong to the second category, while 1 and 4 probably fall somewhere in between: nominally judgments about well-being, but framed much like endorsements or affirmations of one's life.

If this is right, then the SWLS measures not just life satisfaction but perceived welfare as well. This need not be a defect of the scale: *both* life satisfaction and perceived welfare are worth studying, and this instrument might provide a useful means of doing so. (It is widely regarded as having good psychometric properties.) We need only be clearer about what this scale is

really measuring. Alternatively, the SWLS might embody a conception of life satisfaction as a complex state that *includes* perceived welfare.[34] Like aggregating opinions, this option certainly departs from the basic idea of life satisfaction as a kind of *satisfaction* – a way of appreciating or endorsing one's life. Indeed, we saw that one could perfectly well be dissatisfied with one's life even while believing it to be going well, or satisfied when one thinks it going badly. So it may be false to the ordinary notion to conceive of life satisfaction in a broad way that encompasses perceived welfare. Be that as it may, for the purpose of assessing how well individuals' lives are going by their lights, perceived welfare may nonetheless offer a *better* measure than life satisfaction. For as I noted earlier, the difficulties for life satisfaction arise at least in part because life satisfaction attitudes aren't mere assessments of personal welfare. Thus perceived welfare might seem to be a more straightforward gauge of well-being than life satisfaction.

In fact it does seem to be less susceptible to the impact of perspectives and ethical norms, since life satisfaction involves both assessing how one's life is going *and* endorsing it or not. And we may, e.g., be reluctant to withhold endorsement even where we are prepared to say our lives aren't going well, say because issues of fortitude are more pressing on questions of endorsement, or because looking at our lives relative to the less fortunate can incline us to endorse our lives even when it doesn't make us think we are actually doing *well*. SWLS may thus be a superior measure of well-being.

But at the same time, *none* of the items on the SWLS are immune to these issues, because even assessments of personal welfare, made from the first-person perspective, are never just that. Believing that you are faring well or poorly may itself reflect on your character, and can depend on the perspective you happen to take, with a certain amount of arbitrariness involved as well. Consider how Emma might answer the five questions: not only would she find herself wavering on the third item; no doubt her answers to the other questions would (reasonably) vary with it. When contemplating her life in relation to the less fortunate, for instance, she may see her life

being closer to her ideal; the conditions of her life may seem better; and it may seem she has gotten more of the important things she wants in life. All of us can reasonably come to a range of different judgments about our well-being, partly because of the somewhat inchoate nature of our priorities, because our lives are diverse and complicated mixes of hard-to-compare goods, and perhaps also because it may be somewhat indeterminate how much well-being it takes to count as doing *well* or poorly. This confers a certain degree of arbitrariness on our assessments of our welfare, and how we resolve this arbitrariness can depend on our choice of perspective, on ethical norms pressuring us in one direction or the other, and on pragmatic interests.[35]

It should now be clear enough that the form of life satisfaction that concerns this paper is no straw man. For the only way to avoid the concerns raised here about norms and perspectives would evidently be to drop the global evaluation involved in life satisfaction and aggregate particular attitudes toward the various particulars of our lives. (I have not really argued that such aggregation truly avoids the problems, but am willing to grant that it somehow does.) Aggregating felt satisfactions yields an interesting but very different form of satisfaction that holds little prospect of revealing how well our lives are going relative to our priorities. Aggregating mere opinions yields a better picture of our lives in relation to our priorities, but at the cost of making the picture virtually invisible to mere mortals.

Moreover, any form of aggregation will lack the authority of a global judgment. Indeed, aggregation loses an important dimension of subjectivity: how our *lives* seem to us, as opposed simply to how the various elements of our lives seem to us considered individually. It is not even clear how far we *have* well-defined priorities taken only individually. How important to me is something I care about, considered in isolation? You may be able to squeeze an answer of sorts out of me, say by testing my willingness to pay. But I probably should not feel confident about my response to such a question unless I have stepped back and thought about the importance of the item *in relation to the other things I care about*. To go on making judgments

about the importance of things without ever taking the broader perspective would likely amount to a kind of vice: what we often refer to as "lacking perspective."[36] The process of coming to the global judgment embodied in life satisfaction attitudes is supposed not only to reflect our priorities, but to *create* and *transform* them.

