A Nature Fulfillment Response to the Problem of Alienation

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Abstract: Opponents of objective theories of well-being often claim that objective theories violate the resonance constraint on well-being, and are thus faced with the problem of alienation. In this paper, I show that objectivist nature fulfillment theories of well-being avoid the problem of alienation. And I argue that subjectivist accounts of well-being are faced with their own version of the problem of alienation. When it comes to alienation, subjectivist accounts fare worse than objectivist nature fulfillment accounts.

1. Introduction. Opponents of objective theories of well-being often claim that objective theories violate the resonance constraint on well-being, and are thus faced with the problem of alienation. In this paper, I show that nature fulfillment theories of well-being avoid the problem of alienation. And I argue that subjectivist accounts of well-being are faced with their own version of the problem of alienation. When it comes to alienation, subjectivist accounts fare worse than objectivist nature fulfillment accounts.

2. The Alienation Objection. According to objective theories of well-being, such as nature fulfillment theories and objective list theories, a person’s well-being consists at least partly in the attainment of certain objective goods—goods “whose value is independent of individual human psychology” (Tiberius 2018, 23). Attaining objective goods increases your well-being, independently of whether you desire the goods, and independently of whether you enjoy them.
Opponents of objective theories often claim that objective theories are faced with the problem of alienation. If objective goods increase an individual’s well-being independently of whether that individual wants or cares about the objective goods, then there can be cases in which an individual is benefited by having what she does not want, does not care about, or even despises. Here we have alienation: a “potential gap that objective theories create between a person and their well-being” (Tiberius 2018, 24). Peter Railton describes the problem as follows:

What is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him. (2003, 47)

The requirement that well-being have some connection with what a person would find compelling or attractive is often referred to as the “resonance constraint” on well-being. What is good for a person must resonate with that person. The basic intuition behind the resonance constraint is that, for something to be good for you, it must fit you—it must suit you. If some good does not fit you—is not suited to you—then it would seem false to say that it is good for you.

Philosophers who raise the alienation objection claim that objective theories of well-being fail to respect the resonance constraint. Thus, objective theories of well-being should be rejected.

3. Nature Fulfillment Theories of Well-Being. I show that nature fulfillment theories of well-being are not vulnerable to the alienation objection. A number of philosophers, including
Philippa Foot (2001), Thomas Hurka (1993), Douglas Rasmussen (1999), and most defenders of traditional natural law theory (e.g. Oderberg 2010, McInerny 1997, and Lisska 1996), advocate for nature fulfillment theories of well-being. On nature fulfillment theories, human beings have an intrinsic human nature or human essence; and well-being is grounded in this human nature or essence. Human nature or essence is characterized by certain teleological powers directed to certain ends. Every characteristic power is directed to its own exercise—to its own actualization—and to the attainment of certain goals. When a person exercises her characteristic powers, and attains the goals at which those powers are directed, her nature is more fully actualized. Her nature is fulfilled. It is perfected. For Aquinas, and many who follow him, this perfection is the most fundamental sense of goodness:

perfection [is] what used to be called an increase in the fullness of being, a bringing to fulfillment or completion of some disposition, power or tendency of an object—in scholastic terminology, the actualization of some potentiality (or potency) of a thing. And this, at least according to the scholastics... is precisely what they called good in the broadest, fundamental sense. (Oderberg 2014, 346)

Applying this fundamental sense of goodness to human beings gives us human well-being. Human nature is characterized by certain powers, such as the powers of reason, locomotion, sensation, and nutrition. When these characteristically human powers are actualized, and the goals are attained, the human being flourishes (Rasmussen 1999, 3). Thus, human well-being is grounded in human nature.

4. A Reply to the Alienation Objection. Advocates of nature fulfillment theories of well-being can agree with the basic intuition behind the alienation objection. They can agree that a person’s well-being must be suited to—must fit—the person. If certain goods are not suited
to—do not fit—the person, then we cannot say that these goods are good for the person.

Advocates of nature fulfillment theories of well-being, however, can also say that suiting, or fitting, a person involves most fundamentally suiting, or fitting, the person’s nature. Our well-being must fit what we are. And what we are is given by our human nature. Thus, our well-being must fit our human nature. Here we have an analogue of the resonance constraint. The constraint is not that our well-being must fit with our desires and interests, but rather that our well-being must fit what we are (i.e., our nature). Quite obviously, nature fulfillment theories respect this analogue to the resonance constraint. Nature fulfillment theories allow for no alienation between what is good for us and what we are (i.e., our nature), because, on nature fulfillment theories, what is good for us is determined by what we are (i.e., our nature).

