

## The Concept of Quality of Life

### 1. Quality of Life Research

From early on in the last century, governments and other organizations have published *social reports* more and more regularly. These reports contain statistics and analyses of social change and social trends, presenting data on such areas as consumption, income, education, housing, and medical care, among others. The efforts to collect and organize such data have become more systematic from around the 1960s.

Part of the impetus for the gathering of such data came from a dissatisfaction with the perceived limitations of *economic indicators* of social welfare. There were several reasons for this dissatisfaction. First, economic indicators are often macro-level indices, and even though they might be useful for large-scale planning and analysis of social trends, they tell us little about more particular aspects of society. Second, it was also realized that *economic welfare*—that part of a person's overall welfare that arises from economic sources and that is connected to economic activity—is not sufficient to describe and evaluate the entirety of a person's life conditions. And third, it was felt that due to the success of economic indicators, economic objectives were given high priority at the expense of other social objectives. The proponents of what have come to be called *social indicators* felt that the focus on economic indicators to evaluate social policies and measure social change was too narrow. They argued that the systematic collection of data on social indicators would be useful for forecasting and analysis, for the understanding of the causes of social trends, and for policy making and evaluation. This research direction became collectively known as the *social indicators movement*.

Generally speaking, by “social indicator,” the advocates of the social indicators movement meant any piece of statistical data that can stand as a proxy for welfare. A social indicator can be used for the evaluation of how well the lives of people go in a society. A suitably general social indicator might be correlated with the welfare of all the members of society, or perhaps even with the welfare of people living in different societies; more narrow indicators may be correlated with the welfare of particular groups within society. Thus, combined with economic indicators, social indicators can give a more comprehensive picture of individual

and social welfare.

Social indicators research started to blossom in the 1970s. But there was little agreement on its methodology and objectives. Soon, it became a wide and diverse field, with substantial differences in conceptual approach, methodology, and objective. There were no common criteria for problem definition, subject choice, and data collection. Thus, the social indicators movement subsequently fragmented into areas that generally have little in common. This was partly caused by the haphazard development of social indicators research, since the impetus for its progress more often than not came from the information needs associated with specific social decision-making problems rather than from a systematic clarification of its conceptual and methodological background.<sup>1</sup>

One of the new areas emerging from this field was *quality of life research*. It appears that two factors have played a key role in the separation of this area. The first concerns the subject matter of social indicators research, the second its methodology. On the one hand, as the focus of the social indicators movement broadened, the question of what precisely social indicators were meant to measure became more pressing. Many projects were undertaken that, arguably, had little to do with measuring welfare. Some argued that research should not be limited to indicators that are relevant to welfare, since this would unduly restrict the range of variables that can be taken into account. Accordingly, social indicators have many applications today. Others, however, remained committed to the objective of measuring welfare. Their area has come to be called quality of life research. This research direction is concerned with the design and application of “quality of life indices,” which attempt to represent people’s welfare generally or with regard to some particular aspect or “domain” of their life.

On the other hand, an important dividing line occurred early on in the social indicators movement. Research originally focused on *objective social indicators*—pieces of statistics that register frequencies or occurrences of observable and verifiable phenomena. Such indicators include the occurrence of epidemics, the level of environmental pollution, the crime rate, the number of doctors per capita, the availability of housing amenities, and so on. Many researchers, however, began to argue that although the measurement of these indicators gives valuable information about people’s life conditions, they are unable to capture people’s own perceptions or evaluations of their life conditions. They argued that in

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<sup>1</sup>For the early history of the movement, see Judith Innes de Neufville, *Social Indicators and Public Policy: Interactive Processes of Design and Application* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 1975), pp. 40-56; and Michael Carley, *Social Measurement and Social Indicators: Issues of Policy and Theory* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 1-21. For an overview of more recent developments and possible future trends, see Wolfgang Zapf, “Social Reporting in the 1970s and 1990s,” *Social Indicators Research* 51 (2000): 1-15.

order to measure welfare adequately one also needs *subjective indicators*—indicators that can capture the “meaning” or “importance” of objective conditions to people’s lives.

In particular, they claim that any adequate measurement of welfare must assess people’s *happiness* or *life satisfaction*.<sup>2</sup> Thus, measurement of evaluations is carried out by surveys with questions about people’s happiness or satisfaction with their lives overall, or with particular domains of their lives. Respondents are asked to give their evaluation by indicating their happiness or satisfaction level on some ordinal scale.<sup>3</sup>

Although the debate is often cast in terms of the distinction between objective and subjective indicators, it is more precise to formulate it in terms of the distinction between *descriptive* quality of life indicators on the one hand, and people’s own *evaluations*, on the other. This is because few would deny that some objective indicators may be best measured by people’s descriptive reports. The controversy is about whether people’s evaluative reports of their life conditions are an appropriate indicator of their welfare.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the debate that dominates quality of life research is between those who hold that descriptive indicators are sufficient for quality of life measurement, and those who deny this by claiming that people’s own evaluations are also necessary (and perhaps even sufficient).

The case for the use of descriptive indicators is straightforward. The basic idea of quality of life measurement is that even though there are endless philosophical debates about what welfare consists in, there is broad agreement on which particular *goods* (services, opportunities, and so on) promote people’s welfare. Quality of life research can build on that agreement. That is, it can measure the extent to which people possess certain goods, can access certain services, or have certain opportunities. These are likely to promote welfare on any plausible philosophical theory, or at least they are likely to serve as the means of promoting welfare on any of the theories. Therefore, we can assume that access to these

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<sup>2</sup>The two concepts are often identified with one another in the quality of life literature. There is a recent, somewhat parallel trend in philosophy: accounts of happiness in terms of life satisfaction have been given by Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), and L. Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), among others.

