

Summer On Desires and Well-Being

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I Introduction

A person's welfare or well-being concerns what is good *for* him, what makes his life worth living. It therefore depends crucially on facts about the person and his life. As William James once remarked, whether a life is worth living depends on the *liver*.¹ How this dependency should be spelled out is a controversial question. Desire theorists, or as I shall call them *well-being preferentialists*, claim that a person's well-being depends on his desires and preferences. In short, a person's well-being consists in the satisfaction of his desires.² Hedonists, on the other hand, tell us that

1 William James, *The Will To Believe, Human Immortality and Other Essays on Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover 1956), 32

2 To be exact, there are two forms of well-being preferentialism: the object version and the satisfaction version. According to the object version, something is good for me if it is an *object* of one of my desires. According to the satisfaction version, in contrast, something is good for me if it consists in the *satisfaction* of one of my desires. This distinction can be brought out by the following example. Suppose that Eric wants to drink pink champagne and in fact drinks pink champagne. The satisfaction preferentialist assigns value to the *whole* state of affairs that consists of Eric's preference for pink champagne and his drinking pink champagne, whereas the object preferentialist assigns value only to the *part* of the state that consists of his drinking pink champagne. This is an important distinction, but for the purposes of this paper I think it can be safely put aside. For more on this distinction, see Krister Bykvist, *Changing Preferences: A Study in Preferentialism* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Uppsala University 1998); and Wlodek Rabinowicz and Jan Österberg, 'Value Based on Preferences. On Two Interpretations of Preference Utilitarianism,' *Economics and Philosophy* 12 (1996) 1-27.

a person's well-being depends solely on the amount of pleasure and displeasure he experiences in his life. Objectivists go beyond both preferentialism and hedonism in that they deny that well-being must be tied to subjective states. Something can make a person better off without satisfying his preferences or entering into his experiences.

In a recent book, Wayne Sumner gives a lucid and very thorough treatment of the standard accounts of well-being.³ While his criticisms of hedonism and objectivism are convincing, his objections to preferentialism are less so. He argues that preferentialism is seriously mistaken, for preference satisfaction is neither sufficient nor necessary for well-being. In this paper, I show that Sumner's arguments do not support this conclusion. In particular, I show that some of his main criticisms are based on a straw man conception of well-being preferentialism. I discuss this conception in the second section of this paper. In the third section, I deal with his criticism of the sufficiency claim. I show that his criticisms can be met by adopting a personal restriction that excludes preferences that do not involve the preferer and his life. Finally, in the fourth section, I turn to his criticism of the necessity claim.

II Sumner's Straw Man Preferentialist

The root idea behind well-being preferentialism is that my life is going well to the extent to which I get what I want. This idea can be made more precise by choosing a particular interpretation of wants or preferences. Sumner distinguishes between two interpretations: the attitudinal and the behavioral (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 120). What I prefer attitudinally is what I like best or find most agreeable. What I prefer behaviorally is what I choose. Sumner argues convincingly that well-being preferentialism cannot be accepted if we assume the behavioral interpretation (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 120-2). On this interpretation, my well-being is defined by my actual choices. But, surely, the mere fact that I choose something does not show that the thing makes me better off. It is a sad but well-known fact that all too often our choices do not make us better off in any respect. Sumner argues therefore that well-being preferentialism in its strongest form must assume the attitudinal interpretation. This is not especially controversial. Much more controversial are two further restrictions that Sumner wants to impose on well-being preferentialism. The first and most important one

3 Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996)

is that well-being preferentialists can only count *prospective* preferences, i.e., preferences that are about some future state of affairs (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 124 and 129). The second restriction is that they cannot take into consideration negative attitudes, such as aversions and dislikes (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 125, n.24).

These are quite radical restrictions, and one might wonder why they should be adopted, especially since, as Sumner shows, they make preferentialism an inadequate welfare theory. Sumner's answer is that we have to accept these restrictions if we want to remain true to the ordinary concept of desire. Concerning the prospectivity restriction, he claims that it is conceptually possible for me only to desire or want something that occurs later. He contrasts wanting with liking and enjoying: 'I can (occurently) enjoy only what I already have, while I can want only what I have not yet got' (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 129).

