

Consciousness Makes Things Matter

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ABSTRACT:

Consider two questions about welfare: (1) What makes one better or worse off?, and (2) What makes an entity the kind of thing that can be better or worse off in the first place? The first question concerns welfare goods; the second question concerns welfare subjects. This paper defends an answer to the welfare subjects question. My answer is that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. To explain why this view is dialectically defensible, I examine some underexplored metatheoretical questions about how a theory of welfare subjects ought to relate to a theory of welfare goods. I also defend the view from first-order objections appealing to death, plants, conscious subjects that necessarily have welfare level zero, and anti-experientialist theories of welfare goods.

Introduction

Here are two questions about welfare:

WELFARE GOODS: What makes one better or worse off?

WELFARE SUBJECTS: What makes an entity the kind of thing that can be better or worse off in the first place?

Both questions are connected to *welfare levels*, or the degrees to which an entity can be doing well or badly. But a theory of welfare goods explains what determines the welfare level of a given welfare subject, while a theory of welfare subjects explains which kinds of entities have welfare levels in the first place.

This paper defends an answer to the welfare subjects question. My answer is that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. I'll call this view the *phenomenal theory* of welfare subjects. On this view, the set of welfare subjects is identical to the set of conscious subjects, and any entity that is conscious thereby has a welfare level. Alongside developing the phenomenal theory, this paper also addresses some underexplored questions about how a theory of welfare subjects ought to relate to a theory of welfare goods and how to think about welfare level zero. In particular, I'll argue that a theory of welfare subjects need not be derived from a theory of welfare goods and that even subjects that necessarily have welfare level zero ought still count as welfare subjects.

§1 develops the phenomenal theory; §2 discusses some metatheoretical issues about how a theory of welfare subjects ought to relate to a theory of welfare goods; and §3 addresses first-order objections to the phenomenal theory.

§1 The Phenomenal Theory

Welfare is what we have in mind when we ask what makes one's life go best, whether one individual is better off than another, whether one has a life worth living, or whether one is doing well or badly. Oftentimes, welfare is taken to also concern whether one can be harmed or benefitted, what one wants for someone that one cares about, what is modulated in reward and punishment, how good things are from the position of a subject, and what is in a given individual's interest. Other terms that are used to denote the same phenomenon include 'well-being', 'prudential value', 'personal value', 'quality-of-life', and 'good-for'.

The basic categories of welfare include welfare goods, welfare subjects, and welfare levels. A *welfare good*¹ is something that makes a welfare subject intrinsically better off; a *welfare subject* is something that has a welfare value; a *welfare level* is how well or badly a welfare subject is doing. As an example, you are a welfare subject, and (depending on which theory of welfare goods you endorse) your welfare level will increase if (other things being equal) you have a pleasurable experience, or have some of your desires satisfied, or acquire some new knowledge. In brief: welfare goods determine welfare levels for welfare subjects.²

Some might initially find the idea of welfare levels mysterious. But in order to make sense of one subject doing better than another, or of a subject doing well or badly, or of a subject having a life worth living, we need the concept of a welfare level. If we were to eliminate appeal to welfare levels, then we would lack the conceptual resources needed to make sense of how good or bad something is for a subject, how much better or worse off that thing makes that subject, or anything else that requires ascribing any kind of structure to welfare.

Though I'll freely talk about welfare levels, I'll remain neutral on nearly all substantive questions about the structure of welfare levels.³ I'll leave open whether welfare levels are absolute or relational (i.e., whether welfare levels can be specified without comparing individuals), whether welfare levels are totally orderable (i.e., whether for any distinct welfare levels x_1 and x_2 , either $x_1 > x_2$ or $x_2 > x_1$), whether welfare levels are closed under addition (i.e., whether for any welfare levels x_1 and x_2 , there is some welfare level x_3 such that $x_3 = x_1 + x_2$), and whether welfare goods combine additively (i.e., whether the welfare level generated by a set of welfare goods is the sum of the welfare levels generated by each of those welfare goods individually). Later on, I'll discuss an objection that arises if we assume that welfare has a zero point, marking the threshold for a life worth living. But my main arguments can be accepted even by those who reject the idea of welfare level zero.

¹ There are also *welfare bads*, which make welfare subjects intrinsically worse off. For brevity, I'll frame my discussion only in terms of welfare goods, but my arguments generalize straightforwardly to welfare bads.

² To develop a complete theory of welfare, we would need not only theories of welfare goods and welfare subjects, but also a *welfare function*, which takes as input a set of welfare goods (and perhaps also a welfare subject) and outputs a welfare level.

³ See Griffin [1986] for discussion of the structure of welfare.

The question of what makes an entity a welfare subject is connected to the question of what grants an entity moral status. Since there is controversy on how exactly to characterize the relationship between welfare and morality and on the nature of moral status itself, most of my arguments will focus exclusively on welfare. However, nearly everyone agrees that being a welfare subject suffices for having moral status. Consider, for example, Crisp [2017]’s remark that “a theory which said that [welfare] just does not matter would be given no credence at all.” For the purposes of this paper, I’ll take this modest assumption for granted.⁴

In the welfare literature, there are a number of analyses of the concept of welfare. But these analyses typically focus on what it means for something to be a welfare good, leaving open which entities can be the beneficiaries of those goods. As examples, the *locative analysis* says that welfare goods are objective goods located in a given subject’s life, the *positional analysis* says that welfare goods are what determine how desirable it is to be in the position of a given subject, the *suitability analysis* says that welfare goods are whatever serve a given subject well, and the *rational care analysis* says that welfare goods are what one would desire for a subject that one rationally cares about.⁵ In each of these analyses, the notion of a “subject” appears in the analysans. Yet we can ask: which kinds of entities have lives, or have positions that are evaluable with respect to desirability, or can be served well or badly, or can be worthy of rational care? To answer these kinds of questions, we need a theory of welfare subjects.

§

The sense of ‘consciousness’ at stake in this paper is phenomenal consciousness. Most philosophers of consciousness nowadays think that there’s no conceptual

⁴ See Warren [1997] and Jaworska & Tannenbaum [2018] on moral status, Chang [2004] and Lauinger [2017] on welfare and morality, and Shepherd [2018] and Shepherd & Levy [2020] on consciousness and morality.