The problem is that global judgments involve stepping back and passing judgment on our lives. Such an act is inherently ethically loaded and dependent on the arbitrarily selected perspective one occupies at the time. In fact even third-person acts of evaluating a person's life may properly be influenced by ethical norms and perspectival factors not bearing on well-being. (Consider our reluctance to pronounce that someone we know had a bad life.[37]) The facts about how well a person's life goes are one thing; the act of *assessing* the person's life is quite another. We should not expect someone's evaluation of a life, or at least her own life, simply to mirror the quality of that life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

Objection: I have shown only that we are *permitted* to assess our lives in ways that yield no obvious correlation between life satisfaction and well-being. But that hardly shows we do assess our lives like that. For all I have argued, life satisfaction and well-being might actually correlate very strongly, and life satisfaction attitudes might provide an accurate gauge of welfare. So nothing argued thus far should concern empirical researchers and those who rely on their work.

True, facts about how we can reasonably assess our lives do not entail anything about how we actually do assess our lives. People aren't always reasonable. And we regularly forego some reasonable options in favor of others. But the preceding reflections should still concern empirical researchers studying life satisfaction. For even without formal studies it should seem very plausible that the issues concerning norms and perspectives really do affect people's attitudes toward their lives. I expect the reader has experienced them firsthand. And we do have some research pointing to the reality of these phenomena.

The study of African-Americans cited above is at least suggestive. And strong evidence of perspective-shifting emerges from research on the ways context can alter self-reports: reported life satisfaction has been found to increase, for example, when a handicapped confederate is visible at the time of reporting.[38] Apparently, the manipulation causes respondents to assess their lives in relation to the handicapped individual – i.e., from a perspective that tends to make their own lives look pretty good. Similar results occur with other manipulations, as when reports are elicited after respondents are told about past hardships faced in their hometowns.[39] Given the preceding discussion, we should not dismiss such context effects as mere error or noise: the reports they elicit are no less reasonable, and no less authentic, than reports obtained in more "neutral" contexts.

At the very least, we need to take seriously the possibility that self-reports of life satisfaction are strongly affected by these phenomena. Indeed we should be troubled if they were not, since it would raise doubts about whether people are seriously evaluating their lives at all. Does this vitiate the empirical research on life satisfaction? While it does raise significant concerns, they almost certainly are not fatal, mainly because differences in the norms and perspectives people use may often wash out over large samples. Indeed, if they are distributed randomly across the population, and tend to drive people's reports up as much as down, they should have little impact on the outcomes of life satisfaction surveys. But these are big ifs, and they probably hold only to a limited extent.

First, it would be surprising if there weren't *some* shared tendencies for people to emphasize certain norms and perspectives, thus skewing results in one direction. For instance, perhaps the high levels of life satisfaction found in many studies partly reflect the prevalence of ideals of gratitude, fortitude, or self-esteem rather than high levels of welfare. This, if true, would mean that life satisfaction reports tend systematically to be inflated, making people seem better off than they really are. But notice that this is perfectly compatible with life satisfaction reports at least *correlating* very strongly, even perfectly, with well-being. It just

means that we would not be able to take absolute levels of life satisfaction at face value. Since most life satisfaction research is correlational, the majority of studies probably would not be seriously compromised.

Second, norms and perspectives probably are not distributed randomly: very likely there are differences in the norms and perspectives favored by certain groups. For instance, Americans might focus more on norms like fortitude or optimism, with the French being more concerned to avoid smugness or complacency – leading Americans to be more satisfied with their lives even where they aren't better off. And maybe those afflicted by serious illness or a handicap tend more than others to think about their lives in relation to the least fortunate, with the result that such individuals report misleadingly high levels of life satisfaction. Such possibilities are especially problematical because they could complicate even correlational studies. If one group reports higher satisfaction than another, this may reflect only a difference in perspective, or in norms, rather than a difference in perceived welfare. In some cases this possibility may not concern us, as we won't expect such differences to arise. Studies showing low correlations between satisfaction and income, for instance, may not be skewed particularly by systematic differences in perspectives or norms.[40] At least, it isn't obvious that people with higher incomes will tend to adopt different perspectives, or focus on different norms, than those with lower incomes.[41]

