

Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics

By L. W. Sumner

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£14.99 (pbk).

Wayne Sumner's book *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* is essentially an attempt to defend an out-of-favour ethical thesis by providing a new analysis of one of its principal terms. The ethical thesis is welfarism, 'the thesis that individual welfare . . . is the only thing with final or ultimate ethical value, the only state of affairs which we have a moral reason to promote for its own sake' (p. viii; see also pp. 3, 25, 165n35, 184, 191, 193, 201, and 217). According to Sumner, welfarism has fallen out of favour mainly because of inadequate analyses of the concept of welfare – not in the contemporary political sense, but in the philosophical, etymologically suggested sense of 'the general condition of faring or doing well', the sense in which 'my welfare is the same as my well-being or my interest or . . . my good' (p. vii; see also p. 1). This diagnosis of welfarism's decline leads Sumner to devote the first six of his book's seven chapters entirely to analysing the concept of welfare, confining to the last chapter his direct advocacy of welfarism *per se*.

Just as the first six chapters are motivated by the seventh, the first five are essentially preparatory for the sixth. For not until the sixth chapter does Sumner present his own theory of welfare, after discussing what he takes to be his theory's leading rivals. After devoting chapter 1 to some methodological considerations, Sumner proceeds in chapter 2 to explain his conception of the objective/subjective distinction, according to which 'a theory of welfare is subjective if it makes your well-being depend (at least in part) on your set of attitudes or concerns' (p. 81; see also pp. 38, 113, and 163n29) and objective otherwise; he then gives a brief argument against objective theories in general. In chapter 3 he confronts and disposes of what he considers to be the most promising objective theories, those associated with Moore and Aristotle; the failure of these specific theories, Sumner claims, pretty well shows the inadequacy of objective theories in general. He then turns, in chapter 4, to subjective theories, dividing them into 'those on which my welfare is *solely* a matter of my states of mind and those on which it is *additionally* a matter of some states of the world' (p. 82). Taking hedonism to represent state-of-mind theories, Sumner adduces some standard criticisms of it in order to argue that while any adequate theory of welfare must be subjective, it cannot be a state-of-mind theory: it must be a subjective, state-of-the-world theory. This brings him, in chapter 5, to the desire theory, according to which 'a condition or state of affairs makes me better off by virtue of satisfying some desire on my part' (p. 113). Against this theory, too, Sumner presents some familiar criticisms: e.g., that some instances of desire-satisfaction don't benefit a person at all (such as when one's desire is satisfied without one's ever being affected by that fact) and that some things that do benefit a person are not instances of desire-satisfaction (such as when one is pleasantly surprised).

In chapter 6, Sumner says that hedonism and the desire theory 'are mirror images of one another, the strength of each corresponding to the weakness of the other' (p. 138); and he tries to chart a middle course between them. He proposes the happiness theory, according to which welfare is 'authentic happiness' (p. 139). The happiness that Sumner has in mind has 'both a cognitive and an affective component': you *judge* that 'on balance and taking everything into account, your life is going well for you' (p. 145) and you *feel* 'satisfied or fulfilled by [your life]' (p. 146). But Sumner observes that to identify welfare with happiness and

happiness with this cognitive and affective 'life satisfaction' (p. 149) is to make your well-being strictly a function of your mental responses to your experiences – in other words, to posit a state-of-mind theory of welfare (p. 156), which Sumner believes to be *ipso facto* inadequate. To remedy this defect, Sumner adds that your judgment that your life is going well must be (1) informed, in the sense that your judgment would 'survive the acquisition of [additional] information' by you (p. 161) and (2) autonomous, in the sense that your judgment has not 'been influenced by . . . mechanisms of social conditioning, such as indoctrination, programming, brainwashing, role-scripting, and the like' (p. 171). These additional requirements of information and autonomy constitute the authenticity condition and render the happiness theory complete.

According to Sumner, 'The happiness theory is . . . "something in between" hedonism and the desire theory, avoiding both the former's solipsism and the latter's disengagement from our lived experience' (p. 175). But if the happiness theory partakes of the respective strengths of its rivals, it thereby invites reproach from defenders of each of them. The obvious rejoinder from hedonists is that the happiness theory (like so many others before it) is overly responsive to our intuitive discomfort with state-of-mind theories; and that in the guise of the autonomy requirement (with its references to value-laden concepts such as indoctrination and brainwashing) there may be smuggled in arbitrary constraints of the kind from which subjective theories generally are intended to provide safe harbour. Desire theorists, conversely, can complain that the happiness theory goes too far in its reduction of welfare to states of mind (authentic though they may be). Neither the hedonist nor the desire theorist characteristically strives to find some middle ground, and it is unlikely that Sumner's compromise (however artful it may be) will prove very appealing to either combatant. Indeed it seems more likely to get caught in the crossfire.