<sup>3</sup>A neglected problem in quality of life measurement is that even though satisfaction levels are given by the respondents on ordinal scales, these are often treated by the researchers as *interval* scales, such that unjustified conclusions are drawn from the results.

<sup>4</sup>An example of a descriptive survey question is: “To what extent are you able to carry out your daily activities?”; respondents can choose between “Not at all,” “A little,” “Moderately,” “Mostly,” and “Completely.” An example of an evaluation is: “How satisfied are you with your ability to perform your daily activities?”; respondents can choose between “Very dissatisfied,” “Dissatisfied,” “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” “Satisfied,” and “Very satisfied.” (The examples are from the WHO’s WHOQOL-100 quality of life index; see <http://www.who.int/evidence/assessment-instruments/qol/>)

goods—which are typically measurable by objective indicators, including descriptive self-reports—is correlated with welfare and can serve as its proxies.

Most quality of life researchers today, however, reject the idea that descriptive indicators are sufficient for the measurement of quality of life. Their reason is that there is no—or at best only weak—correlation between measures by descriptive indicators and measures by evaluations. Virtually every quality of life study remarks upon the lack of systematic correspondence between measures of people’s life conditions by descriptive indicators on the one hand, and by people’s own evaluations of these life conditions, on the other. The evidence compellingly shows that there are wide variations in people’s own evaluations of their life conditions when there is little variation, according to other indicators, in these conditions—and vice versa: similar evaluative responses are given by people in different conditions, as measured by descriptive indicators.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the lack of correlation between data on descriptive indicators and data on evaluations is insufficient to establish the case for the indispensability of evaluations in quality of life measurement. It does not settle the matter one way or another. Further arguments are needed. Nevertheless, especially in the last decade or so, it has become generally accepted that any sound quality of life measurement tool must include people’s own evaluations. Note that this is proposed as a *general requirement* of quality of life measurement. No one denies that in certain cases evaluations may be more informative or methodologically more advantageous than objective indicators; but the emerging consensus is that evaluations are *always* desirable to use in quality of life measurement, and they are desirable to use in all quality of life domains.<sup>6</sup>

Further arguments for the indispensability of evaluations have been given on both methodological and normative grounds. On methodological grounds, it has been argued that evaluations are easier to scale; that

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<sup>5</sup>For a review of the problem, see Robert A. Cummins, “Objective and Subjective Quality of Life: An Interactive Model,” *Social Indicators Research* 52 (2000): 55-72. The correlation is somewhat stronger in the case of people who are under a certain threshold level as measured by descriptive indicators—that is, those who are in very bad objective conditions tend also to be dissatisfied with their lot.

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Michael R. Hagerty, Robert A. Cummins, Abbott L. Ferris, Kenneth Land, Alex C. Michalos, Mark Peterson, Andrew Sharpe, Joseph Sirgy, and Joachim Vogel, “Quality of Life Indexes for National Policy: Review and Agenda for Research,” *Social Indicators Research* 55 (2001): 1-96, pp. 7-9; Robert A. Cummins, “Assessing Quality of Life,” in Roy I. Brown (ed.), *Quality of Life for People with Disabilities: Models, Research and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 1997), pp. 116-50, at p. 118; Ed Diener and Eunkook Suh, “Measuring Quality of Life: Economic, Social, and Subjective Indicators,” *Social Indicators Research* 40 (1997): 189-216; and Dennis Raphael, “Defining Quality of Life: Eleven Debates Concerning Its Measurement,” in Rebecca Renwick, Ivan Brown, and Mark Nagler (eds.), *Quality of Life in Health Promotion and Rehabilitation: Conceptual Approaches, Issues, and Applications* (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 146-65, at p. 161.

overall life satisfaction data are meaningful to aggregate as opposed to the meaningless “apples and pears” additions of scores for descriptive indicators across different domains of life; and that only quality of life data based on evaluations can be the basis of intercultural comparisons. On normative grounds, it has been argued that the gathering of evaluations gives an opportunity to citizens to shape the political process by providing a way to voice their concerns and reveal their demands; that data on evaluations are essential for assessing policy success and securing public support for policy objectives; and that quality of life measures based on evaluations can help avoid paternalism in the design of institutions and policies.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, none of these arguments establishes the indispensability of evaluations for quality of life measurement as a whole. The methodological advantages of using evaluations are more than offset by their numerous reliability and validity problems.<sup>8</sup> And normative arguments suffer from conflating welfare with other values. No doubt it is important that citizens have opportunities to shape the political process by expressing their demands, that their concerns are considered in policy making and evaluation, and that decisions are not made without taking their perspectives into account, but it does not follow that these values should be promoted by quality of life research. Even though normative considerations have a role to play in the broader context of program and policy design and evaluation, it is better to separate these considerations from welfare measurement. Quality of life research is an important resource for policy making and evaluation, but it is only one of their resources.

One way the case for the indispensability of evaluations for quality of life measurement has *not* been attempted is in terms of some theory of welfare from philosophy. In general, quality of life researchers seem to wish to remain neutral among the theories of welfare that philosophers have put forward. Indeed, it has been argued that quality of life measurement does not have to be committed to any such particular theory.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>For these and similar arguments, see Diener and Suh, “Measuring Quality of Life”; Dieter Birnbacher, “Quality of Life—Evaluation or Description?” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2 (1999): 25-36; and Ruut Veenhoven, “The Four Qualities of Life: Ordering Concepts and Measures of the Good Life,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1 (2000): 1-39, and “Why Social Policy Needs Subjective Indicators,” *Social Indicators Research* 58 (2002): 33-45.

<sup>8</sup>For a brief discussion, see section 4.

<sup>9</sup>See Dan Brock, “Quality of Life Measures in Health Care and Medical Ethics,” in Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 95-132; Albert W. Musschenga, “The Relation between Concepts of Quality-of-Life, Health and Happiness,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 22 (1997): 11-28; and Peter Sandøe, “Quality of Life—Three Competing Views,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2 (1999): 11-23. In his paper, Brock asks what philosophical reflection on welfare can learn from quality of life research. In this paper, I ask the opposite question.

Nevertheless, as I will argue, given that both the methodological and normative arguments fall short of establishing the case for the indispensability of evaluations, quality of life researchers need to appeal to some particular theory of welfare if they wish to make their case. In particular, I will show that the position that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement has a number of background assumptions that are compatible only with certain theories of welfare—at least on certain plausible empirical assumptions about the amount of information people typically have and their use of that information. Perhaps some quality of life researchers would embrace these theories. But if quality of life research is to remain neutral among competing theories of welfare, the role of evaluations in quality of life measurement must be reassessed.

It is, however, a bit unclear what precisely the position that people's own evaluations are, in general, indispensable for quality of life measurement involves. Quality of life researchers hardly ever explain their position in detail. As I see it, there are two ways of understanding it. On what I call the *stronger* position, the central claim is that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement because descriptive indicators do not correlate with welfare, whereas indicators based on evaluations do. This is the reason for the lack of correlation between the two. Welfare is to be measured by people's own evaluations, although other indicators might have a subsidiary or heuristic role in its measurement. In contrast, on the *weaker* position, the central claim is that neither descriptive indicators nor evaluations correlate with welfare; instead, they *jointly* correlate with it. Therefore, measurement by descriptive indicators and measurement by people's own evaluations are both indispensable.

Section 3 looks at the relation between these two positions and the most influential philosophical theories of welfare, which are presented in section 2. Section 4 briefly reviews some methodological problems with evaluations. Section 5 concludes by suggesting that the position that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement rests on a conflation of two claims. Once these claims are separated, it becomes clear that the use of both descriptive indicators and evaluations should be argued for on a case-by-case basis.

## 2. Theories of Welfare

The concept of welfare refers to how well a person's life goes for that particular person. To say that a person's life is going well for that person is not to say that her life is useful for others, or that it is a morally commendable life, or that it is praiseworthy from an aesthetic perspective; such lives may also be good from the perspective of welfare, but only insofar as leading a morally or aesthetically admirable life is *good for* the

person whose life it is.<sup>10</sup> As I said, there is wide agreement both inside and outside of philosophy on what goods contribute to welfare. When philosophers develop theories of welfare, enumerating these goods is only of secondary importance. The primary objective of such a theory is to clarify *in virtue of what* those goods make a person's life go well for that person.

A popular way of classifying theories of welfare is by whether they are *subjective* or *objective*. Subjective theories hold that something is good for a person in virtue of that person having some attitude in favor of that thing. These theories differ in their specification of the relevant pro-attitude: endorsement, enjoyment, happiness, satisfaction, desire, and preference have all been suggested as candidates. Objective theories, in contrast, do not require a connection between a person's pro-attitudes and the goods that promote that person's welfare. These theories propose normative ideals of what it takes for life to be good for the person whose life it is. Based on these ideals, they specify certain goods that make a person's life better.<sup>11</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed survey of theories of welfare in philosophy. Numerous theories have been proposed, and new ones are being developed continuously. Instead, I briefly present only the most familiar and influential *groups* of theories: hedonist, preference satisfaction, and objective accounts.<sup>12</sup>

Preference satisfaction theories (often formulated in terms of desire rather than preference) hold that something is good for a person if and only if that person prefers that thing. On these theories, preference is understood as a disposition to choose: given the opportunity, the person would choose to go for, obtain, or realize the object of her preference. Preference satisfaction is the obtaining of a state of affairs rather than a psychological state: to have a satisfied preference is not necessarily to be pleased about, or to have some conscious experience of, its satisfaction. Indeed, it is not even necessary to experience any mental change at all. A person's preference can be satisfied without the person's ever learning that it has been satisfied.

Two familiar versions of the preference satisfaction theory are the *actual preference satisfaction theory* and the *informed preference satisfaction theory*. (There exist other versions.) On the actual preference satisfaction theory, the person's welfare is promoted by the satisfaction of

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<sup>10</sup>Therefore, we need to distinguish between the question of how well a life goes for the person whose life it is and the question of what makes for a *good life* for that person. A good life for a person is not necessarily a life that goes well for the person. Besides welfare, there are other perspectives and values that are relevant to a good life.

<sup>11</sup>For a detailed discussion of the distinction, see Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, pp. 26-41.

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of these three groups of theories, see James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

the preferences the person has. Roughly, the idea is that what is good for the person is getting what she wants.

This theory is universally rejected by philosophers. One of their reasons is that people can be mistaken about what is good for them. On the one hand, preferences may be ill-considered, based on insufficient information or false beliefs about their object or the consequences of the obtaining of their object. On the other hand, people may form preferences when they are depressed, emotionally disturbed, or physically addicted to some substance that clouds their judgment; or they may commit some sort of cognitive error when they form their preferences.

The problems of this theory have prompted many philosophers to explore variants of the informed preference satisfaction theory. If preferences are formed in conditions that are not suitable for forming adequately informed and appropriately reasoned preferences, we can still ask what people *would* prefer if they were in more ideal conditions for forming their preferences. One way to pose that question is to ask what a person would prefer herself to prefer if she was aware of all the information relevant to her circumstances, made no mistakes of reasoning, and was free of distorting psychological and other sorts of influences. On an informed preference satisfaction theory, what is good for the person is the satisfaction of her hypothetical—adequately informed and appropriately reasoned—preferences.

Informed preference satisfaction theories used to be perhaps the most influential theories of welfare in modern philosophy. Nowadays, however, objective theories are becoming more and more fashionable. These theories are also known as “objective list” or “substantive goods” theories.<sup>13</sup> These labels are misleading insofar as they may suggest that it is sufficient for an objective theory to enumerate the goods that promote welfare—but such a “list” would not be a *theory*. A theory has to be able to explain in virtue of what the goods it proposes are valuable from the perspective of welfare. On objective theories, something is good (or bad) for a person in virtue of some characteristic of that thing itself, independently of the person’s pro-, or con-attitudes toward that thing. Perhaps it is the sort of thing that is worthwhile for human beings to want and seek; perhaps it is the sort of thing that contributes to the life that is appropriate for human beings to live; perhaps it is the sort of thing that it is rational to care about. But an objective theory does not necessarily have to give a unified, let alone reductive, account of that in virtue of which the goods and normative ideals it proposes contribute to a person’s welfare. It can be pluralistic in the sense that it may hold that each of these goods and

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<sup>13</sup>The term “objective list” comes from Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 493-502; the term “substantive goods theory” comes from Thomas M. Scanlon, “Value, Desire, and the Quality of Life,” in Nussbaum and Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life*, pp. 185-200.



ideals have their own, mutually unrelated, “goodmakers.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, there are many different possible versions of objective theories.

The third familiar and influential group of theories is hedonism. Hedonist theories hold that welfare consists in some conscious mental state. Philosophers usually treat hedonism as a subjective theory of welfare.<sup>15</sup> But this is actually incorrect, for hedonism has both subjective and objective versions, which differ in important ways. Whether an hedonist theory of welfare is subjective or objective depends on how it constructs the valuable mental state. Traditionally, that mental state has been identified with pleasure. But what is pleasure? One interpretation is that pleasure is a sensation or feeling. Certain experiences are accompanied by, or result in, this mental state. On this interpretation, hedonism is not a subjective theory: even if the person dislikes or disapproves of having this mental state, having it is good for her. On this sort of objective theory, only experiences can be good for people, and the only goodmaker is pleasantness.

Recent research into pleasure and pain has shown that they have an attitudinal dimension: for some experience to be pleasant (or painful), the subject has to have some sort of a favorable (or unfavorable) attitude toward it. Philosophers have also started to conceptualize pleasure in terms of attitudes.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it is more appropriate to call this mental state *enjoyment* rather than pleasure. On this interpretation, the mental state that hedonists believe is valuable is a compound of some conscious experience and an attitude toward that experience. Such a version of hedonism is a subjective theory, since it gives a central role to an attitude to explain in virtue of what some things—in this case, experiences—are good for people. Other subjective versions of hedonism single out different mental states with an attitudinal dimension: the most familiar of these are happiness and satisfaction with one’s life or important aspects of one’s life.

A further distinction within both objective and subjective hedonist theories is between those versions that hold that the value of those conscious mental states that are relevant to welfare is a function of such factors as their quantity, intensity, or duration, and those that hold that their value, in addition, also depends on the worth of their source. On the latter, the extent to which, for instance, pleasure or enjoyment contributes

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<sup>14</sup>For the distinction between goods that promote a person’s welfare and the goodmakers in virtue of which those goods promote a person’s welfare, see Andrew Moore, “Objective Human Goods,” in Roger Crisp and Brad Hooker (eds.), *Well-Being and Morality: Essays in Honour of James Griffin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 75-89.

<sup>15</sup>One exception I am aware of is Scanlon, “Value, Desire, and the Quality of Life,” p. 189, who treats it as an objective theory.

<sup>16</sup>An overview of the findings of this research with its implications for the concepts of pleasure and pain, and the parallel developments in philosophy, is to be found in Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, pp. 98-112.

to welfare depends at least partly on whether it is the result of some worthwhile activity or state. Furthermore, hedonist theories may want to distinguish between the value of veridical and merely illusionary experiences: pleasure or enjoyment derived from genuine experiences makes a person's life better for that person than pleasure or enjoyment derived from illusions.<sup>17</sup>

These theories tell us in terms of what individual and social welfare are to be evaluated. With respect to the evaluative role of the theories, it is useful to introduce yet another distinction at this point. A theory of welfare is relevant both when we ask how well off a person is, and when we ask how well off a person will be given that this or that action or policy is chosen. This latter question is about *prospective* evaluation. It concerns the likely consequences of choosing some particular action or implementing some particular policy. Such evaluation is future-directed. The former question, in contrast, is a question about the present or the past. When we ask how well off a person is, we ask how well her life has been going, or how well it is going at this point. For want of a better term, I will call this kind of evaluation *retrospective* evaluation—with the proviso that the object of the evaluation may include the present too. We may be interested in either or both sorts of evaluation when we measure quality of life. For instance, retrospective evaluation may be more relevant to policy evaluation, while prospective evaluation may be more relevant to policy design.

### 3. Evaluating Quality of Life

Most quality of life researchers today argue that measurement by evaluations is indispensable for quality of life assessment, and it is indispensable in all quality of life domains. Recent reviews of the field often put forward this claim as a requirement that any sound quality of life measurement tool must meet. The requirement has a number of background assumptions. Three sets of these are relevant to my purposes. First, the requirement assumes that people have appropriate epistemic access to the information on the basis of which their welfare can be evaluated—by which I mean that they have *at least as good* epistemic access to that information as others (for instance, researchers or government officials) do. The assumption is not merely that people have appropriate access to that information in specific circumstances, since that would fail to establish that their evaluations are in general indispensable; the assumption is that (perhaps save for special cases) people always have appropriate access. Whether this assumption is justified depends on what the informa-

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<sup>17</sup>For these and further distinctions within hedonism, see Fred Feldman, "The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 604-28.

tion on the basis of which a person's welfare can be evaluated is. What that information is, in turn, depends on one's view of welfare.

The second set of assumptions is that when a person evaluates her welfare, she bases the evaluation on information that is appropriate and relevant; thus, the proper way to a measure a person's welfare is through that person's own evaluations. Third, it is assumed that the person's evaluations can be elicited by surveying that person about her life satisfaction or satisfaction with respect to particular domains of her life. This, in turn, assumes that it is meaningful to ask people about their satisfaction, that their satisfaction is relatively stable, that people can report it, and they are typically willing to do so, and do so sincerely.

In section 2, I presented four influential groups of theories of welfare: informed preference satisfaction views, subjective and objective versions of hedonism, and other objective theories. I will now ask whether these theories are compatible with the background assumptions of the requirement that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement. For the sake of brevity, I will only consider these four kinds of theory. I also distinguished between prospective and retrospective evaluations of welfare. On the former, we assess how well off a person will be given that this or that action or policy is chosen—we ask which action or policy best promotes the person's welfare. On the latter, we assess how well off a person has been, including the present—we ask how well the life of the person is or has been going for that person.

Moreover, as I remarked earlier, the position of quality of life researchers arguing for the indispensability of evaluations is not entirely clear. One possible reconstruction of their position is that because of the lack of any systematic correspondence between measurement by descriptive indicators and measurement by evaluations, we have to decide whether the former or the latter is to serve as the ultimate standard for quality of life assessment. Since evaluations are able to capture the role and importance people attach to various sources of their welfare, the ultimate standard for making quality of life judgments can only be people's own evaluations. On this stronger reconstruction of the position, the role of descriptive indicators is, at best, indirect: they may be useful heuristics or rough estimates of people's welfare, and they may have the role of informing the person when she forms her judgment. What ultimately matters, however, is the person's own view about how well her life is going.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>For instance, David M. Romney, Roy I. Brown, and Prem S. Fry, "Improving the Quality of Life: Prescriptions for Change," *Social Indicators Research* 33 (1994): 237-72, p. 247, assert that the ultimate determinant of quality of life is the person's own evaluation. Robert L. Schalock, Ivan Brown, Roy Brown, Robert A. Cummins, David Felce, Leena Matikka, Kenneth D. Keith, and Trevor Parmenter, "Conceptualization, Measurement, and Application of Quality of Life for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: Report of an International Panel of Experts," *Mental Retardation* 40 (2002):

Consider first retrospective evaluation on the stronger position. On an informed preference satisfaction theory, how well a person's life is (or has been) going is a matter of whether the preferences she would have if she was adequately informed and reasoned appropriately are satisfied. Since these are not actual but hypothetical preferences, the person herself is not necessarily in the best epistemic position to assess whether they are satisfied. Whether she is depends on how informed she is, whether she reasons appropriately when forming her preferences, and so on. Furthermore, for the same reasons, the person may not even be in the best position to determine what these preferences are in the first place. Given that preferences are usually not formed in conditions that are ideal for the formation of preferences, informed preference satisfaction theories are incompatible with the first set of assumptions.

On an objective theory, how well a person's life is (or has been) going is a matter of the objectively valuable goods she possesses or the normative ideals she realizes in her life. While perhaps in many cases the person is in at least as good a position to evaluate her life in terms of these goods and ideals as others are, she may also disagree with the worth of these goods and ideals. She may disagree that her welfare is to be evaluated in terms of them, and she may base her evaluation on other ideals and goods. Thus, given that people often disagree on the value of different ideals and goods, objective theories are incompatible with the second set of assumptions.

The same considerations apply to objective versions of hedonism. The person may deny that the only good that can promote her welfare is conscious experiences, and that only certain sensations or feelings can be good for her, irrespective of her attitude towards them. While normally she is in the best position to have access to the information about her experiences and feelings, it is less likely that her evaluation is made only on the appropriate sort of information.

Finally, consider subjective hedonist theories in the context of retrospective evaluations of welfare. Subjective hedonist theories are similar to objective hedonist theories insofar as they hold that only certain conscious experiences can be good for a person, but they are dissimilar in the way they identify what makes experiences valuable. On these views, the only experiences that promote a person's welfare are those towards which the person has some specific pro-attitude. Enjoyment, happiness, and life satisfaction have all been offered as candidates for this pro-attitude. On these versions, how good a person's life is for that person

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457-70, p. 458, hold that quality of life is a function of the person's perceptions and her subjective views. The WHO gives a similar definition to quality of life. Birnbacher, "Quality of Life—Evaluation or Description?" pp. 32-33, argues that descriptive indicators are relevant to quality of life merely by having an heuristic role in its measurement; only the person's evaluations are constitutive criteria of how well that person's life goes.

depends on whether she enjoys it, whether she is happy, whether she is satisfied with it, and so on. In order to evaluate the person's welfare, one needs information on both the person's experiences and her attitudes towards these experiences. The best epistemic access to this sort of information is the person's own epistemic access: she is in the best position to know these experiences and attitudes. Moreover, when she reports these attitudes, she is likely to use the appropriate sort of information, since questions about satisfaction or happiness are questions about these attitudes. As a consequence, some sort of subjective hedonist theory of welfare seems most compatible with the first two sets of assumptions underlying the case for the indispensability of evaluations for quality of life measurement on the stronger position. If that position implicitly appeals to some theory of welfare, then it appeals to some version of subjective hedonism.

But it cannot appeal to just any version of subjective hedonism. Recall that some philosophers distinguish between the values of experiences depending on the sorts of activity or state that are the bases of those experiences. For instance, suppose a subjective hedonist theory holds that welfare consists in enjoyment. Some philosophers argue that the value with which particular enjoyments contribute to a person's welfare also depends on the worth of the state or activity that is enjoyed. They may also argue that the value of enjoyments depends on whether the enjoyments are taken in veridical or illusionary states of affairs—holding that enjoyment of genuine experiences is more valuable. On these views, constraints are placed upon the information that is relevant to evaluate a person's welfare. Thus, even though the person herself has appropriate epistemic access to her experiences, she may not be in the best position to evaluate those experiences: she may take into account illusionary experiences in her evaluation (perhaps believing that those experiences are genuine), or she may fail to take account of the worth of those states or activities that are relevant to her evaluation. These modifications to a simple subjective hedonist view sever the connection between the person's own evaluation and her welfare. Therefore, the stronger position is compatible only with simple versions of subjective hedonism that do not introduce such further provisos for the value of mental states.

One possible objection to this analysis is that it misconstrues the position of quality of life researchers. Perhaps when they argue that using evaluations is indispensable for quality of life measurement, they have a weaker position in mind. Their position might be that the lack of correspondence between descriptive indicators and evaluations shows that neither of them can be in itself a good proxy for welfare. Neither descriptive indicators nor evaluations alone correlate with welfare; however, they jointly do. Therefore, both sorts of indicators are indispensable in quality of life measurement. Even though this weaker position, as far as I

can tell, has not been explicitly put forward in these terms in the literature, it provides a possible basis for the indispensability of evaluations.

The weaker position entails that welfare has a component to which the person herself has the best epistemic access. It allows that welfare can be measured by descriptive indicators, but such measurement is necessarily partial. At the same time, it also maintains that measurement by evaluations is similarly only partial measurement. Since the person has the best epistemic access to her own experiences and her own attitudes towards these experiences, this position presupposes that welfare has an irreducibly attitude-dependent component—a component that can be assessed only on the basis of the person's own evaluations.

In the case of the stronger position, the kind of theory on which the person herself has the best epistemic access to evaluate her welfare is a simple version of subjective hedonism. But the weaker position is incompatible with subjective hedonist theories, since it claims that measuring evaluations is necessary but not sufficient for evaluating quality of life. A person's welfare also has components that cannot be assessed directly by the person's evaluations.

The weaker position is incompatible with objective hedonist theories for the opposite reason. Even though the person does have the best epistemic access to her experiences, these theories do not take into account the person's attitudes towards these experiences. That is, the information on which measurement is to be based is not the person's evaluation of her experiences. At least, evaluations do not play an indispensable role in the assessment of welfare on this theory.

Now consider informed preference satisfaction theories. On these views, the information on which a person's welfare can be evaluated is information about the preferences (and the satisfaction of the preferences) that the person would have if she was adequately informed and reasoned appropriately. Because of the problem that people may lack relevant information and may reason inappropriately, they may not be in the best position to make the evaluation. However, one could argue that one of the preferences of adequately informed and appropriately rational people would be the preference to positively evaluate their lives (that is, to be satisfied or happy with it in the sense that determines their evaluations). Thus, evaluations can be considered to reflect the satisfaction of an informed preference—insofar as a person is satisfied with her life, to that extent a particular informed preference is satisfied.

It is not implausible to believe that happiness or life satisfaction would be the object of an informed preference. But perhaps neither is it implausible to believe that adequately informed and appropriately rational people would prefer to be happy or satisfied with genuine rather than merely illusionary experiences, or they would prefer to be happy or satisfied with activities and states of only the worthwhile kind. If so, informed preference satisfaction theories remain incompatible with the first

set of assumptions.

A somewhat similar strategy might be tempting to explain how objective theories of welfare may be compatible with the assumptions on the weaker position. The assumptions are compatible with those versions of an objective theory that are, first, pluralistic about the goods and ideals that make a person's life good for that person; second, those that hold that one of those goods or ideals is to have a positive evaluation of one's life; and, third, those that do not introduce further constraints on the information on which the person is to base her evaluation. On such a theory, being satisfied or happy with one's life is one of the components, among others, that make the person's life good for that person.

Once again, it is not implausible to believe that happiness or life satisfaction would be one of the items on the "list" of an objective theory. But on a plausible version of the theory, that item may well be more complex: it could be restricted to happiness and satisfaction with genuine experiences rather than mere illusions, or happiness and satisfaction based on worthwhile activities and states. Therefore, if the weaker position implicitly appeals to some theory of welfare, then it appeals to some "simple" version of objective theories or informed preference satisfaction theories.

Nevertheless, regardless of whether they take the stronger or the weaker position, quality of life researchers have a problem with prospective evaluations of welfare. In this sort of evaluation, the question is how well off the person is going to be given that this or that action or policy is chosen. Prospective evaluations require extra information compared to retrospective evaluations, since actions and policies are typically chosen in conditions of risk or uncertainty. Thus, in order to evaluate a person's *expected welfare*, one needs information on the risks that influence the outcomes—the probabilities with which the outcomes might obtain and the weight these probabilities should be given to determine which choice is best for the person.

A general problem for the case for the indispensability of evaluations is that it is possible, and in many cases likely, that the person whose welfare is evaluated is not in an appropriate epistemic position to evaluate these risks. She may not have enough information on the probabilities and likely outcomes, and she may under- or overweight the probabilities. For prospective evaluation on the informed preference satisfaction theory, one needs to know more than what a person's adequately informed and appropriately reasoned preferences would be—since which of these preferences can be best satisfied depends on the risks involved in choosing a particular action or policy. Similarly, on objective theories—including objective hedonism—the person needs to know what goods and ideals promote her welfare, she needs to be informed about the presence and future expectations of these ideals and goods in her life, and she needs to be able to assess the risks in order to choose the alternative that

will maximize her welfare. The same problem arises for prospective evaluations on subjective hedonist theories. Given the additional informational needs of this sort of evaluation, the person may be unable to properly assess which alternative would give her the most satisfaction, enjoyment, or happiness.<sup>19</sup>

Two conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, assuming that neither the methodological nor the normative arguments succeed in establishing the case for evaluations, if quality of life researchers want to underpin the requirement that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement in all domains of life, then, depending on the interpretation of their position, they commit themselves to some simple version of subjective hedonism, or some simple version of an objective theory or an informed preference theory. Whether any of these theories gives a plausible account of human welfare is a question I leave open. Second, even if one of these theories is assumed, the role of evaluations in quality of life measurement is limited, since they are relevant only when our interest is in retrospective evaluation. For prospective welfare evaluation, the person's own evaluation is not necessarily the ultimate standard.

#### 4. Further Assumptions

Arguments for the indispensability of evaluations have also been made on the grounds that the use of evaluations is methodologically at least as sound as the use of descriptive indicators. In order to get a perspective on the methodological case for evaluations, it is worthwhile to look briefly at the third set of assumptions I mentioned at the beginning of section 3. Evaluations are elicited in terms of questions about satisfaction (or happiness). These questions assume that it makes sense to ask people about their satisfaction—that is, people can determine how satisfied they are—that their satisfaction is relatively stable, and that people are able and willing to describe it. In short, it is assumed that measurement based on life satisfaction data is both *reliable* and *valid*.

In the most general terms, a reliable measurement tool gives consistent results in similar conditions. The more reliable a measurement tool is, the more confident one can be that the measurement is accurate. In contrast, a tool that is valid actually measures what it is supposed to measure—that is, the measurement construct corresponds to the concept

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<sup>19</sup>This is also realized by Birnbacher, “Quality of Life—Evaluation or Description?” in his case for the indispensability of evaluations for quality of life research: “Quality of life cannot depend on how an individual evaluates certain objective events but only on how he evaluates his subjective states resulting from the event on the occasion of its happening. Equally, quality of life does not depend on how a future subjective state is evaluated before its occurrence but on how it is evaluated when it actually occurs” (p. 31).



it purports to represent.

Evaluations in terms of life satisfaction as indicators of welfare have problems with both reliability and validity. The most important sources of these problems are the phenomenon of adaptation, the influence of contextual effects and transient moods on satisfaction reports, and distortions introduced by the measurement tools.

The phenomenon of *adaptation* is well-known: as people adapt to improved circumstances, their initial gain in satisfaction tends to disappear. Thus, improvements in people's conditions, as measured by descriptive indicators, may yield no benefits in terms of higher levels of satisfaction. For instance, rising standards of living may not lead to higher reported levels of satisfaction. Likewise, people whose circumstances deteriorate tend to adapt to them. After a serious illness or impairment of function, people often adjust their plans and expectations, and they become satisfied with less.

One of the problems with such phenomena is that it seems that whereas in some cases adapted satisfaction levels should be relevant to quality of life judgments, in other cases they should not. For instance, suppose someone wins the lottery but reports similar levels of life satisfaction to those she had reported before she won a lot of money. Perhaps this can be taken as psychological evidence that affluence (at least above a certain threshold) has no significant role to play in determining a person's welfare. In contrast, suppose that a miracle cure for idiocy is developed, and idiots become intelligent. It seems implausible that the quality of life of ex-idiots has not significantly risen, even if their satisfaction levels remain about the same. Whether adapted satisfaction levels should be taken into account in quality of life assessment at least partly depends upon the features to which they are a response.<sup>20</sup>

Problems also arise because evaluations in terms of judgments of satisfaction are sensitive to *contextual influences*. It has been found that the same event may increase or decrease general satisfaction. If a positive (or negative) past event comes to mind when making the evaluation, it may result in an *assimilation effect*: thinking of the event crowds out other information, increasing (or decreasing) reported satisfaction. The same event, however, may also serve as a standard of comparison, resulting in a *contrast effect*: compared to the event, reported satisfaction may be lower (or higher). In addition, similar effects may result from thinking of future expectations and even counterfactual events.

Implicit social comparisons and expectations also pose difficulties. Respondents may edit their reports to satisfy social expectations or what they perceive as the "proper" response to the interviewer. They may also base their evaluation on a comparison of their situation with existing and hypothetical others who are perceived as more or less well off. Even if it

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<sup>20</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this consideration to me.

is known who the respondents compare their situation to, however, it is difficult to predict their responses, because they may use the information in different ways in arriving at their final judgments.

Reports of satisfaction are often influenced by present moods. It has been noted that finding a dime or the outcome of a soccer game can “profoundly affect reported satisfaction with one’s life as a whole.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, certain features of the research design may also distort the results. For instance, the order of questions may influence the responses.<sup>22</sup> It also matters who is present at the time of interviews or self-administered questionnaires. The presence of a handicapped person can increase reported satisfaction, as well as an interviewer of the opposite sex. Incidentally, whether the study is carried out by personal interviews, over the telephone, or by self-administered questionnaires also makes a difference. People report higher levels of satisfaction in face-to-face situations.<sup>23</sup>

Due to these difficulties, the reliability of life satisfaction measures tends to be low—which, in turn, raises worries about their validity. If people’s evaluations are ad hoc, perhaps there is no one thing life satisfaction measures can be taken to represent. But perhaps many of these problems can be overcome by careful research design. In any case, whether evaluations are methodologically as sound as descriptive indicators remains an open question. Although descriptive indicators also have their own methodological problems, the idea that welfare can be evaluated through proxies that measure people’s access to certain important goods, services, and opportunities is relatively much less controversial.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the use of evaluations in quality of life research, if its rationale is the requirement that any sound quality of life

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<sup>21</sup>Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack, “Reports of Subjective Well-Being: Judgmental Processes and their Methodological Implications,” in Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwarz (eds.), *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage, 1999), pp. 61-84, at p. 62.

<sup>22</sup>Fritz Strack, Leonard L. Martin, and Norbert Schwarz, “Priming and Communication: Social Determinants of Information Use in Judgments of Life Satisfaction,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1988): 429-42, surveyed college students about their dating life and life satisfaction. They found that if the question about the students’ overall life satisfaction preceded the question about the number of dates in the previous month, the correlation between life satisfaction and dating was very weak. But if the questions were asked in the reverse order, the correlation was significantly increased. It seems that the question about dating prompted the respondents to include different information in the second case.

<sup>23</sup>For surveys of these results, see Schwarz and Strack, “Reports of Subjective Well-Being”; Daniel Kahneman, “Objective Happiness,” in Kahneman et al. (eds.), *Well-Being*, pp. 3-25; and Robert L. Kahn and F. Thomas Juster, “Well-Being: Concepts and Measures,” *Journal of Social Issues* 58 (2002): 627-44.

measurement tool must include evaluations in all domains of life, commits quality of life researchers to particular theories of welfare—depending on how their position on the reasons for the requirement is interpreted. This is because in the absence of other sorts of arguments, and given the amount of information people typically have and the way they make use of that information, people's own evaluations are not necessarily indispensable in order to assess their welfare—unless one is willing to accept some probably overly simple theory of welfare.

This presents quality of life researchers with a dilemma. On the one hand, if the controversy is settled in favor of those arguing for the indispensability of evaluations, then quality of life research is not neutral among philosophical theories of welfare. Thus, quality of life researchers must drop the requirement that it should be possible to carry out quality of life measurement without reference to such theories—which is bound to make it more controversial. On the other hand, if quality of life measurement is to be carried out without any assumptions about what human welfare consists in, the role of evaluations must be reexamined. In particular, the requirement that any sound measurement tool must include evaluations, and must include them in all domains of life, must be dropped.

I suggest that the way out of the dilemma is to abandon the position that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement and to retreat to the position that even though evaluations may be informative and useful, their use must be justified on a case-by-case basis.

The reason is that the idea that evaluations are indispensable for quality of life measurement seems to be based on a conflation of two separate claims. One claim is that welfare has a subjective component—that is, a person's feelings, happiness, and attitudes towards her life are relevant for determining how well that person's life goes for that person. This claim is compatible with most familiar theories of welfare. Hedonist theories give a central role to some such component (although different versions give that role to different mental states). Informed preference satisfaction theories are likely to agree that happiness or life satisfaction is the object of an informed preference. And objective theories are likely to include some subjective component in their list of valuable goods. For instance, on an Aristotelian theory, a life goes less well if, although it contains the appropriate sorts of activities and excellences, they are not experienced as satisfying by the person whose life it is. Therefore, the subjective component of welfare should be represented in any sound quality of life measurement tool.

The other claim is that the appropriate way to measure this component is through the person's own evaluations. But there is no reason to expect that a one-to-one relation exists between a measurement method of welfare and an underlying component of welfare. That is, there is no reason to suppose that the best or only way to represent the subjective

component of welfare is by evaluative indicators. Both descriptive indicators and evaluations may be good indicators of both subjective and other components of welfare. Perhaps the real aim of the arguments for the indispensability of evaluations is to make a case that the subjective component of welfare must be included in quality of life measurement.<sup>24</sup>

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