A particularly interesting possibility is that norms and perspectives might tend systematically to shift with changes in well-being, so that people who are worse off tend to favor different norms, and think about their lives from different perspectives, than those who are better off. For example, we might tend to favor norms of gratitude more as we get worse off, and norms of noncomplacency as our situations improve. Something like this actually seems fairly plausible. And while such tendencies are unlikely to reach the extremes I posited earlier, where we end up more satisfied the worse our lives get – though recall again the study of African-Americans – they might very well exert a *compressing* force on life satisfaction, dampening swings in people's attitudes as their lives get better or worse. If so, life

satisfaction studies could still provide useful correlational data relating people's welfare with other variables. But the correlations might often be understated or even masked altogether. This could mean that some of the well-known claims about adaptation – *viz*., that we tend to adapt to most changes in our circumstances, ending up little or no better or worse off than we were before – are somewhat exaggerated.[42] Indeed, the posited tendencies are essentially a mechanism for adaptation, though one that will affect our attitudes more than our welfare.

These concerns are weighty, but they are quite compatible with life satisfaction reports nonetheless correlating substantially with well-being. And offhand it is plausible that, for the most part, people who report being more satisfied *do* tend actually to be better off.[43] Bolstering this suggestion are the similar results often yielded by life satisfaction and happiness surveys, combined with the moderate to strong correlations of both with various measures of affect.[44] To be sure, self-reports of happiness may be subject to the same issues about norms and perspectives as life satisfaction reports, and measures of affect might themselves fail to track well-being. But it is plausible that affect itself tracks well-being reasonably well, at least for a wide range of respectable views of well-being. (Again, welfare hedonism may be false, but it isn't *crazy*.) And while current measures of affect are subject to errors of various sorts, it remains plausible that, by and large, people reporting more pleasant experience *do* tend to have more pleasant experience. So despite the worries raised here about the effects of ethical norms and perspective variation on life satisfaction attitudes, self-reports of life satisfaction may nonetheless provide a rough but useful indicator of well-being, at least for a wide range of cases. This may seem to sit poorly with my contentions about the significance of life satisfaction. After all, doesn't this show that life satisfaction attitudes *can* serve as a proxy for well-being? Not quite, for several reasons. As noted above, life satisfaction reports could be uniformly misleading even if they correlate strongly with well-being: we could have a nation of satisfied people who are all faring poorly, so long as those who are less badly off report appropriately higher levels of satisfaction.

Second, correlations that are useful in the analysis of large-scale studies may offer little help for the conduct of ordinary life. For at the individual level, it could still be anyone's guess what to make of someone's sincere claim to be satisfied with her life. Suppose Ned is satisfied with his life in part because he focuses on norms of gratitude and reflects on his life as it compares with the worst-off, while Ted is dissatisfied with his life partly because he focuses on norms of non-complacency and thinks about his life in relation to his most successful peers. Researchers using life satisfaction to study the relation between well-being and, say, education level might safely ignore the differences in the way Ned and Ted arrive at their judgments (as long as they don't themselves correlate with educational attainment); again, such differences may tend to wash out. But anyone interested specifically in *Ned's* welfare will ignore those differences only at their peril: they will likely get it completely wrong. Perhaps the dissatisfied Ted is faring quite well, while satisfied Ned is actually in poor shape. Neither need be making a mistake, of course.

I am not arguing that people's attitudes are *actually* that uninformative; only that they could well be, consistently with my suggestions about a satisfaction-well-being correlation. Life satisfaction reports might thus provide useful information about well-being when aggregated across many individuals even if they are virtually meaningless considered singly.

Third, life satisfaction reports might be driven substantially by respondents' affective states, which in turn track well-being. This in turn might occur because people's judgments are strongly *biased* by whatever their mood happens to be at the time – e.g., if you feel good you're more likely to have good thoughts about your life. Alternatively, people may use their affective states as *information* about how their lives are going, most likely because they consider such matters important, but possibly because they regard affect as a good indicator of how their lives are going ("if I feel good, my life must be going well for me").[45] Whatever the mechanism, the idea that life satisfaction's utility as an indicator of well-being derives from its connection with affect would not be pleasing to life satisfaction's friends,

since it essentially reduces life satisfaction measures to being mere indicators of affect.

In light of these reflections, the following possibilities may be worth taking seriously (at least concerning the United States and similar countries): that life satisfaction tends to be inflated relative to welfare; that it tends to be somewhat compressed in relation to welfare, leading many correlations to be understated; and that an *individual's* sincere claim to be satisfied with his life normally tells us very little about how well he is actually doing (though an assertion of *dis*satisfaction may be very informative, since such claims are so exceptional[46]). It is important to bear in mind that these possibilities involve perfectly reasonable behavior, reflecting not error or irrationality but the unexpected ways in which life satisfaction attitudes are supposed to work.