This answer is unconvincing. Surely, I can say that I want to be loved now at this very moment, or that I desire to be alive now. Also, wants may even take past states of affairs as objects. For, as Parfit has pointed out, I may want it to be true that, in my drunkenness last night, I did not disgrace myself.⁴ It is even clearer that the time constraint does not hold if we focus on comparative preferences. Commitments typically involve preferences for executing a scheduled sequence of activities stretching from the past through the present into the future. But this means that these preferences are partly prospective and partly retrospective. One can also have global preferences that are directed at some part of one's life taken as a whole, or at one's whole life. For instance, one can prefer living a life with a miserable childhood and a blissful adulthood to living a life with a blissful childhood and a miserable adulthood.

So, I do not think that wants, desires and preferences, as they are ordinarily conceived, are essentially future-oriented.⁵ It is interesting to note that Richard Hare and James Griffin, whom Sumner regards as two of the most prominent defenders of preferentialism, explicitly reject the restriction Sumner wants to impose on their favorite theory (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 122). Hare is famous for distinguishing between now-for-now preferences and now-for-then preferences.⁶ Griffin, too, claims that desires need not be held antecedently to their

4 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992), 171

5 Bengt Brülde also points out that Sumner's concept of desire is unusually narrow, in *The Human Good* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis 1998), 176, n.40.

6 Richard Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981), 101-2

fulfillment.⁷ But if the prospectivity restriction is suggested neither by common-sense, nor by preferentialism as it is actually conceived, why should it be accepted?

Sumner acknowledges that one might work with an extended sense of desire that is not necessarily future-oriented (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 133, n.38). But this means, he claims, that preferentialism becomes coextensive with subjectivism, and not a particular instance of it. The argument is that if we accept the extended sense of desire, then 'wanting' becomes coextensive with 'having a positive attitude,' and, since subjectivism is the view that welfare depends on one's attitudes towards the conditions of one's life, preferentialism collapses into subjectivism. This argument is flawed, however. Preferentialism, in this extended sense, claims that my having a positive attitude towards something is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the thing being good for me. Subjectivism, as Sumner conceives it, is a more general category, since it requires only that my well-being depends *in part* on my attitudes. More specifically, it says that having a positive attitude towards something is a *necessary* condition for the thing being good for me (*ibid.*, 38).

Turning to the requirement that negative attitudes are to be excluded, we again find that no good arguments are provided. Sumner claims that wants and desires have no negative counterparts (*ibid.*, 125, n.24). In particular, he claims that aversion is the opposite, not of wanting, but of liking, a mental state category he assumes falls outside the domain of preferences and wants. This is puzzling, especially since Sumner, as we pointed out above, defines attitudinal preferences in terms of what we *like* best. More importantly, linguistic evidence suggests that we do have a negative counterpart of wanting. When I say 'I do not want to see you' I am not normally just saying that I lack a want to see you. I am also saying that I take a *negative* attitude towards seeing you.⁸

Sumner could, of course, claim that my disagreement with him is merely terminological. He could concede that the term 'desire theory' can be given a broader interpretation, and yet claim that his main target is a desire theory that is based on a narrow conception of desires. But then, Sumner's criticism is not especially interesting, since his target is a theory no one has defended. Furthermore, his criticism will no longer

7 James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986), 315 n.

8 Brülde also stresses that there is negative counterpart of wanting, in *The Human Good*, 160, 161, and 170.

touch the theories of James Griffin and Richard Hare, since they both work with a broader notion of desire.

To sum up, I cannot see that Sumner has shown that the very concept of wanting motivates his restrictions on well-being preferentialism. Of course, this does not show that there is no reason to accept the restrictions. Perhaps normative considerations support them. I will show in the following, however, that we have good reason to reject the restrictions, since they seriously cripple well-being preferentialism. In particular, I will show that what makes well-being preferentialism such an easy target for some of Sumner's main criticisms is the prospectivity requirement.

III Satisfaction Is Not Sufficient For Well-Being

Sumner provides some examples that purport to show that a person can have a satisfied preference without being better off in any respect. They can be divided into three groups: (1) examples in which the preference satisfaction is unknown or unfelt, (2) examples in which the preference is satisfied but the person is disappointed, and (3) examples in which a disinterested preference is satisfied.

1. *Unfelt satisfactions*

To say that a preference is satisfied is to say that its intentional object obtains. So, for instance, my desire that there be peace on earth is satisfied just in case there is peace on earth. This implies that I can have a desire satisfied without knowing it or experiencing it. Sumner argues that this feature of preference satisfaction creates difficulties. To show this, he first cites the example of Carl Sagan, who wants us to establish contact with extraterrestrial beings (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 125). Assume that twenty thousand years from now we do establish contact with an alien civilization on some planet far away. Sagan's desire is thus satisfied but he will never know anything about it. Since the satisfaction of this desire has no discernible effect on Sagan, Sumner cannot see how this could make his life go better.

In a second example, Sumner imagines himself wanting his brother to be cured from some debilitating disease (*ibid.*, 125). His brother is cured, but since they have lost contact, Sumner will never know of it. Sumner rhetorically asks how this cure can make his life better if he will never know about his brother's fate.

I share Sumner's intuitions about these cases, but I doubt that they show that preferentialism should be abandoned. What they show, at

most, is that an unrestricted preferentialism should be abandoned, and that a *personal* restriction should be adopted instead. Not all preferences are relevant to well-being; it matters what they are about. Since facts about my well-being are constituted by facts about me and my life, we should only count preferences that range over facts about the preferrer and her life. Of course, it is not easy to pinpoint exactly what count as facts about a person and her life, but as a first approximation we can say that something is a fact about a person and her life just in case the fact consists of the person's exemplifying a genuine property, and not just a mere Cambridge-property. The problem here is, of course, how to distinguish genuine from non-genuine properties. But it is at least clear that, on this account, a preference is personal only if it is about something that entails that the person exists at some point in time.⁹ In both examples above, the preferences range over states of affairs that do not entail that the preferrer exists, and my constraint would therefore exclude them.¹⁰

A special case of unfelt satisfaction occurs when the preferrer is dead at the time of satisfaction. Sumner argues that posthumous satisfactions (frustrations) cannot make my life better (worse). In support of this claim he poses a dilemma about when posthumous satisfactions make my life better (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 126). He considers two alternatives, neither of which he finds acceptable. Either I am better off when the desired state obtains, in which case my life is improved after it has ended, or I am better off now when I am holding the desire, in which case I am better off before my preference is satisfied. This is a false

9 A similar constraint is proposed by Mark Overvold, 'Self-Interest and the Concept of Self-Sacrifice,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1980), 117-18. However, his constraint is inferior to mine in two respects. To begin with, it requires that the agent exists at the time of the desired state of affairs. So, my desire for *p* is relevant to my well-being only if I exist at the time of *p*. This would exclude too much. It would, for instance, exclude my desire to be buried in my home village on a certain day, and my desire to donate my organs after my death. The second flaw is that Overvold treats his constraint as a *sufficient* condition for well-being. He thinks that *all* preferences that fulfill his constraint *directly concern* the preferrer and, therefore, are in his interest. But this cannot be right. Any preference of mine whose object is of the form *I exemplify feature F*, would then count, even if *F* is a mere Cambridge-property, e.g., the property of living in a world in which it is true that snow is white.

10 One could object that Sumner's desire does range over a fact that entails that Sumner exists, since the state of affairs that Sumner's brother is cured entails that Sumner exists (at some point of time). But I assume that Sumner's desire should be read *de re*. Assuming that Fred is Sumner's brother, what Sumner desires is that *Fred* is cured, not that *whoever* is Sumner's brother is cured. I will not take a stand on whether the satisfaction of this latter *de dicto* desire improves well-being. Jan Österberg made me aware of the relevance of this distinction.

dilemma, however. Sumner does not consider the possibility that the fact that I am better off is an *atemporal* fact.¹¹ In general, it is not reasonable to assume that it always makes sense to ask *when* something is good, or *when* something is better than something else. For instance, it seems odd to ask when one outcome is better than another. Why, then, assume that it must always make sense in the case of prudential value? Of course, we must be careful to distinguish between the temporal location of the state of affairs that makes the evaluative difference and the temporal location of the fact that a state makes an evaluative difference. Often there is no problem to locate the good-making state of affairs. I am only suggesting that facts *about* good-making may lack temporal location.

It should also be noticed that Sumner's dilemma rests on the assumption that posthumous satisfaction falls outside the boundaries of a person's life. This assumption might be contested, however. Of course, it cannot be contested if by 'life' we mean '*biological life*.' But we may work with a wider notion of life. Things that happen to me after my death, e.g., what happens to my dead body, are things that happen in my life in the sense of being part of my *life-story* or *history*. Also, my doings and accomplishments are parts of my life-story even though they may involve states of affairs that outlast my biological life.¹² I may, for instance, give my children a good start in life by giving them the right education even though I happen to die before this is fully accomplished. Or I may revive a person by giving her the kiss of life even if I die before she is revived and starts to breathe. If this wider notion of life is assumed, then my posthumous satisfactions need no longer fall outside the boundaries of my life. Inside my life-story we will find, for instance, the posthumous satisfaction of my desire to be buried in my home town at a certain date, and the posthumous satisfaction of my desire to give my children a good start in life (assuming that I died before this was accomplished). Note also that in this case it is not excluded that my life is made better when the posthumous satisfaction occurs, since the satisfaction may now be part of my life.¹³ It is, of course, controversial whether well-being should be defined in terms of this wider notion of life. (I will give some positive

11 Strictly speaking, there is yet another possibility: welfare facts may exist *eternally*. But this option will entail that I am better off both before my death when I am holding the desire and after my death when the desired state obtains.

12 For a similar point, see Dorothy Grover, 'Posthumous Harm,' *Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (1989) 334-53, and Shelly Kagan, 'Me and My Life,' *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 93 (1993/94) 309-24.

13 An *object* preferentialist would instead locate the value at the time of the preference object.

evidence below.) In any case, it is question-begging to assume without argument that well-being depends only on facts about our biological life.

Another argument that Sumner puts forward against the prudential value of posthumous satisfaction and frustration is that accepting the possibility of these posthumous values would no longer guarantee that death is the end of all harms (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 127). For if my desires are frustrated posthumously, my life is made worse by things that happen after my death. This means that it is hard to make sense of suicide, since this is usually seen as a fool-proof way to prevent future harms. I admit that death can no longer be seen as the end of all harms if we accept posthumous harms. But it is still possible to make sense of suicide, since, typically, what motivate suicide are *felt* harms such as physical pain, psychological distress, and deep depression. Death is still the end of these harms, and this is usually enough to motivate suicide candidates.

There are some positive arguments for the value of posthumous satisfactions and frustrations. For instance, it does not seem strange to say that my desire to donate my organs after my death, and my desire to bury my body in my home village are examples of desires whose frustrations make my life worse. Note that these preferences are not excluded by my constraint that only preferences about preferers and their lives count. These preferences are directed at states of affairs that entail that I did exist at some time in the past, since I cannot be dead without first having been alive.

Also, life projects whose completion occurs after our death seem relevant to well-being. Consider, for instance, Griffin's well-known story about Bertrand Russell.¹⁴ Griffin claims that it seems reasonable to say that Russell's life would have been more valuable had his work for nuclear disarmament reduced the risk of nuclear war. And it would not just have been valuable to others; it would have been better for Russell. Sumner considers this case but does not find it convincing. He thinks our intuition rests on a conflation between different modes of value (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 126). He concedes that Russell's life might have been more valuable because of his achievements. But this, Sumner claims, is a perfectionist value distinct from prudential value. We can make something a better specimen of its kind without making it better off. For instance, I can make my lawn-mower a better specimen of its kind by replacing the rusty knives without making it better off.

14 Griffin, *Well-Being*, 23

I cannot see why the preferentialist's intuition must rest on a conflation between perfectionist and prudential values. It is true that Russell's achievements might make his life a good specimen of its kind. But this does prevent them from also being important components of his well-being. To successfully pursue one's life-time ambitions, and to live in accordance with one's overall plan of life are ways to improve one's well-being. This intuition need not be based on any perfectionist ideas; it can be based on the compelling idea that a life full of meaning and success is a prudentially good life. Whereas our aims give our lives meaning and purpose, their accomplishments make our lives successful.¹⁵ If this is accepted, I cannot see that it makes any difference *when* our accomplishments occur: in particular, whether they occur before or after our death.

What is important to note here is that aims and ambitions are desires that concern the way something is brought about. To aim at something is to desire to do something or take part in the bringing about of some state of affairs. My aim cannot be identified with a desire whose content is that something is the case, e.g., that a book is written. My aim must be identified with a desire whose content is that something is brought about by me, e.g., that a book is written *by me*.¹⁶ This agent-relative feature was present in the example of Russell, since he did not just want it to be the case that nuclear weapons are disarmed, he wanted *to work for* disarmament. This feature also explains why other people cannot lead our lives, and realize our aim and goals. Since the attainment of my goals requires that I act, it is conceptually impossible for other people to realize my aims without my assistance.

The relevance of this feature to our well-being is even clearer if we reconsider the examples of Sagan and Sumner. Change the example of Sagan so that he wants, not only that we meet aliens, but also that *he helps*

15 This theory is not without its problems (as the editor of this journal suggested). To be a *pure* preferentialist theory, it will have to say that *any* ambition or aim confers meaning to a life. But, intuitively, not all ambitions are on a par. We would, for instance, want to say that a desire to count blades of grass confers less meaning to a life than a desire to contribute to nuclear disarmament. But this important objection does not affect my main point. For the objection does not show that a true preferentialist cannot capture our intuition that posthumous satisfactions have some significance. It shows, at most, that a pure preferentialist might have no plausible way of deciding the relative importance of different preferences, whether or not their satisfaction will be posthumous.

16 This distinction and the examples given to illustrate it are found in Martin Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1993), 17. However, Fischer does not use it to explain the nature of aims and goals.

to bring about this meeting. Assume that he has been working for this goal during a main part of his life. Then it does not seem counter-intuitive to say that his well-being is improved by the satisfaction of this preference.¹⁷ What was counterintuitive about counting Sagan's original desire was that it did not involve him. In the modified example, however, his desire clearly involves him, since it is about his playing an active part in bringing about the meeting. Consider also the example of Sumner and his brother. Assume this time that Sumner is a doctor who has worked for years to find a cure of his brother's disease and that he wants not just that his brother is cured but also that he is cured *by him*. Then, again, it does not seem odd to claim that satisfying Sumner's preference makes his life better. For in this case, Sumner's desire is directed at a fact about himself, i.e., the fact that he is curing his brother.¹⁸

Sumner gives a very different diagnosis of the problematic cases. He wants us to conclude that the right remedy is to adopt an experience requirement.¹⁹ Such a condition says that a state of affairs can make me

17 Joel Feinberg also stresses that my well-being depends crucially on who is bringing about the desired states of affairs, in 'Harm and Self-Interest,' in *Law, Morality, and Society: Essays in Honour of H.A.L. Hart*, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Hax, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press 1979). Feinberg says that '[my] interest in producing an excellent book, or a beautiful object is not fully satisfied by another person's creation of such objects. My interest is not simply that such objects exist, but that I bring them into existence' (60; italics in original).