At this point, we are left with two different constraints on well-being both motivated by the same basic intuition that a person’s well-being must fit the person. The resonance constraint says a person’s well-being must fit the person’s desires and interests. The nature fulfillment analogue of the resonance constraint says a person’s well-being must fit the person’s nature. Advocates of nature fulfillment theories can argue that satisfying the latter constraint is more important than satisfying the former. A person’s human nature is a more important, and more fundamental, to a person’s identity than are the person’s desires and interests. This point should be intuitive. A person’s nature is a person’s very essence. Included in (or flowing from) a person’s nature are all the person’s essential properties. An essential property is a property that a person must have—without which the person would cease to exist (Robertson 2016). Particular desires and interests, on the other hand, are accidental properties.
An accidental property is a property that a person “happens to have but... could lack” (Robertson 2016). Particular desires and interests, in other words, are contingent features of a person. If a person loses a desire or interest, the person may continue to exist. Throughout the course of one person’s life, her desires and interests come and go, yet her nature remains the same. If her nature did change, she would cease to exist entirely. Thus, it seems that a person’s nature is more fundamental, and more important, to her identity than are her desires and interests. If a person’s nature is more fundamental and important to her identity, then fitting well-being to a person will involve more fundamentally, and more importantly, fitting well-being to the person’s nature than to her desires and interests.

Another way of showing that a person’s nature is more important to her identity than are her desires and interests is to consider equal human dignity, and equal human rights. Advocates of nature fulfillment theories can say that human nature grounds human dignity and human rights (Oderberg 2013). Because each human being has human nature, all human beings have equal dignity and should be afforded equal rights.¹ The variations of desires and interests amongst human beings do not result in various levels of dignity or rights. The particularities of our desires and interests should not change the way others value us or treat us. Our nature grounds our rights and dignity; whereas our contingent desires and interests do not ground our rights and dignity. Thus, once again, it seems that our nature is more fundamental to—and more important for—our identity as persons than are desires and interests.

¹ Here we will set aside controversial cases such as the severely disabled, the unborn, etc. The argument only requires us to accept that in ordinary cases there is equality.
If we are worried about suiting well-being to a person, therefore, we should be more worried about suiting it to the person’s nature than suiting it to her desires and interests. In other words, it is more important for us to satisfy the nature fulfillment analogue to the resonance constraint than to satisfy the resonance constraint. Nature fulfillment theories, as mentioned above, obviously respect the nature fulfillment analogue to the resonance constraint. Thus, in a fundamental way, nature fulfillment theories abide by the intuition that a person’s well-being must suit the person.

5. A More Troubling Alienation Problem. Now that we have defended nature fulfillment theories of well-being from the alienation problem, we can turn to a more troubling alienation problem that faces subjective theories of well-being. Subjective theories of well-being define well-being “in terms of subjective attitudes” (Tiberius 2018, 24). For many subjectivists, the relevant subjective attitude is desire (Heathwood 2017; Railton 1986); for others, it is life satisfaction (Sumner 1996); for still others, it is belief or judgment (Dorsey 2012); etc. What is good for you is determined by what you desire, or what generates life satisfaction, or what you judge to be good for you, etc.

Subjective attitudes (whether desires, life satisfaction, or beliefs, etc.) differ between different people. Some people desire to exercise. Others do not. Some people are subjectively satisfied making 20,000 dollars a year. Others are not. Some people believe that practicing religion is good for them. Others do not. This variation in subjective attitudes is supposed to be a strength of subjectivist theories. It gives us an account of well-being that is not one-size-fits-all. It is intuitive (especially to members of an individualist, pluralistic society) that well-being
looks different for different people. Differences in subjective attitudes can explain these
differences in well-being.