ETHICS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

I have suggested that the issues raised in this paper about ethical norms and perspectives are not merely theoretical concerns: they seriously problematize attempts to draw conclusions about individuals' well-being from their attitudes toward their lives, and very likely have a substantial effect on the results gleaned from life satisfaction surveys. How far this constitutes a problem for the research remains an open question. But to a great extent, life satisfaction studies probably yield important insights into human welfare.

Stepping back, a broader point emerges: philosophical reflection on matters of value can play an important role in informing the science of happiness, for at least one reason that we may not have expected. For it can actually help *explain* empirical results in psychology. Recall, for example, my suggestion that life satisfaction attitudes might tend to be systematically skewed by a general bias toward certain norms or perspectives. By thinking about how we *ought* to assess our lives, we have probably learned something about how people *do* think about their lives.

This may seem backwards: how human psychology works is an empirical question not to be settled by armchair reflection, and certainly not to be settled by thinking about values. But the science of human welfare includes the study of human *evaluation*, and life satisfaction in particular depends on what people value and what they see as reasonable or unreasonable ways of thinking about and responding to their lives. Empirical research is one way of learning about such matters, but it can be notoriously difficult to get inside respondents' heads. And the most obvious means of finding out what drives people's reports – asking them – has serious limitations: as any ethics instructor knows, people's sensitivity to values far outstrips their ability to articulate their values. Hence the evaluative considerations that drive respondents' attitudes will often be opaque to the individuals themselves, or will be inadequately expressed by their reports.

Philosophical ethics, by contrast, arguably succeeds mainly insofar as it manages to articulate, more clearly than we could before, the values we already have.[47] It considers the question of what attitudes we ought to take toward our lives not by eliciting individuals' spontaneous, unreflective responses on the matter, but by engaging a community of thinkers in sustained, disciplined reflection. Answers that fail to accord with people's ultimate values will tend not to survive this scrutiny: the arguments will fail to persuade and gain currency in that community. Thus the best philosophical writing on ethics often generates in the reader the recognition of things already known or experienced, but never before made explicit. In short, philosophical reflection can be the vehicle for a kind of intensive, small scale empirical study of people's valuing that can yield information not accessible through the research instruments available to the sciences.

The methods of philosophical ethics are hardly perfect for this purpose. For one thing, the samples involved are typically very small, and philosophers are not exactly a representative slice of humanity. Their values may thus tend to differ systematically from those of the population at large. A second limitation is that philosophy can press us so far beyond our unreflective habits that its results have little bearing on what

people actually think or do. After all, philosophers often come to radical conclusions that no one would propose forms any part of the average person's effective values. (Think Nietzsche or Plato.) This is not a problem for philosophy so much as a consequence of its aspirations: to improve the way we think and live. But it is a concern for any attempt to draw inferences about human psychology from the conclusions of an ethical argument. These limitations of philosophical methodology do not, however, seem problematical for the arguments of this paper. As I have argued, it is highly plausible that the relevant values are both widely shared and effective in shaping many people's attitudes toward their lives.

It is doubtful that traditional empirical studies can reveal the complexities of our thought about our lives as fully as philosophical reflection of the sort engaged in here can. (This could naturally be granted even by those unpersuaded by the particular arguments given above.) If this is right, then philosophical ethics may sometimes be indispensable for explaining empirical results concerning human psychology, at least when those results depend on human valuing.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has just touched on the ways philosophical inquiry can inform the science of happiness. There will certainly be others, not all of them obvious. But it is likely that coming years will see a gradual blurring of the boundaries between philosophical and scientific work on happiness and related psychological matters, much as we have seen in cognitive science. A convenient rubric for this emerging field of inquiry might be *prudential psychology*, following the common use of 'prudential' among philosophers to denote matters of well-being (as in 'prudential value'). Just as moral psychology engages researchers of various disciplines in studying the psychological dimensions of morality, prudential psychology investigates the psychological aspects of welfare. It encompasses philosophical work on such matters as happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction, as well as scientific inquiry that has been variously placed under the headings

of ‘‘happiness studies,’’ ‘‘hedonic psychology,’’ (much of) ‘‘positive psychology,’’ and what might be called ‘‘eudaimonic psychology.’’[48]