18 I am assuming here that Russell's, Sagan's, and Sumner's desires are *intrinsic*. It matters intrinsically to all of them who brings about the desired states of affairs. More specifically, each one desires intrinsically that *he* plays an active part in bringing about the desired state. This is not the only possibility, however. Sometimes our aims and goals are only extrinsic. We want to do something just because we think it will bring about something we desire intrinsically. In these cases, we may not mind at all who is bringing about the states of affairs. So, if another person happens to be in a better position, we might want her to bring about the desired state of affairs. But I strongly doubt that the satisfaction of these extrinsic desires necessarily makes us better off. It will not make us better off if our underlying intrinsic desires are not in any way about ourselves and our lives. Also, the lifetime projects and ambitions that make our lives meaningful are not extrinsic in this way. My life cannot be meaningful if I do not intrinsically want to take any active part in it.

19 Sumner mentions the possibility of narrowing the preferentialist theory by focusing *only* on preferences that function as aims or goals (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 132-3). But he rightly points out that this theory would exclude too much. It would, for instance, exclude pleasant surprises, and more generally, all agreeable things that happen to us without us planning for them. He fails to recognize, however, that we could still think, as I do, that the success in achieving our aims is a *sufficient* condition for our well-being.

better or worse off only if it enters or affects my experience in some way. But, as I have suggested above, we should instead impose a personal restriction and say that only preferences that are directed at facts about me and my life can make me better or worse off. Even if it is difficult to give a precise definition of this category, it seems clear that it includes preferences about my body and its organs, preferences about my experiences, and preferences about what I bring about. These preferences concern crucial aspects of my life as an embodied and conscious agent.

It is worth pointing out that the experiential requirement would have some clearly implausible implications. The requirement entails that, even if you hate to be ridiculed, it cannot be bad for you to be ridiculed behind your back. Nor can it be bad for you to be deceived unknowingly, or to have false friends, people who only pretend to be your friends, even if you want to have true friends.²⁰ These implications are vividly illustrated in the movie *The Truman Show*. This movie is about a man named Truman, who literally lives in a soap opera. From his birth he has been living inside a huge TV studio, surrounded by actors who have pretended to be his parents, friends, girlfriends, and neighbors. From the inside, his life has always looked perfect. He thinks he gets exactly what he wants. If we accept the experience requirement, we have to say that nothing bad happened to him.²¹ In contrast, accepting the personal requirement does not have this debilitating implication.

Sumner draws a different lesson from examples like Truman's. He claims that they show that welfare does not consist *merely* of pleasurable states (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 92-8). For it is implausible to think that a pleasurable state is a component of my well-being if it is based on an illusion and I prefer reality to illusion. Sumner thinks that this problem can be solved without abandoning the experience requirement. But here Sumner's focus is too narrow. It is true that many of the pleasures Truman experiences are made dubious by the fact that they are based on false beliefs. So, one lesson to draw from the Truman case (and the like) is that I can experience pleasure without being better off. It is also true that this lesson does not threaten the experience requirement, since this requirement only entails that I cannot be better off without being affected experientially. But there is a second lesson as well: I can be *worse off* without being affected experientially. And this does

20 These implications are pointed out by, among others, Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books 1974); Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979); and Griffin, *Well-Being*.

21 In the movie, Truman comes to realize that his life is an illusion. At this point, of course, the experience requirement will not rule out that Truman is harmed.

threaten the experience requirement, since it entails that something makes me worse off only if it enters into my experience.

2. *Disappointing satisfactions*

Above we considered cases in which we get what we want without knowing or experiencing it. Now we will instead consider cases in which we do know about the satisfaction of our desires and yet we feel disappointed. Sumner gives the following illustrative example (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 129-33). Suppose I can choose between the career of a philosopher and that of a baseball player. I investigate both options thoroughly and arrive at the conclusion that, all things considered, I prefer philosophy to baseball. However, having worked as a philosopher for a couple of years, I realize that this kind of life is just not for me. It is not that I had any mistaken beliefs about philosophy. On the contrary, I found the demands of teaching and writing as I expected. The only mistake I made was to think that this career would be fulfilling.