In chapter 7, Sumner deploys his new theory of welfare in the service of a defence of welfarism, 'the view that nothing but welfare matters, basically or ultimately, for ethics' (p. 184). His strategy is to show that welfarism accords better with our ordinary ethical intuitions than does any competing theory of the good, mainly by arguing that things other than welfare that are sometimes alleged to have ultimate ethical value actually have only derivative ethical value, via their connection with welfare. Health, knowledge, liberty, and autonomy; the flourishing of cultures and the integrity of ecosystems – all these have value, but their value 'is adequately captured by the role they play in enriching our lives; there is no remainder which requires independent acknowledgement beyond this prudential payoff' (p. 202). Now Sumner ably shows how the ethical value that we attach to various goods *may* be seen as derivative of the ethical value that we attach to welfare. But it is 'may', not 'must': for as Sumner (following Mill) admits at the beginning of the chapter, when an argument for a certain theory of the good ultimately appeals to people's ordinary intuitions about the good, the argument cannot aspire to be conclusive (p. 187). As a result, readers with strong preconceived intuitions about the good are unlikely to be moved by Sumner's reflections.

Still, even readers not sold on Sumner's affirmative claims – his theory of welfare and his defence of welfarism – should find other rewards in this book. The critiques Sumner offers of other theories of welfare are firm but not polemical and, taken together, they constitute an excellent primer on theories of welfare. Moreover, Sumner is – almost without lapse – helpfully explicit about what he takes himself to be doing. In the first chapter, for example, he distinguishes and explains the criteria that he claims should be used in the assessment of competing theories of a concept such as welfare: criteria such as conformity to pre-analytic convictions

and coherence with common-sense explanations of behaviour, as well as several others. These criteria are pervasive in analytic philosophy, but often only inchoately so; one rarely finds them explicated with such admirable clarity and efficiency. Sumner revisits these criteria in the latter part of chapter 6, where he assesses his own theory in terms of them.

In some parts of the book, Sumner's commitment to proceeding systematically can be a bit of a burden. For example, his explanation in chapter 2 of his conception of the objective/subjective distinction is somewhat laboured, and seems even more so in light of its meagre payoff. For Sumner justifies this part of his project on the grounds that his identification of certain theories as objective will then enable him to dispose of all of them at once (p. 27); but his argument against objective theories in general – as well as being surprisingly brief and relatively vague – is then offered as merely 'presumptive' (p. 44), requiring Sumner to examine a couple of leading specific objective theories. (Then, having discarded Moorean and Aristotelian objective theories, Sumner oddly says that 'With [the latter's] demise goes all prospect of constructing a descriptively adequate objective theory of welfare' (p. 80), as if he had addressed all possible objective theories.) Now Sumner's discussion of specific objective theories is well done, and he may be right in claiming both (1) that their respective failures are due essentially to their being objective theories and (2) that other objective theories can therefore also be expected to fail. But for none of this is it requisite that Sumner give the objective–subjective distinction the attention he does; and some readers may, at this early stage of Sumner's inquiry, hastily infer that the whole book is unduly preoccupied by methodological considerations. On the contrary, most of Sumner's concern with system and method is well worth the trouble.

Clearly, although in motivation the book is essentially normative, in execution it is mostly explanatory, both in Sumner's attention to method and in the attention Sumner pays to other, historically prominent, theories of welfare. Even in the last chapter, where Sumner puts his new theory of welfare to work in an argument about the foundations of morality, he admits that defending welfarism is a matter of 'explain[ing] as clearly as possible what the view entails, and what welfare is, and then [saying]: "There now, don't you find *that* attractive?"' (p. 193). Of course, explanations certainly can function as arguments; but what is more important to appreciate is that Sumner's book has so much else to offer that its value does not depend very much on its argumentative success. Among its virtues is that it is an excellent introduction to the field of welfare studies: it presupposes no knowledge of the field, and its clear organization and lucid prose make it accessible to beginning graduate students, and perhaps advanced undergraduates. But unlike a mere introduction, Sumner's work presents the views of someone who has thought carefully and expertly about advancing the field. It promises to become a central point of reference and debate for those interested in the nature and value of welfare.

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