‘Happiness’ is just a word. But it is a potent word, and it matters how we use it. Getting clear on what happiness is, and determining which if any states of mind deserve the attention people give to ‘‘happiness’’ is surely among the central tasks for any credible prudential psychology. What part of the empirical literature, for instance, can claim to be telling us about the character and sources of happiness, in any sense of the word that can bear the weight that accompanies its use? The arguments of this paper have taken us a step toward answering such questions, suggesting that it may be misleading for researchers to present life satisfaction studies as (at least directly) research on happiness. For people are liable to misunderstand the studies' significance. That most people are satisfied with their lives, for example, probably tells us little about how well they are faring. This is surprising, to be sure. But it is a lot less surprising than the claim that most people's being *happy* doesn't tell us much about their well-being.[49]

Of course, I have not shown life satisfaction isn't happiness: perhaps happiness is far less important than most people believe. (This is such a radically revisionary claim, however, that we should probably resist it if there is an intuitively tolerable alternative view of happiness that *does* vindicate our practical interests in it.[50]) But then future discussions of life satisfaction that are couched in the language of happiness should, perhaps, carry a disclaimer: happiness is overrated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Material for this paper was presented for the Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology program at Washington University. I want to thank the audience for helpful commentary. For their invaluable comments on earlier versions of my central arguments regarding life satisfaction, I wish to thank Bengt Brülde, Ruth Chang, Richard Dean, Jerry Fodor, Douglas Husak, Colin McGinn, Stephen Stich, L. W. Sumner, Larry Temkin, Valerie

Tiberius, and Robert Woolfolk, as well as audiences at the University of Arizona, Augustana College and the New Jersey Regional Philosophical Association's Fall 2000 conference.

NOTES

[1] See Nozick (1989), Sumner (1996), and Almeder (2000). Other philosophical proponents of views making life satisfaction central to or exhaustive of happiness appear to include Barrow (1980, 1991), Benditt (1974, 1978), Campbell (1973), Montague (1967), Rescher (1972, 1980), Telfer (1980), and Von Wright (1963). Those making life satisfaction central or identical to well-being (often using the word 'happiness' for it) appear to include Kekes (1982, 1988, 1992), McFall (1989), Meynell (1969), Tatarkiewicz (1976), and Thomas (1968), among others. Empirical researchers often identify life satisfaction and happiness – notably, Veenhoven (1984, 1997).

[2] For reviews of this literature, see, e.g., Diener et al., (1999), Kahneman et al., (1999), and Argyle (2002).

[3] For more on the different senses of 'happiness', see my (2000).

[4] 1996, p. 145. Some of Sumner's remarks suggest that he might allow for life satisfaction in the absence of a literally global judgment, but his views on this point seem open to different readings, and in any event his account seems strongest with the global judgment requirement. (The reasons for this should become apparent in what follows.)

[5] I will often use 'life satisfaction attitudes' as generic, covering attitudes of dissatisfaction as well.

[6] Perhaps a wholehearted endorsement of your life really is just a kind of judgment. If so, it is a special kind of judgment, with affective and conative dimensions.

[7] Hedonism about happiness is not to be confused with hedonism about well-being. Hedonists about happiness might agree that things other than pleasure matter for well-being. Recent philosophers who appear to accept hedonism about (psychological) happiness include, among many others, Brandt (1979, 1989); Carson (1978, 1981); (Davis 1981a, b); Griffin (1979, 1986); Mayerfeld (1996, 1999); and Sprigge (1987, 1991). Hedonism's adherents in psychology include, most notably, Kahneman (1999). I argue against hedonism in Haybron (2001).

[8] Haybron (2001) forthcoming. Alex Michalos has long maintained that life satisfaction and happiness are distinct, with happiness taking something like an emotional state form (Michalos, 1980).

[9] We might call this a "subjective well-being" account, but this term has a special meaning in the empirical literature that won't fit all hybrid views. On the notion of subjective well-being, see Diener et al. (2003). For an excellent review of work on subjective well-being, see Diener et al. (1999).

[10] On the experience machine, see Nozick (1974). Happy slave-type worries are discussed in, e.g., Elster (1983), Millgram (2000), Nussbaum (2000), and Sen (1987). Recent defenses of mental state theories of welfare, notably hedonism, include Crisp (forthcoming), Feldman (2004) and Silverstein (2000).
[11] A forceful challenge to this claim has recently come from Elijah Millgram, who draws on empirical research concerning adaptation to argue that happiness, understood hedonistically, does not track well-being, but only *changes* in well-being (2000). In essence, he suggests that "happy slave" phenomena are more or less ubiquitous: we all tend to adapt to the good and bad in our lives, so that our happiness will normally fail to track our welfare. This important argument deserves a more extensive response than I can offer here, but I am not convinced. This is partly because, for various reasons – one of which I will suggest later in this paper – some of the empirical findings on adaptation seem to me to be exaggerated or easily misunderstood (which is not to deny the obvious reality of adaptation).
[12] A much-condensed version of the main arguments in this section appears in my (forthcoming).
[13] Sgt. DiRaimondo was subsequently killed in action. The letter dates to September 4, 2003, and was printed in the *New York Times*, "The Things They Wrote," March 24, 2004.
[14] For some evidence that they may not be met as well as we would hope, see Schwarz and Strack (1991, 1999).
[15] I will also assume for the sake of argument that life satisfaction would be crucial to welfare if it did track well-being, and that people normally do have attitudes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their lives.
[16] I will later point out that even "simple" first-person assessments of well-being are not really that simple, and are somewhat susceptible to the same issues I discuss regarding life satisfaction.
[17] I am using 'ethical' broadly, incorporating virtues of character like fortitude or resourcefulness that we don't necessarily think of as strictly "moral" virtues (see, e.g., Williams, 1985). I have also followed the custom of referring to "ethical theory" for a still broader realm of inquiry that includes non-moral and non-aretaic values.
[18] This sort of case shows clearly the compatibility of my arguments with even strong forms of subjectivism.
[19] For an interesting discussion of the way brief reflections on gratitude can have lasting impacts, probably in this unreflective way, see Emmons and McCullough (2003).
[20] Thanks to Bengt Brülde for bringing this worry to my attention.
[21] See the discussion below of compression (Section "Implications for the science of happiness").
[22] Note that we need not imagine her emotional state as highly volatile, as I've described it here. People in her position sometimes oscillate in their attitudes toward their lives while remaining fairly miserable throughout. (One can wholeheartedly endorse one's life, even feeling satisfied *with* it, without generally feeling good, indeed even while depressed. For more on this point,

see my forthcoming.) In short, Emma-like variations in life satisfaction can occur even as *both* the agent's life conditions and internal state remain largely unchanged.

[23] Annas (1993). See, e.g., Myers (1992), Diener and Diener (1996), Myers (2000), Argyle (2002), Diener and Suh (2000).

[24] There is some question whether perspectives and norms can really be distinguished in this way: perhaps to take up a perspective just *is*, in part, to bring certain norms to the fore. I have left the notion of a perspective undefined, preferring to rely on the intuitive idea of a "way of looking at things." But on even the most expansive understanding of a perspective we can still distinguish the question of which facts command the majority of your attention from the question of which norms govern your evaluations. That distinction is all my discussion requires.

[25] For an empirical discussion of the standards people typically use in formulating judgments about their lives, see Alex Michalos's Multiple Discrepancies Theory (1985).

[26] Perspective also influences the way we decide to add up the various incommensurables in our lives, by altering the information that is most salient.

[27] Assuming we have the relevant attitudes in the first place, which is not a trivial assumption.

[28] I have not argued specifically against the existence of norms concerning the pattern of attitudes that can reasonably be maintained in a single life. Hence the 'possibly'. But see the next paragraph for a related point.

[29] Including emotional state (see footnote 22). It is possible to stipulate that life satisfaction incorporates one's emotional state, à la a broad "sense of well-being," so that the attitude can't change without a comparable change in one's emotional condition. Such a view loses much of life satisfaction's distinctive significance as an evaluation – a depressed philosopher might reasonably be satisfied because she doesn't *care* about feeling good, a possibility this approach eliminates. But in any event it makes life satisfaction attitudes too scarce: there is no reason to think people have such "thick" attitudes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction most of the time. Hence life satisfaction could not be a proxy for well-being, nor could well-being be defined in terms of life satisfaction (since, absurdly, the concept of well-being often wouldn't apply to people). I expand on these points in Haybron forthcoming.

[30] I argue that the former conclusion is probably warranted in Haybron forthcoming.

[31] "For Richer or for Poorer, to Our Visa Card Limit," *New York Times*, July 13, 2003. I have changed last names.

[32] Or it might seem like a kind of alienation from her life, which would be another reason to want not to be dissatisfied with one's life.