⁵ See Campbell [2017] for an overview of conceptual analyses of welfare. Campbell (and many others) seem to implicitly presume that an entity is a welfare subject just in case it can accrue some welfare goods or bads. I address this deflationist view in §2 and §3.

analysis of ‘phenomenal consciousness’ in more basic terms.⁶ But oftentimes the relevant sense of ‘consciousness’ is denoted with the following expressions: an entity is *conscious* just in case there is something it’s like to be that entity, just in case it has subjective experiences, just in case it has mental states that feel a certain way, or just in case it has a first-person point of view.

I’ll remain neutral on both metaphysical questions about the nature of consciousness and epistemological questions about how we can acquire knowledge of which entities are conscious. Though I’ll sometimes take for granted standard assumptions about which entities are in fact conscious (or not), this shouldn’t be taken as endorsing any particular theory of consciousness. Which theory of consciousness is correct will make a difference to which entities are welfare subjects. But I believe my defense of the phenomenal theory will hold no matter which theory of consciousness one favors.⁷

The central thesis of this paper can be expressed as a metaphysical analysis: what it is for an entity to be a welfare subject is for it to be conscious. As a consequence, the set of conscious subjects is identical to the set of welfare subjects. Given the definition of welfare subjects mentioned earlier, this is equivalent to saying that all and only conscious subjects have welfare levels. In other words, it’s for all and only conscious subjects that there is a fact of the matter about how well or badly that subject is doing, how good its life is, whether it’s better or worse off than another subject, and so forth. Over the rest of the paper, I’ll call this the *phenomenal theory* of welfare subjects:

The Phenomenal Theory

Consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject.

⁶ See Nagel [1974] and Chalmers [1995] for some classic discussions of consciousness. Block [1978: 281], invoking Louis Armstrong, has suggested that consciousness is like jazz: “If you got to ask, you ain’t never gonna get to know.”

⁷ Some might worry that combining the phenomenal theory with theories such as panpsychism will generate implausible results regarding the extension of ‘welfare subject’. However, if one is already sympathetic to both panpsychism and the phenomenal theory, then I suspect my response in §3 (in particular, to the Zero objection) will provide a satisfactory defense of these consequences.

According to the *capacity version* of the phenomenal theory, an entity is a welfare subject just in case it has the capacity for consciousness. According to the *state version* of the phenomenal theory, an entity is a welfare subject just in case it's in a conscious mental state. When you are in a dreamless sleep, you aren't in a conscious mental state, but you still have the capacity for consciousness. And there may be entities that have never yet been conscious, but who nevertheless have the capacity for consciousness. The state version of the phenomenal theory is quite radical; the capacity version is more modest. Though I think the state version merits philosophical attention, I'll focus on the capacity version. For the rest of the paper, whenever I talk about conscious subjects without qualification, I'll mean entities with the capacity for consciousness.⁸

The phenomenal theory leaves open a range of other questions about the relationship between consciousness and welfare. Consider, for example, the question of whether consciousness is intrinsically valuable. To say that consciousness is intrinsically valuable is to say that consciousness is a welfare good. Though I endorse the idea the consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject, I'm skeptical that consciousness is a welfare good.⁹ Consider, as another example, experientialism, or the thesis that every welfare good can be possessed only by conscious entities. Though those who favor experientialism might tend to also favor the phenomenal theory, I'll later explain why the connection is less straightforward than one might initially think.¹⁰

From my experience, the phenomenal theory strikes many people as attractive. In fact, many ethical discussions seem to invoke the phenomenal theory as a

⁸ I'll remain neutral on how to analyze the term 'capacity'. The notion of a capacity arises in many philosophical contexts, and the task of developing an analysis of capacities is a job for the metaphysician, rather than the ethicist. The options in the contemporary literature include appeals to dispositions, powers, and modal analyses. The proponent of the phenomenal theory may then simply adopt whichever general account turns out to be best.

⁹ Note that denying that consciousness is a welfare good is compatible with taking particular kinds of experiences (such as pleasures) to be welfare goods. See Lee, A [2018] for discussion.

¹⁰ There's also a stronger version of experientialism, according to which every welfare good is a conscious experience. See Griffin [1986] and van der Deijl [2019] for discussions of experientialism (in both senses).

starting point.¹¹ Yet there has been little systematic development of the view in the contemporary philosophical literature. Some have argued that sentience (i.e., the capacity to experience pleasure or pain) is what makes an entity a welfare subject,¹² but I'll later discuss the possibility of conscious subjects that aren't sentient. Those who have argued that consciousness has important connections to welfare tend to focus on welfare goods (rather than welfare subjects).¹³ And many have made passing remarks expressing sympathy for the phenomenal theory, but that still leaves a lacuna for an analysis and defense of the view.

This situation may strike some as puzzling. If the phenomenal theory is implicitly favored by many, then why has it not yet received an explicit defense in the contemporary literature? I suspect the reason is that the phenomenal theory strikes many as a basic datum that cannot be justified on further grounds. What could be said in its favor, beyond a direct appeal to one's grasp of what it is to be a welfare subject and what it is to be conscious? To some extent, I agree with this sentiment. I'll later explain why I think the phenomenal theory may best serve as a foundational claim in a theory of welfare, rather than as a theorem derived from more fundamental axioms. Given this, I take the main tasks of this paper to consist in analyzing the phenomenal theory and defending it from objections, rather than persuading those who are antecedently skeptical of the view.

At the same time, it's worth articulating the principal points that favor the phenomenal theory. Speaking metaphorically, even if it's true that the phenomenal theory cannot itself be constructed out of other building blocks, we can still evaluate

¹¹ Some notable recent examples include Lin [2020] and van der Deijl [2020], who both start by noting that the phenomenal theory is widely accepted and then attempt to derive it from a theory of welfare goods. I'll discuss their arguments in more detail in §2.

¹² See Bentham [1907], Singer [1993], DeGrazia [1996, 2020], and Bernstein [1998] for some examples. Note that authors who discuss sentience tend to be focused more on morality than on welfare, though it's often implicit that sentience is also a ground of welfare subjecthood.

¹³ As some examples, Siewert [1998] argues that many kinds of experiences are intrinsically valuable, Nagel [1970] argues that consciousness itself is intrinsically valuable, Crisp [2006], Bramble [2016], and Bradley [2019] defend hedonistic theories of well-being, Kriegel [2019] argues that consciousness plays a central role in any theory of well-being, van der Deijl [2019] argues for a (non-hedonistic) experientialist theory of welfare goods, and Lin [2020] discusses the idea that all differences in welfare levels must be due to differences in experiences.

how well it fits with the rest of the overall structure. In what follows, I'll explain why the phenomenal theory strikes me as attractive, whether it's treated as a basic datum or as a claim derivable from more fundamental principles.

§

Many people have the intuition that consciousness is ethically significant.¹⁴ But there's disagreement over how exactly to precisify that intuition. A natural idea is that consciousness is ethically significant because consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. This claim renders consciousness ethically significant both because the question of which things are welfare subjects is itself a part of the subject-matter of ethics, and because of plausible connections between welfare and morality. More specifically, if we grant the common idea that welfare subjecthood suffices for moral status, then the phenomenal theory has implications not only for which entities can be better or worse off, but also for which entities matter morally.

One might object that the ethical significance of consciousness could instead be explained by taking consciousness to be either necessary or sufficient for some welfare goods. But these alternative explanations are problematic. If consciousness is sufficient for some welfare goods, then any entity that is conscious is thereby in possession of some welfare goods. The most natural way to justify this claim is to take consciousness itself to be a welfare good.¹⁵ However, while the claim that consciousness is ethically significant is widely accepted, the claim that consciousness is a welfare good is controversial. In fact, even those who deny that consciousness is a welfare good tend to agree that consciousness is ethically significant.¹⁶

On the other hand, the claim that consciousness is necessary for some welfare goods is uncontroversial, since only conscious entities can have pleasures and nearly everyone agrees that pleasure is a welfare good. But then consider the

¹⁴ See Sumner [1996], Siewert [1998], Levy & Savulescu [2009], Rosati [2009], Glannon [2016], Cutter [2017], Shepherd [2018], Kammerer [2019], and Kriegel [2019] for various expressions of the idea that consciousness is ethically significant. For some dissenting views, see Caruthers [1999], Levy [2014 b], and Lee, G [2019].

¹⁵ Strictly speaking, one could think that every conscious experience is valuable while denying that consciousness itself is valuable. But my argument applies to this kind of view as well.

¹⁶ See Glannon [2016] and Lee, A [2018] for some examples.

following fact: for all (or at least most) welfare goods g , only entities made of atoms can possess g . Yet nobody thinks that whether an entity is made of atoms is a matter of ethical significance. This means that the mere fact that consciousness is necessary for the possession of some welfare goods is insufficient for explaining the datum that consciousness is ethically significant. The better explanation is the one offered by the phenomenal theory: consciousness is ethically significant because consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject.

Consider next a widely-endorsed ethical belief: if one dies, then one ceases to be a welfare subject. There's variance on what is meant by 'death', but the most common definitions of 'death' entail that if one dies, then one loses the capacity for consciousness. In fact, it's standard in philosophical contexts (as opposed to medical contexts) to simply define 'death' as the permanent loss of the capacity for consciousness.¹⁷ Therefore, unless we understand 'death' in a non-standard way, the aforementioned ethical claim will entail that if one dies, then it's both the case that (1) one loses the capacity for consciousness, and (2) one ceases to be a welfare subject. From there, it's trivial to see how the phenomenal theory accounts for the connection between death and loss of welfare subjecthood.

One might object that the datum about death could instead be explained by the idea that if one dies, then one ceases to exist, and that if one ceases to exist, then one thereby ceases to be a welfare subject. However, even philosophers who deny that death entails non-existence can accept that death entails cessation of welfare subjecthood. Consider a philosopher who endorses a biological theory of personal identity, where one is identical to one's body, and suppose we understand death as the permanent loss of the capacity for consciousness. If one is identical to one's body and one's body still exists after death, then one still exists after death. Yet it's obvious that endorsing a biological theory of personal identity doesn't force one to deny that death entails the cessation of welfare subjecthood. This indicates that the explanation provided by the phenomenal theory is more robust than the explanation appealing to loss of existence.

If the phenomenal theory is true (and if ethical inquiry is at least somewhat truth-tracking), then we should expect debate about whether Fs are conscious to

¹⁷ See Nagel [1970] and McMahan [1988]. A similar idea is invoked in discussions of the ethical significance of zombification, such as in Siewert [1998] and Kriegel [2019].

yield debate about whether Fs are welfare subjects, and ethical debates about conscious entities to differ from ethical debates about non-conscious entities.¹⁸ Both these predictions are reflective of contemporary applied ethics. In support of the first prediction, consider our uncertainty about the ethical statuses of entities such as simple organisms, embryos, artificial intelligences, persistent vegetative state patients, and cerebral organoids. In support of the second prediction, consider how there's abundant debate about the ethics of eating animals yet little debate about the ethics of eating plants.¹⁹

§

I've focused thus far on identifying how the phenomenal theory explains and fits with some commonly endorsed ethical ideas. I'll focus now on some more theoretical considerations for the phenomenal theory.

Towards the beginning of the paper, I identified a number of theoretical roles that characterize the concept of welfare: welfare is what we have in mind when we ask whether an individual has a life worth living, whether one individual is better off than another, or how good it is to be in the position of a given subject. The phenomenal theory enables us to conserve all these theoretical roles. The kinds of questions mentioned above are sensible whenever we are talking about conscious entities. By contrast, some of these questions seem inapplicable to non-conscious entities. As examples, it seems infelicitous to ask whether a tree has a life worth living, or whether you are better or worse off than a corporation such as Microsoft, or how good it would be to be in the position of a non-conscious artificial intelligence such as AlphaGo. This is evidence that when we talk about the "welfare" of non-conscious entities such as plants, corporations, or AIs, we are not invoking the full-

¹⁸ Note that this second prediction is *not* that we should expect *no* debate about the ethical status of entities that are clearly not conscious. Instead, the prediction is that there will be asymmetries between the two sets of debates, since some ethical issues that apply to welfare subjects don't apply to non-welfare subjects.

¹⁹ See, as examples, Mikhalevich and Powell [2020] on invertebrate minds, Doggett [2018] on vegetarianism, Guenin [2008] on embryos, Müller [2020] on artificial intelligence, Kahane & Savulescu [2009] on persistent vegetative state patients, Shepherd [2018] on cerebral organoids, and List & Pettit [2011] on group agents.

blooded sense of ‘welfare’ that we have in mind when talking about the welfare of conscious entities.²⁰

A metatheoretical desideratum for a theory of welfare subjects is for the theory to identify a unified ground of welfare subjecthood. If we rejected this desideratum, then it would be easy to construct a theory of welfare subjects that generates intuitive predictions but that has a disjunctive structure, where what it is to be a welfare subject is to be either an F, or a G, or ... a Z. A disjunctive theory would be unsatisfying, at least if there is no explanation of what F and G and so forth have in common that makes them all grounds of welfare subjecthood. If we accept this metatheoretical desideratum, then we constrain the space of possible theories. It then becomes a substantive challenge to develop a theory of welfare subjects that satisfies this desideratum while still faring well with respect to other factors, such as extensional adequacy, fit with other components of our ethical theories, and (as I’ll discuss later) satisfactory answers to challenges. My arguments thus far (and that will follow) aim to illustrate how the phenomenal theory does well on all of these factors.

I’ll end with a motivation that’s speculative but that strikes me as significant. Both consciousness and welfare are subject-relative properties: consciousness concerns how things feel *for* a subject, whereas welfare concerns how good things are *for* a subject. A natural thought is that to be the kind of entity for which things can be going better or worse, one must be a subject in a more basic sense. I don’t know whether this idea can be precisified in more systematic terms, but similar thoughts have been invoked by other philosophers. Sumner [1996: 43] says that a “welfare subject...must also be a subject in a more robust sense—the locus of a...unified and continuous mental life”; Kahane & Savulescu [2009], when addressing the question of how it is that “certain states of affairs matter, not impersonally, but in relation to someone,” say that “possession of consciousness—of a subjective standpoint—might be a general condition for an entity’s having interests”; and Rosati [2009] says that “we regard as welfare subjects...only those beings who...have a point of view” and that “we do not talk in terms of the welfare of a living thing *unless there is a way things can be for it.*” The common thread in these lines of thought expresses what I take to be the most fundamental motivation for the phenomenal theory.

²⁰ I’ll discuss this point in more detail in §3, under the “plant objection.” For some similar lines of thoughts, see Sumner [1996: 43], Rosati [2009], Bradley [2015: 9], and Campbell [2017].

§2 Welfare Subjects and Welfare Goods

The principal goal of this paper is to develop a first-order theory of welfare subjects. But, at least from my own experience, addressing this first-order issue often leads to metatheoretical questions about what a theory of welfare is supposed to look like in the first place. More specifically, some might think that properly justifying a theory of welfare subjects requires not only identifying its intuitive appeal and explanatory benefits (as done earlier), but also explaining how the theory of welfare subjects follows from a plausible theory of welfare goods.

In fact, this line of thought plays a prominent role in several recent papers that discuss the relationship between consciousness and welfare subjecthood. Lin [2020] and van der Deijl [2020] both argue that the connection between consciousness and welfare is best explained by *experientialism* about welfare goods, or the thesis that every welfare good can be possessed only by conscious entities; Bradford [2022], on the other hand, questions the idea that consciousness is necessary for welfare subjecthood. More specifically, van der Deijl argues that the phenomenal theory itself is best explained by the accepting that differences in welfare must be due to differences in experiences, Lin argues that the thesis that consciousness is necessary for welfare subjecthood is best explained by taking all welfare goods to have experiential components, and Bradford argues that the idea that consciousness is necessary for welfare subjecthood is untenable because some welfare goods can be accrued by non-conscious entities. Though these authors argue for different positions, the common thread is that they all assume that a theory of welfare goods is explanatorily prior to a theory of welfare subjects.

Personally, I'm sympathetic to experientialist theories of welfare goods. But I think the dialectical picture is more complex than what the aforementioned authors suggest. In what follows, I first articulate some general reasons for caution about the idea that theories of welfare subjects must always be derivable from theories of welfare goods. Then I raise some specific challenges to the idea that experientialism explains the phenomenal theory.

Deflationism

Why think that theories of welfare goods are prior to theories of welfare subjects? The most appealing justification I can think of is the following: while a theory of

welfare subjects can be derived from a theory of welfare goods, a theory of welfare goods cannot be derived from a theory of welfare subjects. However, the appearance of asymmetry may be an artifact of convention.

To derive a theory of welfare subjects from a theory of welfare goods, one must appeal to *deflationism* about welfare subjects, or the thesis that what it is to be a welfare subject is to be an entity that can accrue welfare goods (or bads). If deflationism is true, then any answer to the welfare goods question automatically yields an answer to the welfare subjects question: the objective-list theory would entail that welfare subjects are entities that can have knowledge, friendship, and pleasure, desire-satisfactionism would entail that welfare subjects are entities that can have desires, and hedonism would entail that welfare subjects are entities that can feel pleasure. In philosophical discussions of welfare, deflationism is sometimes a hidden premise.²¹ This is particularly evident when we observe that theories of welfare goods are often characterized as theories of welfare simpliciter. Yet to my knowledge, there has been almost no explicit defense of deflationism in the philosophical literature.²²

I won't attempt to argue that deflationism is false (nor true). Instead, I'll argue merely that deflationism isn't obviously true. That modest claim matters for the dialectic. If deflationism is obviously true, then justifying the phenomenal theory requires showing how it follows from a theory of welfare goods. If deflationism isn't obviously true, then that's no longer a condition on arguing for the phenomenal theory. My goal, in what follows, will be to argue that deflationism isn't obviously true. Instead, it's a substantive thesis that stands in need of justification.

Consider some philosophically coherent theories of welfare that are incompatible with deflationism. These include certain *variabilist* theories of welfare goods (according to which welfare goods are subject-relative),²³ *restrictive* theories of

²¹ A good example is Campbell [2016]'s overview of the concept of well-being.

²² A notable exception is van der Deijl [2020], who acknowledges that deflationism is substantive but argues for the thesis by appeal to a theoretical coherence criterion. For reasons that will become apparent in this section and the next, I think that such a criterion is too weak to justify deflationism.

²³ See Lin [2018] for a criticism of welfare variabilism. I find Lin's arguments persuasive (so I don't endorse variabilism), but my point is that argumentation of the kind developed in Lin's paper is what is required to show that variabilism is implausible.

welfare subjects (according to which not all entities that can accrue welfare goods are welfare subjects), and *permissive* theories of welfare subjects (according to which not all welfare subjects can accrue welfare goods). As examples, consider a variabilist who thinks that carnal pleasure is a welfare good for animals but not for humans (even though humans can experience carnal pleasure), or a restrictivist who thinks that even plants and corporations have desires but that only conscious entities are made better off by desire-satisfaction, or a permissivist who thinks that conscious entities that necessarily cannot accrue any welfare goods or bads still have welfare level zero (a view I'll discuss more in §3). Perhaps these views will ultimately all turn out to be false. But rejecting such views requires argument. That indicates that deflationism is a substantive claim; we ought not simply take it for granted.

To derive a theory of welfare subjects from a theory of welfare goods, one needs deflationism as an auxiliary premise. But once we permit appeals to auxiliary premises, it's likewise possible to derive a theory of welfare goods from a theory of welfare subjects. Suppose, for example, that one accepts (1) some theory of which things are good simpliciter, and (2) the thesis that what it is for g to be a welfare good is for g to be a good simpliciter and possessed by a welfare subject. With these background assumptions, any answer to the welfare subjects question automatically yields an answer to the welfare goods question. Now, obviously one could argue that one of these claims is implausible. But the present point is that deflationism cannot be justified simply on the grounds that a theory of welfare subjects can be derived, with auxiliary premises, from a theory of welfare goods.

Experientialism

Since deflationism is a substantive thesis that remains under-analyzed, we ought not automatically assume that theories of welfare goods are prior to theories of welfare subjects. But even if we were to accept deflationism, the connection between the phenomenal theory and experientialism would still be less straightforward than one might initially think.

A first challenge concerns extensional adequacy. Consider a conscious subject—Zero—who cannot accrue any welfare goods (or bads). Suppose, for example, that Zero's only possible conscious experiences are experiences of gray (where those experiences are neither pleasant nor unpleasant), and that Zero entirely lacks capacities for desire, knowledge, or any other standard candidates for welfare goods.

Since Zero is conscious, the phenomenal theory entails that Zero is a welfare subject. For the moment, let's set aside the question of whether that consequence is plausible—I'll address that question in §3. For now, the relevant point is that even experientialism supplemented with deflationism doesn't entail the phenomenal theory, since the latter counts Zero as a welfare subject while the former doesn't.

This challenge is anticipated by van der Deijl [2020], who accepts experientialism, the phenomenal theory, and deflationism, and who contends that subjects like Zero count as welfare subjects because they possess *welfare neutrals*.²⁴ van der Deijl says little about the concept of a welfare neutral. But let's assume that a welfare neutral is like a welfare good, except that instead of increasing one's welfare level it leaves one's welfare level the same: for example, anhedonic experiences are candidates for welfare neutrals. Is adding a category of welfare neutrals a credible move in developing a theory of welfare? Perhaps the answer will turn out to be 'yes', but to my knowledge there has been no philosophical analysis of the concept of a welfare neutral. Moreover, it's not obvious that taking the notion of a welfare neutral as basic is ultimately better than taking the notion of a welfare subject as basic. And strictly speaking, this sort of approach entails that deflationism, as defined earlier, is false: one must instead adopt the more speculative thesis that what it is to be a welfare subject is to be an entity that can accrue welfare goods or bads *or neutrals*. Given this, it's not so simple to derive the phenomenal theory from experientialism.

A second challenge concerns explanatory unity. Let *pluralistic experientialism* be any experientialist theory that posits more than one basic welfare good. If one favors pluralistic experientialism, then it's natural to ask why every welfare good is possessable only by conscious subjects. Let *impure experientialism* be any experientialist theory that takes some welfare goods to have non-experiential components. If one favors impure experientialism, then it's natural to ask why every welfare good has an experiential component. Now, obviously explanations must end somewhere: any first-order theory must take some claims as basic. But if it's legitimate to ask for an explanation of the phenomenal theory, then it seems likewise legitimate to ask for an explanation of experientialism.

²⁴ van der Deijl's term is 'neutral good'. I prefer the term 'welfare neutral', both because it better fits with other welfare terminology and because it's less oxymoronic.

Let me offer a speculative hypothesis, if only to exemplify why I think the philosophical space is underexplored. Consider the following principle: in order for g to count as a welfare good for welfare subject x , g must affect whatever property makes x a welfare subject. This principle isn't trivial, since there are plenty of things that can affect an entity without affecting the property that makes that entity a welfare subject: for example, consider the microphysical interactions occurring in your liver. Moreover, different theories of welfare subjects generate different predictions given this principle: for example, a desire-based theory of welfare subjects may predict that in order for g to count as a welfare good, g must affect your desires (or their satisfaction). If we accept this condition, and if we also suppose that what it is to be a welfare subject is to be a conscious subject, then we acquire an answer to the explanatory unity question mentioned above. The answer is that experientialism is true because taking a welfare good to be possessable by non-conscious entities would violate the principle outlined above. The reader may decide for themselves whether the principle is plausible, but it's clear that it at least merits consideration. Yet, notice that this answer reverses the order of explanation: the phenomenal theory is used to explain experientialism, rather than the other way around!

These sorts of considerations illustrate why the dialectical situation is complex. Though we have a refined understanding of the theoretical space for first-order issues about welfare goods, we have a crude understanding of the theoretical space for metatheoretical issues about how a theory of welfare goods should relate to a theory of welfare subjects. Now, one way of making progress would be to address these metatheoretical issues directly. However, I think another route for progress is to simply develop defensible theories of welfare subjects. We don't normally take progress on first-order issues to require settling all the background metatheoretical matters; it's possible to make progress in ethics, metaphysics, and science without settling metaethics, metametaphysics, and the philosophy of science. By similar lights, we can make progress on first-order theories of welfare subjects without settling the metatheory of welfare.

§3 First-Order Objections

The rest of this paper returns to the first-order issues by defending the phenomenal theory from a number of objections. The first—the anti-experientialism objection—is that the phenomenal theory is incompatible with popular theories of welfare

goods. The second—the zero objection—is that conscious entities that necessarily have welfare level zero are not welfare subjects. The third—the plant objection—is that non-conscious entities (such as plants) can be welfare subjects. The fourth—the death objection—is that one can be harmed even after death.

The Anti-Experientialism Objection

Let *anti-experientialism* be the view that some welfare goods can be possessed by non-conscious entities. The anti-experientialism objection claims that (1) anti-experientialism is true, and (2) if anti-experientialism is true, then the phenomenal theory is false.

How popular is anti-experientialism? Those sympathetic to hedonism will obviously reject the thesis. For those sympathetic to desire-satisfactionism or an objective list theory, the question of anti-experientialism turns on questions about whether desires and (say) knowledge can be attained without consciousness. The answers to these questions aren't obvious. A number of recent philosophical discussions challenge the idea that desire and knowledge are independent of consciousness.²⁵ And even if we were to agree that non-conscious entities can have desires and knowledge in some sense, we would have to ensure that the kinds of desire and knowledge attainable by non-conscious entities are in fact welfare goods. These considerations indicate that anti-experientialism is itself unobvious. Nevertheless, suppose for the sake of argument that anti-experientialism is true.

Even if anti-experientialism is true, it doesn't follow that the phenomenal theory is false. Since anti-experientialism is a claim about welfare goods, an argument from anti-experientialism to the negation of the phenomenal theory once again requires deflationism as an auxiliary premise.²⁶ And once we recognize the role of

²⁵ Brogaard & Chudnoff [2020] argue that empirical knowledge requires consciousness, Smithies [2019: 17] argues that all knowledge requires consciousness, Stampe [1987], Strawson [1994], Oddie [2005], and Smithies & Weiss [2019] argue that desire requires consciousness, Roberts [2009] argues that friendship requires consciousness, Kriegel [2019] argues that consciousness plays an important role in every major theory of welfare goods, and Lin [2020] argues that every welfare good at least partially involves consciousness.

²⁶ Note that both deflationism and anti-experientialism are compatible with the phenomenal theory (so long as one doesn't endorse the other thesis). In fact, Sumner [1996: 43, 127–128]

deflationism in the anti-experientialism objection, it becomes evident that anti-experientialism is compatible with the phenomenal theory. In response, some might object that accepting both anti-experientialism and the phenomenal theory leads to an untenable picture. To accept both theses, one would have to accept the following: only conscious entities have welfare levels, welfare levels are determined by welfare goods, yet even some non-conscious entities can have welfare goods. This result may strike some as philosophically dubious.²⁷ However, consider an analogy: only entities bound by a gravitational force have weight, weight is determined by mass, yet even entities that aren't bound by a gravitational force have mass. This case is structurally analogous to the situation described above, yet there's obviously no pressure to reject the claim that only entities bound by a gravitational force have weight.

Is there a disanalogy between the weight/mass case and the welfare levels/welfare goods case? One response is to point out that weight is determined not only by an object's mass, but also by whether it's bound by a gravitational force. However, one could likewise say that an entity's welfare level is determined not only by its welfare goods, but also by whether it's conscious. Another response is to contend that weight is a relational property whereas welfare isn't. However, we need to be careful about the meaning of 'relational' here. Weight is relational in that an object's weight is determined extrinsically, but weight is also non-relational in that weight ascriptions are monadic (particular objects have weights, rather than ordered pairs of objects and gravitational fields). By similar lights, welfare may be relational in the sense of being determined extrinsically (as anyone who accepts desire-satisfaction or knowledge as welfare goods would think), but welfare is also non-relational in that welfare ascriptions are monadic (particular welfare subjects have welfare levels, rather than ordered pairs of welfare subjects and sets of welfare goods). The upshot is that anti-experientialists who wish to reject the phenomenal theory need to state their reasons: merely appealing to anti-experientialism itself isn't enough.

seems to accept both anti-experientialism and the phenomenal theory, and van der Deijl [2020] accepts both deflationism and the phenomenal theory.

²⁷ See Bradford [2022] for an example of the anti-experientialism objection.

The Zero Objection

Previously, I described a conscious subject—Zero—who cannot necessarily accrue any welfare goods (or bads). If the phenomenal theory is true, then Zero is a welfare subject. The zero objection claims that Zero isn't a welfare subject.

Speaking for myself, I'm somewhat skeptical that Zero is metaphysically possible. The question isn't merely whether it's possible for a creature to have a cognitive architecture that precludes any pleasant or unpleasant experiences. Rather, the question turns on controversial issues about the metaphysics of identity across possible worlds. I find it natural to think that even if it's psychologically impossible for Zero to have any pleasant or unpleasant experiences (or any other mental states that generate welfare goods or bads), such experiences would still be metaphysically possible. Moreover, I'm sympathetic to the previously mentioned idea that Zero's experiences would still count as "welfare neutrals." The viability of the Zero objection requires taking stances on these controversial issues.

Suppose we set aside these metaphysical concerns. To address the objection, we need to consider the difference between having welfare level zero and lacking a welfare level altogether. As an analogy, consider electric charge, which (like welfare) has positive, negative, and zero values. Most physical objects can have either positive or negative charge, but some—such as photons—necessarily have zero charge.²⁸ Suppose we are developing an account of which kinds of entities have charge values, and imagine someone who reasons from the premise that photons cannot have either positive or negative charge to the conclusion that photons lack charge values. That line of reasoning is fallacious: photons have zero charge (rather than no charge value at all). By contrast, it would be a mistake to say that a gravitational field or the color red or the number three have zero charge—instead, their charge value is undefined. It's easy to see how analogous examples can be generated using other quantities that have zero values, such as mass (gluons necessarily have zero mass, but the mass of love is undefined), height-above-sea-level (the surface of the sea is zero meters above sea level, but the height-above-sea-level of the solar system is undefined),

²⁸ I favor the view that any particle with non-zero charge would thereby not be a photon. Some may prefer a more permissive view about the modal properties of elementary particles, which may lead to the result that photons possibly have non-zero charge. But such a view would likely also lead to the result that Zero possibly has a non-zero welfare level.

and temperature (a universe with no kinetic energy is zero kelvin, but the temperature of time is undefined). Whereas in some cases ascriptions of value zero seem truth-evaluable, in other cases such ascriptions seem to be category mistakes.

One might object that there are some quantities, such as number of children, where to have a zero value just is to lack a positive (or negative) value. Consider: for any α , if there doesn't exist a β such that α bears the parent relation to β , then α has zero children. However, this observation simply indicates that we should distinguish between positive properties (which entail the possession of some feature) and negative properties (which entail the absence of some feature). As examples, having zero charge, zero mass, or zero temperature are arguably positive properties, whereas having zero children, zero prime factors, or zero moons are credible candidates for being negative properties. Whenever having a zero value is a positive property, we can make sense of the difference between an entity having value zero along that quantity versus an entity lacking a value along that quantity altogether. This enables us to justifiably say that having zero charge is distinct from lacking a charge value while also allowing that anything that doesn't have a positive number of children thereby has zero children.²⁹

Now let's return to Zero. When we consider welfare, we can easily make sense of the difference between having welfare level zero and lacking a welfare level altogether. It is only for entities that have welfare levels for which we can ask how well the entity is doing, whether it has a life worth living, whether it's better off than another entity, and so forth. When we calculate the average welfare in a world, we ought to factor in entities with welfare level zero (while excluding entities that lack welfare levels). These considerations indicate that welfare level zero is a positive property (rather than a negative property).³⁰ The question then is whether Zero has welfare level zero or lacks a welfare level altogether. Since it's natural to say that

²⁹ Some may disagree and contend that having zero children, zero prime factors, and zero moons are all positive properties. On this view, the sentence 'the number three has zero children' is false (rather than merely an odd thing to say). However, this disagreement is largely irrelevant to this paper, since the crucial point for my arguments is that having welfare level zero is a positive property.

³⁰ Bradley [2009: 108] argues that welfare level zero is a negative property, since one can be rationally indifferent between non-existence versus a permanent coma. Hershenov [2007] argues that such indifferences are compatible with welfare level zero being a positive property.

Zero has a life that is neither good nor bad, that Zero's life is on the threshold between a life worth living and a life not worth living, and that Zero's life is worse than the life of someone in paradise but better than the life of someone in hell, we have reason to think that Zero has welfare level zero. Since anything with a welfare level is a welfare subject, we have reason to think that Zero is a welfare subject.³¹

Are there countervailing reasons against counting Zero as a welfare subject? A first objection is that Zero isn't a welfare subject because it cannot be better or worse off.³² But then consider Happy, who is just like Zero except that its only possible experience is a state of pleasure. Though Happy cannot be better or worse off, it's still clearly a welfare subject: if we wish to determine the average level of welfare in the world, then Happy's welfare would factor into that calculation. A second objection is that the fact that Zero necessarily has welfare level zero is itself a reason for denying that Zero is a welfare subject. But then consider Balanced, who is also just like Zero except that its only possible experience is a state involving both pleasure and pain (such that the goodness of the pleasure exactly balances out the badness of the pain). Though Balanced necessarily has welfare level zero, it's likewise clearly still a welfare subject.

I'll end with one more reason for favoring the result that Zero is a welfare subject. The argument appeals to continuity considerations. Imagine a spectrum of cases, where on the left side are subjects like Happy, in the middle is Zero, on the right side are subjects like Unhappy (who is always in a state of pain), and where the ordinal position of a subject corresponds to its valence value (so that subjects further to the right have more unpleasant experiences). All subjects to the left of Zero are welfare subjects and all subjects to the right of Zero are welfare subjects. Therefore, to deny that Zero is a welfare subject, one would have to accept a discontinuity in welfare subjecthood with respect to this spectrum. While genuine discontinuities sometimes occur in reality, I don't see any compelling reason to think that this ought to be understood as such a case. The better option is to accept that Zero is a welfare

³¹ If there are welfare neutrals, as discussed in §2, then it's plausible that Zero's experiences are welfare neutrals. In that case, we have further reason to take Zero to be a welfare subject.

³² At the beginning of the paper, I characterized a welfare subject as 'the kind of thing that can be better or worse off'. This description was intended to fix the referent of 'welfare subject', rather than to define the term.

subject while identifying the ways in which Zero is a special case. Just as photons are special cases of charge subjects and the number zero is a special case of an integer, Zero is a special case of a welfare subject.

The Plant Objection

Plants are the most prominent examples of non-conscious entities that are candidates for being welfare subjects.³³ But plants probably aren't conscious, so any reasons for taking plants to be welfare subjects are also reasons for doubting the phenomenal theory.

Why think that plants are welfare subjects? The most common justifications appeal to the fact that plants can flourish (e.g., by receiving sunlight) and flounder (e.g., by being uprooted) and to the idea that plants have interests (such as growing and spreading their seeds). The view that plants are welfare subjects also seems supported by our welfare language: it's natural, for example, to talk about what is good or bad for a plant. The problem is that these observations overgeneralize. Many kinds of entities, such as corporations,³⁴ livers, and beehives, satisfy the criteria above yet are plausibly not welfare subjects. It's in the interest of a corporation to increase revenue and attract investors; a beehive flourishes by preserving the structural integrity of the hive and maintaining a healthy population of bees; and one's liver is doing well when it's healthy and free of toxins and badly when one consumes excessive amounts of alcohol. In response, one might contend that welfare talk about corporations, beehives, and livers is metaphorical. But anyone who favors that response must explain why we shouldn't likewise think that welfare talk about plants is also metaphorical.

³³ See Varner [1998] and Marder [2013] for endorsements of the idea that plants are welfare subjects. See Attfield [1983], Taylor [1981], and Agar [2001] for views that seem sympathetic.

³⁴ A number of philosophers have argued that group agents may have moral status. But these discussions tend to focus on questions about rights or responsibility, rather than on welfare subjecthood. As far as I know, no philosophers in the group agents literature who have explicitly endorsed the claim that group agents are welfare subjects, but some have explicitly rejected that claim. For some recent discussions, see List & Pettit [2011: 182], who suggest that "something is good only if it is good for...sentient beings," and Lovett & Riedener [forthcoming: 11], who say that "[o]rganizations do not have welfare" because "organizations are not phenomenally conscious."

The objector might respond by identifying a criterion that demarcates plants and animals (including humans) from corporations, livers, and beehives. The most obvious criterion is that plants and animals are organisms whereas corporations, livers, and beehives aren't. But suppose there were artificial intelligences that had capacities for pleasure, desire, and knowledge yet lacked the reproductive and metabolic capacities characteristic of organisms. Or consider bacteria, which are organisms but plausibly not welfare subjects. These cases indicate that being an organism is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a welfare subject. To develop an extensionally satisfactory account of welfare subjecthood, the objector must find another criterion that includes plants, animals, and sophisticated artificial intelligences yet excludes corporations, livers, beehives, and bacteria.

A more radical response is to endorse an extremely permissive view of welfare subjects. Consider, for example, the view that any entity that we talk about using welfare language counts as a welfare subject. Though this might be a case where one person's modus ponens is another's modus tollens, there's also some danger of a verbal dispute. I agree that one can use the term 'welfare subject' in a permissive way, but I think there would remain an important difference between the sense of 'welfare' we have in mind when talking about plants, corporations, livers, beehives, and bacteria versus the sense of 'welfare' we have in mind when talking about conscious entities.³⁵ To elicit that asymmetry, consider how it's not clear we can meaningfully ask whether a corporation's welfare is above the threshold for a life worth living, or how it's plausible that animals can be harmed in some ways that are normatively distinct from any ways that plants can be harmed. My core aim is to argue that there's a normative joint between conscious entities and non-conscious entities. If the objector disagrees with this, then we may have identified a divergence in fundamental intuitions. But if not, then some of the disagreement may be merely verbal.

It's worth noting that those who have argued that plants are welfare subjects are often motivated by the intuition that plants can be objects of moral concern. Although one way to justify that idea is to contend that plants are welfare subjects, it's also possible to think that plants can be objects of moral concern while endorsing the phenomenal theory. Consider, for example, someone who thinks that (1) plants

³⁵ The idea that welfare language may be polysemous has been discussed by many philosophers, including Sumner [1996: 43], Rosati [2009], Bradley [2015: 9], and Campbell [2017].

are intrinsically valuable, and (2) it's morally bad (other things being equal) to destroy intrinsically valuable things. On such a view, the justification for taking plants to be objects of moral concern doesn't necessitate that plants are welfare subjects. In light of this, I suspect that at least some philosophers who care about plants have intuitions that are ultimately compatible with the phenomenal theory.

The Death Objection

The death objection claims that one can be made better or worse off even after death, where *death* may be defined here as the permanent loss of the capacity for consciousness. Suppose that I slander you after you die, rendering your reputation unjustly damaged. On some theories of welfare, I've thereby made you worse off, even though you are dead.³⁶ Since only welfare subjects can be made worse off, it seems to follow that consciousness isn't necessary for welfare subjecthood.

To evaluate the death objection, we must ask whether or not you continue to exist after death. Consider first the version of the death objection that says you cease to exist after death. Then we can ask: which entity is made worse off? Since we are stipulating that it is you whose welfare is affected, that the harm occurs after your death, and that you cease to exist after death, there is only one plausible answer: your past self (before your death). But that past self was conscious, so this version of the death objection is compatible with the phenomenal theory.

Is it possible to deny that existence is a requirement for being a welfare subject? Suppose you think that we are morally obligated to mitigate the effects of climate change because of how it will affect the welfare levels of future people that don't yet exist. Then it may seem that existence isn't a requirement for being a welfare subject, since we are considering the welfare levels of people that don't yet exist. However, the conclusion that we have moral obligations towards future people is justified by the premise that the future people *will be* welfare subjects (rather than the premise that they *are now* welfare subjects). But the claim that the future people will be welfare subjects is compatible with the principle that existence is a requirement for welfare subjecthood. Future people aren't yet welfare subjects (since they don't yet exist), but they will be welfare subjects (since they will be conscious).³⁷

³⁶ See Blatti [2012] and Kagan [2012] for some discussions of death's harm.

³⁷ A similar point can be made about non-actual people (who exist only counterfactually).

The other version of the death objection holds that one continues to exist after death. But it's hard to know how to make sense of this if we define death as the permanent cessation of consciousness. If one continues to exist after death, then in what form does one exist? There seem to be no good candidates for physical forms, since one's body may cease to exist after death (as in cases of cremation) and since there's nothing special about the set of atoms that constituted one's body (which particular atoms constitute a person is constantly in flux). Other wilder ideas are that one persists as a non-conscious mental entity or as an abstract object, but these options are hard to take seriously without further argument. Since no other options seem credible, the prospects for this version of the death objection look bleak.

There is a variant on the death objection that we can call the life objection, which says that one can be made better or worse off even before one is ever conscious. Consider, for example, someone who thinks that embryos lack the capacity for consciousness but are nevertheless welfare subjects. This view is incompatible with the phenomenal theory. But note (as with the death objection) that an embryo may still become a welfare subject in the future even if it's not a welfare subject now, and (as with the plant objection) that denying that embryos are welfare subjects still leaves open questions about their moral status. Moreover, if some embryos in fact have the capacity for consciousness, then those embryos will count as welfare subjects under the phenomenal theory. I suspect that these observations will be enough to satisfy most who are inclined to invoke the life objection.

Conclusion

The phenomenal theory claims that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. I argued that the phenomenal theory is extensionally adequate across uncontroversial cases, predicts asymmetries between various ethical debates, accounts for the idea that whether an entity is conscious is a matter of ethical significance, explains why death entails loss of welfare subjecthood, conserves the theoretical roles associated with welfare, identifies a unified ground of welfare subjecthood, and captures the intuition that welfare subjects must have subjective points of view. I also defended the phenomenal theory from objections concerning death, plants, Zero, and anti-experientialist theories of welfare goods.

Along the way, I've aimed to motivate a shift in how we think about theories of welfare. Philosophical discussions of welfare are dominated by debates about

welfare goods, and theories of welfare goods are oftentimes regarded as theories of welfare simpliciter. But without a story about welfare subjects, a theory of welfare is incomplete. I've explained why I think we should be careful about drawing conclusions about welfare subjects from premises solely about welfare goods, and I've given reasons for being cautious about deflationism about welfare subjects. Moreover, even those sympathetic to deflationism must still explain for what their preferred deflationist analysis looks like and how their theory works in cases involving welfare level zero. In light of this, this paper's discussion of the metatheory of welfare may be fruitful even for those who favor different first-order theories.

Nevertheless, I've argued that the phenomenal theory of welfare subjects correctly identifies the connection between consciousness and welfare. While other philosophers have argued that consciousness is intrinsically valuable, or that only conscious experiences are valuable, or that all welfare goods can be possessed only by conscious entities, I think that none of those theses adequately captures the scope and stability of the connection between consciousness and welfare. To properly understand the connection, we need to shift our focus from welfare goods to welfare subjects. The connection is that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. In brief: consciousness makes things matter.

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