Sumner claims that this implication of preferentialism is unavoidable, since desires are always future-oriented and thus represent, as he puts it, our '*ex ante expectations*,' our '*view now how things will go then*'²² (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 131). But these expectations can always be mistaken, as in the case above when I expected a career in philosophy to be fulfilling but was later disappointed. Sumner therefore concludes that preferentialism is false, since, as this example shows, I can get what I most wanted and still not be better off.

Sumner's example is hard to grasp. I am supposed to get exactly what I wanted and still be disappointed. But it does not seem to make sense to say that I am disappointed about something and yet no desires or wants of mine are frustrated. Is not the natural explanation of my disappointment that I *antedecently wanted* the philosophy career to be fulfilling and then realized that it was not? But, if so, then we can, contrary to what Sumner claims, explain why the satisfaction of my career preference need not make me better off on the whole: it frustrates my standing preference for having a fulfilling job.

Another option is that the disappointment should be explained by now-for-now desires. When I started to do philosophy I had new unex-

22 The same point is made in Wayne Sumner, 'Welfare, Preference, and Rationality,' in *Value, Welfare, and Morality*, R.G. Frey and C.M. Morris, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 82, and Sumner, 'Something in Between' in *Well-Being and Morality: Essays in Honour of James Griffin*, B. Hooker and R. Crisp, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2000), 10-11.

pected experiences — e.g., the anxiety before delivering a paper at a conference, and the panicky feeling of not getting anywhere with a tricky philosophical problem — and formed a now-for-now desire not to have these experiences. However, Sumner would argue that since *genuine* desires are prospective and never directed at the present, a preferentialist cannot take these now-for-now attitudes into account. But this is a weak response, for as we saw before, there are no conceptual or terminological reasons to accept the prospectivity requirement. What Sumner's example shows is therefore only that any reasonable preferentialist should reject this requirement.

There is also a problem with Sumner's comments on his example. On the face of it, it does not seem to make much sense to say that our desires represent our views now of what will happen later. This is to muddle the distinction between cognitive and conative mental states, i.e., the distinction between beliefs and desires. Only cognitive states, beliefs, can provide representations of what will happen in the future. Of course, desires can 'represent' views about the future in the sense that they are *based* on these views. I may, for instance, desire to take on a certain job *because* I believe I would earn more money and I want to earn more money. For the case at hand, this would mean that I prefer philosophy to baseball because I believe that philosophy will be more fulfilling in certain respects and I desire to have a job that is fulfilling in these respects. But then we are back to the interpretation according to which my disappointment is ultimately explained in terms of the frustration of my antecedent desire to have a fulfilling job.

3. *Disinterested desires*

The third kind of counter-instance Sumner invokes against the claim that preference satisfaction is not sufficient for well-being concerns disinterested preferences. He gives the following example (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 134). Suppose that for several years I wanted a democratic, non-racist government to be installed in South Africa. Suppose further that I wanted this not because of how I would benefit but because I thought it would be just. This kind of government has now been installed in South Africa, but Sumner sees no reason to think that I am better off just because this preference of mine has been satisfied. In general, the satisfaction of our disinterested desires does not seem to make us better off.

I tend to agree with Sumner on this point. But, again, I do not think that this threatens preferentialism as such. At most, it shows that an unrestricted preferentialism should be rejected. A restricted version that incorporates a personal restriction will exclude this preference, since it

is not about a state of affairs that essentially involves the preferrer. However, if we change the example and assume that, for decades, I have been working for a political change in South Africa, motivated by an intrinsic desire to play an active part in the bringing about of this change, then it no longer seems strange to say that the satisfaction of this desire makes me better off. To bring about this political change is to realize one of my most important life projects, and thus to make my life successful in an area that concerns me the most.

Sumner goes on to argue that the mere existence of disinterested desires should trouble the preferentialist. Since the preferentialist has to admit that if I do what I most want to do then I necessarily do what is best for me, the very notion of disinterested desire seems to be incoherent. Sumner goes on to say that,

[no] matter how altruistic my aim, no matter how great a personal sacrifice I am willing to make in order to achieve it, if I am successful then I will have made no sacrifice at all since I will have got what I most wanted. I can represent the desire to myself as disinterested, therefore, only if I do not subscribe to the desire theory of welfare. Acceptance of the theory undercuts the very distinction between self-interested and disinterested desires. (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 135)

Again, this is at most a problem for an unrestricted version of preferentialism. My restricted version will not face this problem, since it holds that only a proper subset of my desires are relevant to my well-being. Every time I choose not to satisfy some of the preferences that are essentially about myself I will not improve my well-being.

But one might wonder why this poses a problem even for unrestricted preferentialism. If I subscribe to this theory, I can still distinguish between my disinterested desires and my self-interested ones. My disinterested desires are, as Sumner points out, the desires I hold for some impersonal reasons such as moral reasons (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 134). So, even if I accept that the satisfaction of any desire makes me better off I can still desire things for reasons other than self-interest. The distinction between disinterested and self-interested desires is a distinction in terms of the *grounds* of desires, not the value of satisfying the desires.

Sumner could respond that the unrestricted theory nevertheless undercuts the distinction between self-interested and disinterested *choice*, since it seems to make it impossible for me to *do* what I most want and yet fail to do what is best for me on the whole. This is not clear, however. I can, for instance, do what I most want to do *now* and yet fail to do what is best for me on the whole simply because the action frustrates a lot of future preferences.

IV Satisfaction Is Not Necessary For Well-Being

Sumner does not think highly of preferentialism: he argues that preference satisfaction is not even necessary for well-being. Sumner thinks that this is shown by the fact that we can be pleasantly surprised when we get what we did not previously desire (Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 132-3). For instance, I can enjoy taking a sauna without having had any previous desires to do so. Or, to take one of Sumner's own examples, I can enjoy listening to bluegrass without having had any previous desires to listen to this kind of music. If desires are essentially prospective it is true that preference satisfaction cannot be an essential component of well-being, because then we cannot explain a pleasant surprise in terms of some instantaneously formed now-for-now preferences. But since prospectivity is not conceptually required, the preferentialist is free to reject it, and can thus very well explain pleasant surprises in terms of newly formed now-for-now preferences directed at certain experiences. To insist that the preferentialist must hold on to the prospectivity requirement is to ask him to tie his own hands.

It is also clear that Sumner's narrow version of preferentialism prevents preference satisfaction from being an essential welfare component if we focus on the constraint that no negative attitudes should count. Surely, what makes a life miserable is not just that we fail to get what we want, but that we get what we detest. It is possible that my desires are frustrated and yet I do not hate what I have got.²³ For instance, we can imagine a situation in which I want to have no headache, I have a headache, and yet I take only an intrinsically *neutral* attitude towards not having a headache. Compare this with the case in which I want not to have cancer, I have cancer, but I take an intrinsic *aversion* towards having cancer. If we accept Sumner's unfairly restricted version of preferentialism, we cannot distinguish these two cases. Again, this does not show that there is anything wrong with preferentialism as such. It only shows that any reasonable preferentialist theory must count negative attitudes such as aversions.

V Conclusions

Well-being preferentialism is not threatened by Sumner's criticisms, for he does not address the theory in its strongest form. There is a much more promising form of the theory that is immune to Sumner's objections. This form satisfies a personal requirement (only preferences about the prefer-

23 This is also stressed by Brülde, *The Human Good*, 35-7.

rer and her life count) and takes into consideration synchronic as well as prospective preferences, aversions as well as desires. Of course, my results do not show that preferentialism is superior to all other well-being theories. But I have shown that it is a serious contender that cannot be dismissed easily.²⁴

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