[33] It is possible to believe one's life is going well without seeing this as a judgment about one's well-being, but this is the most natural way of understanding such a judgment.

[34] Perhaps Sumner has something similar to this latter suggestion in mind when he writes of happiness involving a judgment that one's life is going well.

[35] All this suggests that personal welfare might more accurately be assessed not only by questions that don't involve endorsement, but also by less global questions about particular concerns in people's lives, where there is less arbitrariness. E.g., assessing strength of agreement with "there are important things in my life that could be better." (A cancer patient might view her life as a whole favorably, but she can't very well deny that the disease stinks.)
[36] My thinking about perspective in this paper, particularly at this point, owes much to Valerie Tiberius and many helpful exchanges with her on these matters. See, e.g., Tiberius (2002).
[37] Notice that even non-subjectivists ought to share the subjectivist's hesitation to override someone's judgment about his own life, lest we be paternalistic or condescending. Perhaps subjectivism is sometimes motivated in part by a confusion: thinking that the "paternalism" involved in holding that people aren't ultimately authoritative about their own welfare implicates us in paternalistically passing judgment on others. It doesn't.
[38] Strack et al. (1990), cited in Schwarz and Strack (1991, 1999). The effect holds only if the confederate is not privy to the report; otherwise subjects tend to revise their reports downward, presumably to avoid rubbing the confederate's nose in their ostensibly better fortune.
[39] For a review, see Schwarz and Strack (1991, 1999).
[40] For reviews of the literature on money and subjective well-being, see Diener and Biswas-Diener (2002), Diener and Seligman (2004), Argyle (1999, 2002), Myers (2000), Csikszentmihalyi (1999), and Frey and Stutzer (2002).
[41] On the other hand, perhaps relevant differences *would* arise at the extreme ends of the spectrum – If you're Bill Gates, you might feel especially compelled by considerations of gratitude or a desire not to be too "needy" to take a favorable attitude toward your life.
[42] For discussion of the literature on adaptation, see Frederick and Loewenstein (1999), Diener et al. (1999), Argyle (2002), and Kahneman (1999).
[43] At least within a society; it is less clear that we won't find large differences in the perspectives and norms favored by different cultures. On cultural issues and happiness, see the papers in Diener and Suh (2000).
[44] See, e.g., Myers (1992), Diener (1994), Argyle (1996), Diener et al. (1997, 1999), Schwarz and Strack (1991, 1999), and Larsen and Fredrickson (1999). Life satisfaction's connection with affect appears to be culturally quite variable, as I note below.
[45] Probably some combination of these factors contributes to the convergence of life satisfaction and affect, even if they do not wholly account for it. There is certainly good evidence, for instance, that current affect does bias life satisfaction reports significantly, so that manipulations of mood – weather, pleasant or unpleasant environments, finding a dime – influence reported life satisfaction congruently (in the case of weather, e.g., by 2 points on a 10-point scale). See Schwarz and Strack (1991, 1999). It should be noted that life satisfaction appears to correlate much more weakly with affect in "collectivist" than in "individualistic" cultures. In China, for instance, life

satisfaction may not correlate measurably with negative affect at all (Suh et al., 1998).
[46] See the earlier references on levels of reported satisfaction. In general it seems that around 80-85% of Americans tend to report positive life satisfaction, while negative responses tend to be under 10%, sometimes well under.
[47] It can obviously succeed in other ways as well, say by systematizing them and eliminating incoherencies.
[48] On happiness studies, see this journal. On hedonic psychology, see Kahneman et al. (1999). A review of eudaimonic work appears in Ryan and Deci (2001). On positive psychology, see Snyder and Lopez (2002). Positive psychology arguably goes beyond matters of welfare in its concern with human strengths. E.g., virtues matter as strengths apart from their connection with well-being. Its purview is in a different way narrower than prudential psychology's, since there is no reason to exclude "negative" psychology from the latter.
[49] It may be that life satisfaction studies tell us *indirectly* about happiness conceived differently, say in emotional state terms, insofar as their results correlate with the relevant states. And as I have noted, such studies might correlate strongly with how well people's lives are going relative to their concerns – thus yielding important information about well-being – even if they are poor gauges of absolute success in those terms, and even if the attitudes themselves aren't as important as people think.
[50] I defend this claim at length in Haybron (2003), and argue for an emotional state account on such grounds in Haybron forthcoming.

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