These differences in subjective attitudes, however, open subjective theories to an
alienation objection. Advocates of nature fulfillment theories of well-being can accuse
subjectivists of creating a potential gap between a person and her well-being. If human persons
have a human nature (as advocates of nature fulfillment theories think they do), then fitting a
human person involves fitting her human nature. Both nature fulfillment theorists and
subjectivists can agree that a person’s well-being must fit the person. Thus, if human persons
have human nature, then the nature fulfillment analogue to the resonance constraint holds.
The constraint, once again, is this: our well-being must fit what we are—it must fit our human
nature. Because subjective attitudes can differ so much between different people, it is possible
for many people to have subjective attitudes that endorse what does not fit human nature. For
example, consider the case of the grass counter: “Imagine a brilliant Harvard mathematician,
fully informed about the options available to her, who develops an overriding desire to count
the blades of grass on the lawns of Harvard,” and to do so every day, all day (Crisp 2017).
Counting blades of grass every day, all day does not fit human nature. Human beings have, as a
part of their nature, certain powers of higher cognition, and certain powers of developing
second-personal relationships. Activity that prohibits the exercise of these powers does not fit
human nature. Consider also the case of drinking gasoline. A person may think that drinking
gasoline is good for him. Drinking gasoline, however, does not fit human nature, because
human beings are not constituted to digest gasoline. In cases like these, subjective attitudes endorse actions or states that do not fit human nature.

Now, in cases where subjective attitudes endorse actions or states that do not fit human nature, subjectivism tells us that such actions and states are good for us (they are a part of our well-being) despite not fitting human nature. For the subjectivist, our well-being is determined by subjective attitudes. It is not determined by our nature. Thus, subjectivism results in a potential gap between a person’s well-being and the person’s nature. A person’s nature, however, as shown above, is of the utmost importance to her identity as a person. So, by creating a gap between a person’s well-being and her nature, subjectivism creates a gap between the person’s well-being and the person. Subjectivism results in alienation.

Subjectivists might reply here that they do not have to say that satisfying the desire to count blades of grass is good for a person, or that the belief that drinking gas is good for a person makes drinking gas good for the person. Perhaps the grass counter’s idealized desires would not include the desire to count blades of grass. In this case, defenders of an idealized desire theory of well-being could say that counting blades of grass is not good for the person. Or they could say, as Donald Bruckner does (2016), that the only desires that are relevant to well-being are desires for which a person “is able to describe the object of desire in such a way as to make comprehensible to others what she sees as positive, worthy of pursuit, in that object” (Bruckner 2016, 1). Perhaps the grass counter could not describe the object of her desire (counting blades of grass) in such a way as to make comprehensible to others what she sees as worthy of pursuit in that object. If so, the desire is not relevant to well-being.
Subjectivists could give similar responses to the gas drinking case. Subjectivists could give similar responses to all cases in which a person’s subjective attitudes endorse an object that does not fit the person’s nature. If subjectivists pursued this strategy, they could say that our subjective attitudes never make an object that does not fit human nature part of a person’s well-being. The desire to count blades of grass all day, every day does not make counting blades of grass all day, every day (an action which does not fit human nature) part of a person’s well-being. A person’s belief that drinking gasoline is good for him does not make drinking gasoline (an action which does not fit human nature) part of our well-being. Thus, subjectivism creates no gap between a person’s well-being and a person’s nature. It creates no gap between a person’s well-being and the person.

This potential response is not one that subjectivists are likely to employ. When subjectivists claim that objective theories of well-being face the problem of alienation, they are saying that objective theories create a gap between objective well-being and a person’s subjective attitudes. In other words, a person’s well-being understood in objectivist terms sometimes does not fit the subjective attitudes of a person that are relevant (on the subjectivist’s view) to her well-being. For nature fulfillment theories, objective well-being consists in attaining the fulfillment of a person’s nature. So, subjectivists must say that the fulfillment of a person’s nature sometimes does not fit the subjective attitudes of a person that are relevant (on the subjectivist’s view) for her well-being. There is, at least sometimes, a gap between the two. The subjectivist alienation critique of objectivism requires this gap. Thus, even if the grass counter or the gasoline drinker cases are not cases in which the fulfillment of a
person’s nature and the person’s well-being relevant desires fail to fit each other, there must be at least be some such cases. And these cases will give subjectivists a problem of alienation. In these cases, a person's desires that subjectivists think are relevant to well-being do not fit the person's nature, and so do not fit the person.

**Conclusion.** Some objectivist theories of well-being may succumb to the alienation problem, but nature fulfillment theories do not. On nature fulfillment theories, a person's well-being always matches the person. A person's well-being is determined by the person's nature, and the person's nature is the most important part of the identity of the person. Thus, there is no gap between what is good for the person and the person herself. Subjectivism, on the other hand, has a problem of alienation. Subjectivism creates a potential gap between a person's good (as determined by the person's subjective attitudes) and a person's nature. And, because the person's nature is the most important part of the identity of the person, subjectivism opens up a potential gap between a person's good and the person herself. When it comes to alienation, subjectivism fares worse than nature fulfillment theories.
References:


