
Consciousness Makes Things Matter

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ABSTRACT:

Philosophers often debate what makes one better or worse off, but seldom debate 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 a *phenomenal theory* of welfare subjects, according to which consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. On this view, the set of conscious subjects is identical to the set of welfare subjects. Alongside developing the phenomenal theory, I also address some underexplored metatheoretical 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.

Introduction

Philosophers often debate what makes one better or worse off, but seldom debate 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. Both issues have to do with welfare levels, or the degree to which an entity is 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 a *phenomenal theory* of welfare subjects, according to which consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. 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 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 would 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 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 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. On a more abstract level, we can think of welfare levels as akin to the values of quantities such as electric charge, acidity, or height-above-sea-level. In each case, there is a quantity that has a range of values, and certain kinds of entities can instantiate values along those quantities.

Though it is useful to compare welfare to other kinds of quantities, I will remain neutral on nearly all substantive questions about the structure of welfare.³ My arguments do not require taking a stance on whether welfare levels are absolute or relational (i.e., whether welfare levels can be specified without comparing individuals), on 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 $x_2 > x_1$), on 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 $x_3 = x_1 + x_2$), or on 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). I will

¹ There are also *welfare bads*, which make welfare subjects worse off. For brevity, I discuss only welfare goods, but all 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.

take for granted that welfare has a zero point (marking the threshold for a life worth living), though even that assumption is inessential to most of my arguments.

The question of what makes an entity a welfare subject is arguably connected to the question of what grants an entity moral status. However, there is not only disagreement about the relationship between welfare and morality, but also disagreement about the nature of moral status itself. For example, there is little consensus on the grounds of moral status (e.g., on which psychological or biological capacities are required for moral status), the structure of moral status (e.g., on whether moral status comes in degrees), or even how to define ‘moral status’ (e.g., on whether having moral status entails being able to be wronged).⁴ Since there is controversy even over basic questions about moral status, it is hard to draw connections between welfare subjecthood and moral status without invoking substantive assumptions. For these reasons, my arguments focus exclusively on welfare (rather than on its connections to morality).

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 things can be the beneficiaries of those goods. As examples, the *locative analysis* says that welfare levels are determined by the objective goods that are located in a given subject’s life, the *positional analysis* says that welfare levels are determined by 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 But which kinds of entities have lives, or have positions that are evaluable with respect to desirability, or can be served well or badly, or are objects worthy of rational care? To answer these kinds of questions, we need a theory of welfare subjects.

⁴ See Warren [1997] and Jaworska & Tannenbaum [2018] for overviews of issues about moral status, Chang [2004] and Lauinger [2017] on the relation between welfare and morality, and Shepherd [2018] on the relationship between consciousness and moral status.

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.

The Phenomenal Theory of Welfare Subjects

An entity is *conscious* just in case there is something it is like to be that entity. Putting it another way, an entity is conscious just in case it has subjective experiences, or mental states that feel a certain way, or a first-person point of view. I will 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 will sometimes take for granted standard assumptions about which entities are in fact conscious (or not), this should not be taken as endorsing any particular theory of consciousness.

The slogan of this paper is that consciousness makes things matter. I take this phrase to express a metaphysical analysis: what it is for an entity to be a welfare subject is for it to be a conscious subject. 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 is 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 is better or worse off than another subject, and so forth. Over the rest of the paper, I will call this the *phenomenal theory* of welfare subjects:

The Phenomenal Theory: Consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject.

Talk of conscious subjects is ambiguous between state consciousness and creature consciousness. An entity is *state conscious* at a time just in case it is in a conscious mental state; an entity is *creature conscious* just in case it has the capacity for state consciousness.⁶ When you are in a dreamless sleep, you are not state conscious, but you are still creature conscious. In light of this, there are two different versions of the phenomenal theory. Though I think the radical view that state consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject merits philosophical attention, I will focus on the more modest view that creature consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. For the rest of the paper, whenever I talk about conscious subjects without qualification, I mean entities that are creature conscious.

⁶ See Bayne [2007] for more on this distinction. Note that while I define state consciousness as a property of subjects, it is also sometimes defined as a property of mental states.

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; to say that consciousness makes things matter is to say that consciousness is what makes an entity a welfare subject. Though I endorse the phenomenal theory, I also favor the view that consciousness is not a welfare good.⁷ Consider, as another example, experientialism, or the thesis that every welfare good can be possessed only by conscious entities. Though it may be natural for those who favor the phenomenal theory to also favor experientialism, and though I myself accept experientialism, I will later explain why the connection between the theses is less straightforward than one might think.⁸

From my own experience, the phenomenal theory strikes most people as *prima facie* attractive. Yet to my knowledge, there has been little development of the phenomenal theory in the contemporary philosophical literature. Some philosophers have argued that sentience (i.e., the capacity to experience pleasure or pain) is what makes an entity a welfare subject,⁹ but I will later discuss the possibility of conscious subjects that are not sentient. Some philosophers have argued that consciousness has important connections to welfare, but the focus tends to be on welfare goods (rather than welfare subjects).¹⁰ Some philosophers have discussed the relationship between consciousness and morality, but there is controversy over how

⁷ 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.

⁸ There is also a stronger version of experientialism, according to which every welfare good is a conscious experience. See Griffin [1986], Lin [forthcoming], and van der Deijl [forthcoming] for discussion of experientialism (in both senses).

⁹ See Bentham [1907], Singer [1993], DeGrazia [1996], and Nussbaum [2004], for some examples. Note that authors who discuss sentience tend to be focused more on morality than on welfare, though it is often clearly implied that sentience is a ground of welfare subjecthood.

¹⁰ As some examples, Siewert [1998] argues that many kinds of experiences are intrinsically valuable, Crisp [2006] and Bramble [2016] 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 [forthcoming] discusses the experience requirement on welfare.

exactly welfare relates to morality.¹¹ And philosophers occasionally make passing remarks expressing sympathy for the phenomenal theory, but that still leaves a lacuna for an analysis and defense of the view.

The Basic Motivations

The remainder of this section articulates some of the basic motivations for the phenomenal theory. As a preliminary observation, observe that the phenomenal theory does extremely well with respect to extensional adequacy across uncontroversial cases. If we were to make a list of entities that are uncontroversially conscious subjects and a list of entities that are uncontroversially welfare subjects, then those two lists may well be identical: both lists would be comprised of various kinds of animals (including humans). Likewise, if we were to make a list of entities that are uncontroversially not conscious subjects and a list of entities that are uncontroversially not welfare subjects, then those two lists may also turn out to be identical: both lists would include rocks, tables, black holes, mushrooms, and so on.¹² There are, of course, controversial cases—for example, plants, embryos, and the deceased—and these cases will be addressed later. But my point is that defending the phenomenal theory requires addressing cases that are already controversial rather than attempting to explain away apparent counterexamples. That is a promising start.

A central motivation for the phenomenal theory is that it explains an imprecise but widely accepted datum: namely, that whether or not an entity is conscious is a matter of ethical significance.¹³ At first pass, one might object that this datum can instead be explained by taking consciousness to be either necessary or sufficient for certain welfare goods. But these alternative explanations are problematic. To justify

¹¹ See Levy [2014 a], Shepherd [2018] and Shepherd & Levy [forthcoming] for recent discussions of consciousness and morality.

¹² Note that these lists are not simply complements of each other, since many things are neither uncontroversially conscious (or welfare subjects) nor uncontroversially not conscious (or welfare subjects): for example, slugs would not be on any of these lists.

¹³ By 'ethical', I mean to include both the prudential and the moral. See Sumner [1996], Siewert [1998], Levy & Savulescu [2009], Rosati [2009], Bradley [2015], Glannon [2016], Cutter [2017], Shepherd [2018], Kammerer [2019], and Kriegel [2019] for different expressions of the idea that consciousness is ethically significant. For some dissenting views, see Levy [2014 b] and Lee, G [forthcoming].

the claim that consciousness is sufficient for certain welfare goods, one would likely have to hold that consciousness itself is a welfare good.¹⁴ But 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.¹⁵ On the other hand, the claim that consciousness is necessary for certain welfare goods is uncontroversial, since consciousness is necessary for pleasure and nearly everyone agrees that pleasure is a welfare good. But observe that nobody thinks that whether an entity is made of atoms is a matter of ethical significance, even though being made of atoms is arguably necessary for every welfare good. This means that the mere fact that consciousness is necessary for certain 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 makes things matter.

Second, the phenomenal theory makes correct predictions about the status of various ethical debates. If the phenomenal theory is true, then we should expect there to be (1) debates about the ethical statuses of most entities that are neither clearly conscious nor clearly unconscious, and (2) asymmetries between ethical debates about entities that are clearly conscious versus ethical debates about entities that are clearly non-conscious.¹⁶ Both of these predictions are born out when we look at contemporary issues in applied ethics. In support of the first prediction, consider debates about the ethical statuses of simple organisms, embryos, artificial intelligences, persistent vegetative state patients, and cerebral organoids. In support of the second prediction, consider how there is abundant debate about the ethics of eating animals yet little debate about the ethics of eating plants, or how there is much more debate about the ethical status of conscious entities (such as humans) than about the

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ See Glannon [2016] and Lee, A [2018] for some examples.

¹⁶ 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 because there are ethical issues that apply to entities that are welfare subjects that do not apply to entities that are not welfare subjects.

ethical status of non-conscious entities with similar agential properties (such as corporations or nations).¹⁷

Third, the phenomenal theory explains the intuition that if one ceases to be conscious, then one ceases to be a welfare subject. This intuition is appealed to both in discussions of death and in discussions of zombification scenarios.¹⁸ It is possible to object that the intuition could instead be explained by the idea that if one ceases to be conscious, then one ceases to exist. But even philosophers who deny that cessation of consciousness entails non-existence can accept that cessation of consciousness entails cessation of welfare subjecthood. Consider, for example, philosophers who endorse biological theories of personal identity, which take people to be identical to their bodies. If one is identical to one's body and one's body still exists after the cessation of consciousness, then one still exists after the cessation of consciousness. Yet it is not as if endorsing a biological theory of personal identity will force one to deny that cessation of consciousness entails the cessation of welfare subjecthood. This indicates that the explanation offered by the phenomenal theory is more robust than the explanation appealing to loss of existence.

Fourth, the phenomenal theory explains how we can acquire knowledge of welfare subjecthood even in epistemically impoverished situations. Let Mystery be an entity such that (1) we know that Mystery is conscious, but (2) we know nothing else about Mystery. Even though we know almost nothing about Mystery, it seems we can still wonder how well or badly Mystery is doing, whether Mystery's life is worth living, whether Mystery's life is better or worse than yours, and so forth. By contrast, consider the analogous situations where all we know about Mystery is that it is made of atoms, or that it has a liver, or that it is larger than a breadbox. In those situations, it is uncertain whether we can meaningfully ask the same kinds of questions, since it is uncertain whether Mystery is in fact a welfare subject.

Finally, I think it is no coincidence that both consciousness and welfare are subject-relative properties: phenomenology concerns how things feel *for* a subject,

¹⁷ See, as examples, Mikhalevich and Powell (2020) on invertebrate minds, Doggett [2018] on vegetarianism, Guenin [2008] on embryos, Müller [forthcoming] on artificial intelligence, Kahane & Savulescu [2009] on persistent vegetative state patients, Shepherd [2018] on cerebral organoids, and List & Pettit [2011] on group agents.

¹⁸ See Siewert [1998] and Kriegel [2019] on zombification arguments.

whereas welfare concerns how good things are *for* a subject. A natural thought is that in the most basic sense of ‘subject’, consciousness is what makes an entity a subject at all (as opposed to a mere object), and that we can always ask how good or bad things are going for any given subject. Similar ideas have been expressed by other philosophers: Sumner [1996, p. 43] says that a “welfare subject...must also be a subject in a more robust sense—the locus of a reasonably 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 and talk about the welfare of only those beings who...have a point of view.”

Before moving forward, let me mention two very recent papers that also discuss the relationship between consciousness and welfare subjects. van der Deijl [forthcoming] argues that the phenomenal theory is best explained by accepting an experience requirement on welfare goods, and Lin [forthcoming] argues that the thesis that consciousness is necessary for welfare subjecthood is best explained by taking all welfare goods to have experiential components. These papers address issues that overlap with those addressed in this paper, but the core dialectical aims are different. Both van der Deijl and Lin take the phenomenal theory (or the necessity side of the thesis) as a basic datum and then ask which theories of welfare goods best support that datum. By contrast, my goal is to justify taking the phenomenal theory as a datum in the first place. Nevertheless, an important intersecting question is whether the phenomenal theory can be explained by adopting the right theory of welfare goods. I will soon address that question, but setting the stage for my discussion will require first addressing some metatheoretical issues about the relationship between theories of welfare subjects and theories of welfare goods. We turn now to those issues.

§ 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 quickly leads to metatheoretical questions about what a theory of welfare should look like. More specifically, some readers might think that an argument for the

phenomenal theory should not only identify its intuitive appeal and explanatory benefits (as done earlier) but should also explain why the phenomenal theory follows from the right theory of welfare goods. The aim of this section is to explain why I think such a line of thought misconstrues the philosophical situation.

The Metatheory of Welfare

To begin, note that motivating a claim does not generally require explaining why that claim is true. In fact, this is evident when we consider the kinds of arguments one encounters in philosophical discussions of welfare goods. To argue that g is a welfare good, one typically tries to show that the claim aligns with our intuitions across a range of cases, how the claim can explain other claims that are plausible, and how the claim is defensible in the face of objections. These kinds of considerations can yield compelling reasons for thinking that g is a welfare good, even in the absence of an explanation for why that is so. This point is particularly obvious when we consider foundational claims that serve as the cornerstones of first-order theories. In such situations, there simply is no explanation of the claim in more basic first-order terms, at least if the theory is true.

This dialectical point may seem prosaic, but I think the current status of the philosophy of welfare warrants making the point explicit. Many philosophical discussions of welfare tacitly assume *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).¹⁹ For example, a deflationist who endorses desire-satisfactionism would think that an entity is a welfare subject just in case it can have desires. This tacit assumption is particularly evident when we observe that theories of welfare goods are often characterized as theories of welfare simpliciter. And if deflationism is true, then a theory of welfare subjects will be derivable from a more fundamental theory of welfare goods. Yet to my knowledge, there has been almost no explicit discussion of deflationism within the welfare literature.²⁰

¹⁹ See Campbell [2016]’s overview of the concept of well-being for a good example of this.

²⁰ A notable exception is van der Deijl [forthcoming], who acknowledges that deflationism is substantive but argues for the thesis by appeal to theoretical coherence criterion. But, for reasons that will become apparent later in §2 and in §3, I think that such a criterion is either too weak to justify deflationism or compatible with rejecting deflationism.

My goal is not to argue that deflationism is false, but instead to explain why it is a substantive thesis that requires independent motivation. Though such a claim is modest, it has significant implications for the dialectic of this paper. In particular, it guards against the metatheoretical objection that the phenomenal theory ought to be derived from a theory of welfare goods. Furthermore, if we grant that deflationism might be false (but the phenomenal theory true), then the situation with respect to motivating the phenomenal theory may be analogous to the situation of (say) a hedonist motivating the claim that pleasure is a basic welfare good. In both cases, one can motivate the claim by appeal to the claim's intuitive plausibility, explanatory benefits, and resistance to objections. But asking for an explanation in more basic first-order terms is asking too much.

As some initial reasons for why deflationism is not obvious, consider theories of welfare that are *prima facie* philosophically defensible yet incompatible with deflationism. These include certain *variabilist* theories of welfare goods (according to which welfare goods are subject-relative),²¹ *restrictive* theories of 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 plants, artificial intelligences, and corporations all 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 that I will discuss more in §3). Even if you find none of these views attractive, it should be clear that rejecting these views requires philosophical argument.

The next section will provide some more reasons for being cautious about deflationism. But at this point, let me address a few potential objections. First, one might object that in order to discharge the requirement of explaining how the phenomenal theory can be derived from a theory of welfare goods, I must show that

²¹ See Lin [2018] for a criticism of welfare variabilism. I find Lin's arguments persuasive (so I do not 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.

deflationism is false (rather than merely non-obvious). However, that is surely demanding too much. We do not normally think that arguing for a first-order theory requires meeting explanatory demands that are idiosyncratic to specific metatheories. If we were to adopt that general principle, then a great deal of work in ethics, metaphysics, and science would be dialectically inadequate, since work in those domains tends to leave open the kinds of metatheoretical issues addressed in metaethics, metametaphysics, and the philosophy of science.

Second, one might contend that 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 might be an artifact of convention. We have already seen that deriving a theory of welfare subjects from a theory of welfare goods requires deflationism as an auxiliary premise. But if we permit auxiliary premises, then it is likewise possible to generate a derivation going the opposite direction. 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. Given these background assumptions, a theory of welfare subjects can be used to yield a theory of welfare goods. Now, obviously one could argue that such a theory (or an auxiliary premise) is implausible. But my 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. And if one wishes to shift the dialectic back to which theories of welfare are most plausible, then we should return to the first-order issues (rather than the kind of metatheoretical objection driven by deflationism).

Third, one might worry that if we reject deflationism, then we are committed to brute facts about welfare subjects. Now, it should be obvious that this objection cuts both ways: one could just as well worry that taking (say) pleasure to be a basic welfare good commits one to brute facts about welfare goods. More importantly, however, we should distinguish between facts that are basic within a theory and facts that are basic simpliciter. Even if the claim that consciousness makes things matter is a basic claim within a theory of welfare, that leaves open whether it is basic simpliciter. The latter question depends not only on one's first-order theory of welfare, but also on one's metaethical framework. I think it is possible to develop a

satisfying metaethical foundation for the phenomenal theory, but addressing those kinds of metaethical questions is beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, some might worry that staying neutral on deflationism undermines the philosophical significance of this paper. However, it is relatively easy to see that there are significant philosophical consequences whether deflationism is true or false. If deflationism is true, then the phenomenal theory provides a significant constraint on which theories of welfare goods are viable. If deflationism is false, then we have identified a basic element of a theory of welfare (and in fact, an element that has received little direct philosophical attention). Moreover, even if we set aside first-order questions about the phenomenal theory itself, the kinds of metatheoretical issues discussed in the present section are underexplored in the welfare literature.

The Experientialism Argument

Let *experientialism* be the view that every welfare good can be possessed only by conscious entities. Can adopting experientialism explain the phenomenal theory? As mentioned earlier, both Lin [forthcoming] and van der Deijl [forthcoming] argue that the answer is ‘yes’. While I am sympathetic to many points in both those papers, I think the philosophical picture is more complex than either paper suggests. In what follows, I raise two challenges for those who wish to explain the phenomenal theory by appealing to experientialism. My point is not that these challenges cannot be met, but rather that the connection between experientialism and the phenomenal theory is less straightforward than one might initially think.

The first challenge concerns extensional adequacy. Even if we supplement experientialism with deflationism, it is not clear that the resulting theory of welfare subjects will be extensionally equivalent to the phenomenal theory. 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 us set aside the question of whether that consequence is plausible—I will address that question in §3. The current question is whether experientialism can yield the result that Zero is a welfare subject.

This challenge is anticipated by van der Deijl [forthcoming], who accepts experientialism, the phenomenal theory, and deflationism, and who contends that subjects like Zero count as welfare subjects because they possess welfare neutrals.²² 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? Even if the answer turns out to be 'yes', I think that at present there has not yet been enough philosophical analysis of the concept of welfare neutrals to warrant taking the notion for granted. Moreover, it is not obvious that taking the notion of a welfare neutral as basic will ultimately be 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 audacious thesis that what it is to be a welfare subject is to be an entity that can accrue welfare goods (or bads or *neutrals*). These points make me think that it is not so simple to derive the phenomenal theory from experientialism.

The second issue concerns explanatory unity. Let *pluralistic experientialism* cover any experientialist theory that posits more than one basic welfare good. Let *impure experientialism* cover any experientialist theory that takes some welfare goods to have non-experiential components. If one favors pluralistic experientialism, then it is natural to ask why every welfare good is possessable only by conscious subjects. If one favors impure experientialism, then it is natural to ask why every welfare good has an experiential component. Now, obviously explanations must end somewhere, so I am not suggesting that a theory must answer these questions in order to be viable. But some claims call out for explanation more than others. And if one favors either an impure or a pluralist version of experientialism, then it is natural to raise these kinds of questions.

Let me offer a speculative answer, if only to exhibit why I think the philosophical space is underexplored. Consider the condition that in order for g to count as a welfare good for some entity, g must affect whatever property makes that entity a welfare subject. Note that this condition is not trivial, for there are plenty of things that can affect an entity without affecting the property that makes that entity a

²² 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 is less oxymoronic.

welfare subject: for example, consider the microphysical interactions occurring in your stomach. Note also that different theories of welfare subjects generate different predictions given this condition: 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 questions mentioned earlier: in particular, taking a welfare good to be possessable by non-conscious entities would violate the condition outlined above. The reader may decide for themselves whether this idea is plausible, but it strikes me as clearly at least meriting philosophical 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 are the sorts of issues that make me think 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. Given this, I think that addressing these kinds of metatheoretical issues is a promising route for advancing the philosophy of welfare. At the same time, however, I think another route for progress is to simply develop plausible theories of welfare subjects (alongside theories of welfare goods). Just as with other philosophical issues, we can make advances on the first-order questions before settling all the metatheoretical matters.

§ 3 | 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 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 will turn on questions about whether desires and (say) knowledge can be attained without consciousness. The answers to these questions are not obvious. A number of recent philosophical discussions challenge the views that desire and knowledge are independent of consciousness.²³ 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. Nevertheless, let us suppose for the sake of argument that anti-experientialism is true.

Since anti-experientialism is a claim about welfare goods and the phenomenal theory is a claim about welfare subjects, developing an argument from anti-experientialism to the negation of the phenomenal theory would again require deflationism as an auxiliary premise.²⁴ It is straightforward to see how many of the points about deflationism from §2 likewise apply in the present context. However, some readers might be inclined to think that anti-experientialism actually supports deflationism. If we were to accept anti-experientialism while denying deflationism, we would have the following situation: only conscious entities have welfare levels, welfare levels are determined by (say) desire-satisfaction, but some non-conscious entities can have desires. That result may strike some as philosophically untenable.

²³ See Brogaard & Chudnoff [forthcoming] for argument that empirical knowledge requires consciousness, Smithies [2019, p. 17] for argument that all knowledge requires consciousness, Stampe [1987], Strawson [1994], Oddie [2005], and Smithies & Weiss [2019] for arguments that desire requires consciousness, Kriegel [2019] for argument that consciousness plays an important role in every major theory of welfare goods, and Lin [forthcoming] for argument that every welfare good at least partially involves consciousness.

