

**Review of Mark Fabian's *A Theory of Subjective Wellbeing*.
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WILLEM VAN DER DEIJL
Tilburg University

A MESSY STATE OF AFFAIRS

Science, and social science in particular, is often motivated by the promise of progress: making lives better, or improving human wellbeing. But seeing how central this motivation has been to science, it is perhaps surprising that the science of wellbeing is still in its early stages. This is not because of a lack of interest in wellbeing measurement by scientists (see Angner 2011 for an excellent historical overview). Rather, it appears to be because measuring wellbeing is hard. Developing measurements is always hard (see for instance Chang 2004 history of thermometers), but there may be something particularly difficult about wellbeing measurement. Wellbeing, in all plausibility, has a lot to do with qualitative assessments of mental states (at least in part). However, our access to the mental states of others is quite limited, especially if it comes to making comparative judgments of specific qualitative features.¹ 'Is the color red you see, the same as the color red that I see?' But also, 'Does chocolate taste as good to you as it does to me?' These questions are hard to answer. And measuring wellbeing seems to involve at least some questions in this category. But if this were it, things would not be so bad. After all, there are many psychological measures of mental states. What makes things particularly challenging is that wellbeing is a rather difficult concept to specify. What does it entail for a life to be lived well. This is, unfortunately, a rather philosophical question. And philosophers are divided on the subject. Broadly speaking, there are three strands of views: lives are good for those living them because 1) they are enjoyable (and are void of suffering), 2) contain high levels of desire-satisfaction (and little frustration of desires), and 3) involve numerous goods such as knowledge, achievement, and friendship, independent of whether they are pleasant or desired (while avoiding their counterparts).

¹ This is not to say that our access to our own mental states is all that much better (see Schwitzgebel 2008).

Overcoming these two challenges appears to require a multi-disciplinary effort. The question of what wellbeing entails is not one that can be empirically answered. And the question of which measure best captures wellbeing is not one that can be determined from the philosopher's lazy boy. There have been many different efforts trying to foster multi-disciplinary cooperation. There is a multidisciplinary *International Journal of Wellbeing*, founded by two philosophers, and initially empirically minded journals, like the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, have also published many contributions by philosophers. Still, genuine multi-disciplinary approaches have been rare. Empirical researchers publish studies using specific survey measures such as 'life satisfaction' or 'positive and negative affect' that have become widely accepted.² They shun debates about whether these notions truly identify with how good life is for the individuals filling in the surveys, and contend that they are likely to approximate wellbeing to some extent. At the same time, philosophers have debated the nature of wellbeing without an emerging consensus. All and all, little headway appears eminent. At the same time, the need for policymakers to build on better measures than GDP to capture progress has not been resolved.

THEORY TO THE RESCUE

This is where Mark Fabian's *A Theory of Subjective Wellbeing* comes in. Building on Anna Alexandrova and Daniel Haybron's (2016) plausible diagnosis, Fabian starts off from the idea that progressing this debate further requires better theory. And this is what Fabian's book offers: a theory. As the cover promises: Fabian's theory "integrates not only ideas in SWB studies and analytical philosophy, but also ideas from clinical, moral, and developmental psychology; continental philosophy and welfare economics". The reader is in for a hell of a ride: from Nietzsche, Sartre, and Kierkegaard, to self-determination theory and the capability approach. It is a ride that is worth taking though. Fabian's book is incredibly creative and insightful. Fabian diagnoses the state of research on wellbeing in different subfields as 'disjunctivitis', which is to say that "when researchers work in disciplinary silos and are disinclined to theorize they are prone to produce internally inconsistent bodies of knowledge" (43). Fabian describes the aim of the book, then, as follows: "my contention is that a

² Typically, these involve asking individuals to rate their life satisfaction and positive and negative emotions. For instance, they may ask "how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days, considering that 1 is the worst possible life, and 10 is the best?"

unifying project is overdue in the field of SWB and I humbly present this book an attempt at it” (43).

THE THEORY

In order to explain the main gist of the book, we need to survey a number of key concepts that different fields of study tend to view differently. Wellbeing, or prudential good, is what is good for someone (philosophers typically add: for ‘the sake of the individual’, but Fabian does not). This notion is often used interchangeably with welfare in the philosophical and economic literature, but Fabian defines welfare as the standard of living. Subjective wellbeing (SWB) is the “individual’s own judgment and perceptions of their wellbeing” (4), and is also a serious contender for what wellbeing may be, substantively. Subjective well-being (note the hyphen!), however, is the research field that has been studying life satisfaction, and positive negative affect, and meaning in life. Fabian refers to this as a ‘school of thought’ sometimes, but sometimes as a body of research.

Fabian’s primary aim is to construct a theory of SWB. He does not commit to the view that SWB is also wellbeing, but “leave[s] that debate to the philosophers” (46). At the same time, he presents a fierce defense of his theory of SWB as an account of wellbeing, at least from commonly discussed problems (the experience machine, the immoral but well objection, adaptation, etc.). At the same time, he suggests that even if SWB indeed would be what wellbeing is, then still it should not be the aim of governments to maximize it. Instead, they should maximize welfare. Moreover, SWB can be measured, although most likely not in precise interpersonally comparable ways.

Most of the book develops the theory of SWB. Fabian expresses this theory in the form of an equation:

$$\text{SWB} = f(\text{hedonia, eudaimonia, conscience})$$

He calls this the SWB production function, analogous to production functions in economic theory. A chapter is dedicated to each of these three factors in the production function. The production function itself—the way these elements generate SWB—is described as the coalescence of being. Let’s look at these elements briefly.

Hedonia, here, refers to affective states. Someone does well here if they have an overall balance of positive over negative emotions. Eudaimonia is not so much understood in an Aristotelian sense, but rather in

the sense of Self-Determination Theory: being able to live according to your own values and pursue them successfully and autonomously. It may be surprising to philosophical readers to find eudaimonia as an element of SWB, but the reason for this is that in the intended sense, eudaimonia does not require one to live morally, but it requires one to live autonomously, according to one's one intrinsic values. Finally, the incorporation of conscience is particularly interesting.

Here, Fabian joins up two literatures: the psychological literature on the importance of hope, having a sense of meaning, and purpose; and the existentialist philosophical literature. Fabian builds on Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to argue that existential dread is a common experience (in the West? I ask because Fabian is not so clear on this). Losing the sense that there is a divine standard of living can make us feel anguish, despair, and mostly, meaninglessness. All prudential and moral rules appear utterly arbitrary. And, indeed, psychological research suggests that this sense of despair, anguish, and arbitrariness tends to be utterly detrimental to one's subjective wellbeing. Fabian contends—along with some existential thinkers—that there is no point in attempting to discover some objective standard. After all, psychological research suggests that moral intuitions have evolutionary explanations, debunking them as serious guides to moral truth. However, one can construct one's own subjective standard. And doing so will give you a sense of meaning and purpose that you can take seriously.

The final element of Fabian's theory is the coalescence of being: the idea that we can harmonize our actual self (how we are now), our ideal self (how we want to be), and our ought self (how we feel we should be). Feeling like you need to be married by 30, wanting to pursue a career in philosophy, and currently being 29 without prospects of marriage and a career in philosophy can clearly make you feel bad about your life. Resolving this conflict, then, for instance, by getting rid of the idea that you need to get married, and starting a PhD in philosophy instead, is one way to find a coalescence of being.

So much for the theory. Does it succeed in its aims to develop a guiding theory for wellbeing research?

There is a lot to say here. Fabian is perhaps right that the analytic philosopher's need for clarity sometimes gets in the way of making progress. Still, there is one aspect Fabian deliberately undertheorizes that worries me. A question that easily comes up when we look at the SWB

production function that Fabian postulates is whether the different elements (hedonia, eudaimonia, and conscience) are supposed to be constituents or causes of SWB. Fabian thinks that this is not a very meaningful question:

[the] debate over what is “intrinsic” to well-being and what is merely “instrumental” is counterproductive. Mental states, preference satisfaction, nature fulfillment, and process are all integral to the model.
(7)

But this strikes me as problematic. Take hedonia. It seems fairly obvious that not feeling well is bad for someone, and that feeling well is good for someone. Even those who are not much inclined to hedonism take that to be true (see for instance Bradford 2021 for a discussion). However, the same is not obviously true for relatedness, or acting autonomously (or having a sense thereof). Often lacking these goods will not be good for someone, but there are plenty of instances to think of where that does not appear to be the case (I will happily feel unrelatedness in a group of extreme right-wing protesters). In other words, not all the elements of Fabian’s production function appear to be equal. If all these elements would be constituents of SWB, then this raises a complicated issue: how important are all these elements relative to each other? In other words, how do we get to know all the numerical values in the function? But it is not at all clear that all these variables are constituents.

To clarify, let’s build on Fabian’s analogy and imagine a function describing national GDP growth that would look like this:

$$\text{GDP growth} = f(\text{quality of economic policy; technological innovation; GDP growth of the central province})$$

A function like this may very well be a good proxy for GDP growth. However, it mixes in both causes (quality of economic policy and technological innovation) with constituents (GDP growth of central province). This may be fine for developing proxies, but it would look bad in an economic theory.

Fabian’s suggestion that this is not a very important issue is, I think, mistaken. Imagine that a group of individuals are suffering a bout of anhedonia. Treating anhedonia is difficult, but imagine that we can make the individuals feel like they have more autonomy over their life. Even

though none of the individuals will be able to feel positive emotions, they are now better able to act in accordance with their aims. It seems that if this does not make them feel better, this is little consolation. Perhaps Fabian will point out that this does not matter much in practice. These cases may be rare. When discussing the problem of immoral people who are still high on SWB, Fabian suggests that he takes these individuals to be exceptions. And he is fine if his theory only covers the general population. But there is an important reason that philosophers like to argue with counterexamples. Imagine that the response to Einstein's discovery of relativity would have been: 'this is an exceptional case, and we are fine if our theory of physics just covers the non-exceptional circumstances'. This would have been an obvious mistake, and we would have forgone a significant opportunity to learn about the laws of thermodynamics. This is why exceptions matter, especially for theorizing.

Moreover, the truth does matter in practice. The identification of wellbeing with preference-satisfaction has, according to many critics, led to an overemphasis on making people financially autonomous, without focusing on how people feel. If anything, wellbeing theory plays exactly this practical role: determining which aims deserve particular attention. Casting this aside as philosophical frivolity may not do justice to the importance of determining what exactly it is that makes our life good for us.

Another issue is the conception of SWB at the heart of the book. For a book that is called *A Theory of Subjective Wellbeing*, the book spends surprisingly few words discussing the nature of the concept of subjective wellbeing. It is how well an individual is doing according to their own standard. But there are more questions to be answered. Take a key issue: whether or not SWB is a mental state. Fabian writes: "I am even reluctant to describe SWB as a mental state because the self is embodied, and coalescence speaks to harmony between thought and action" (189). This is surprising considering the way that SWB is typically seen (as, indeed, a mental state). Later, discussing the benefits of SWB as a theory of wellbeing, it becomes clear that Fabian does see the concept as a mental state (for instance, in chapter 11, Fabian bites the bullet on the experience machine objection).

But also consider the issue of whether SWB can be compared across individuals. There is an excellent section on measurement (chapter 10) that discusses how the measurement of SWB faces the problem of scale norming: the same level of SWB can be judged differently in different con-

texts. Someone who has not lived a very good life, but then starts to improve can rate their life 7 twice, but because their perspective has shifted, that 7 might mean different things. This is indeed a difficult problem for comparing measures of SWB (see for instance Ingelström and van der Deijl 2021), however, if SWB just is how well someone is doing according to their own judgment, you may wonder if it is even conceptually possible to compare across individuals and time. Scale norming, then, is only a symptom of a deeper problem: that the concept does not allow for interpersonal comparisons. A judgment of ‘I am doing quite well’ of one person may reflect a less enjoyable life than someone else who would say ‘I am not doing very well’, but enjoyment is not the standard of wellbeing. Individual judgments are. We may say that person A is doing better according to their standard than B is doing according to theirs, but this does not tell us much about which life is better for them, if these standards are different. Can SWB ever escape the problem of scale norming, even outside of the context of measurement?

That being said, it takes intellectual courage to write a book touching on so many different research fields. I am sure that Sartre scholars (of which I am not) would find some objections to the way that Fabian discusses him, and I am sure that analytical moral philosophers will find the conclusion that no objective moral standards exist because our moral intuitions have evolutionary bases a little quick, and I am sure empirical SWB researchers may find flaws that I do not see. However, this is merely the result of undertaking such a courageous task. Fabian is right to say that the field of wellbeing research needs better theories, and *A Theory of Subjective Wellbeing* is an excellent step in the right direction.

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Willem van der Deijl is assistant professor of philosophy at Tilburg University. He was an editor of the Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics from 2014-2017.

Contact e-mail: <wjavanderdeijl@gmail.com>