²⁴ Note that both deflationism and anti-experientialism are compatible with the phenomenal theory (so long as one does not endorse the other thesis). In fact, Sumner [1996, p. 43, 127–128] and Rosati [2009] seem to accept both anti-experientialism and the phenomenal theory, and van der Deijl [forthcoming] accepts both deflationism and the phenomenal theory.

However, consider an analogy with weight and mass: only entities bound by a gravitational force have weight, weight is determined by mass, yet even entities that are not bound by a gravitational force have mass. This case is structurally analogous to the situation described above, yet there is 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 is 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 is conscious. Another response is to contend that weight is a relational property whereas welfare is not. However, we need to be careful about the meaning of 'relational'. Weight is relational in that an object's weight is determined extrinsically, but weight is also non-relational in that weight ascriptions are monadic (i.e., 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 (i.e. particular welfare subjects have welfare levels, rather than ordered pairs of welfare subjects and sets of welfare goods).

These considerations indicate that anti-experientialism is philosophically compatible with the phenomenal theory. Or at least, given these considerations, anti-experientialists who wish to reject the phenomenal theory should state their reasons: merely appealing to anti-experientialism itself is not enough.

The Zero Objection

In the previous section, I described a conscious subject—Zero—who cannot accrue any welfare goods (or bads). If the phenomenal theory is true, then Zero is a welfare subject. The zero objection claims that Zero is not a welfare subject.²⁵

To address this objection, we need to consider the difference between having welfare level zero and lacking a welfare level altogether. As an analogy, consider

²⁵ Kagan [2019, p. 14] expresses an analogous thought regarding moral status: “[I]magine a creature that had qualitative mental states but was incapable of experiencing either pleasure or pain... Would it *count*? Would it have moral standing?”

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.²⁶ Suppose we are developing an account of which kinds of entities have charge values, and imagine a philosopher 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 obviously dubious: 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 is 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 necessarily zero meters above sea level but the height-above-sea-level of the solar system is undefined), and temperature (a universe with no kinetic energy is zero kelvin but the temperature of the United Nations 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 does not exist a β such that α bears the parent relation to β , then α has zero children. However, this simply means 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

²⁶ I favor the view that any particle with non-zero charge would thereby not be a photon. But suppose you prefer a more permissive view about identity across possible worlds. Though such a view might lead to the result that photons possibly have non-zero charge, it would probably also lead to the result that Zero possibly has a non-zero welfare level.

also allowing that anything that does not have a positive number of children thereby has zero children.²⁷

Now let us return to the zero objection. 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 is better off than another entity, and so forth. This indicates that welfare level zero is a positive property (rather than a negative property). The question then is whether Zero has welfare level zero or lacks a welfare level altogether. Since it is natural to say that 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 living in paradise but better than the life of someone living in hell, we have good reason to hold that Zero has welfare level zero. Since anything with a welfare level is a welfare subject, it follows that Zero is a welfare subject.²⁸

Are there countervailing reasons against counting Zero as a welfare subject? A first objection is that Zero is not a welfare subject because it cannot be better or worse off.²⁹ 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 is still clearly a welfare subject: if we were to calculate the total amount of welfare in the world, then Happy's welfare level would factor into that calculation. A second objection is that the fact that Zero necessarily has welfare level zero is itself a reason

²⁷ Some may disagree and contend that having zero children, zero prime factors, and zero moons are all positive properties. Consider, for example, someone who thinks the sentence 'the number three has zero children' is false (rather than merely an odd thing to say). However, this disagreement is largely irrelevant for the arguments in this paper, since the crucial point is merely that having welfare level zero is a positive property.

²⁸ The points in this section might be thought to support the notion of welfare neutrals briefly discussed in §2. Though that may be ultimately correct, it is important to note that the present discussion focuses on welfare levels, rather than welfare goods/bads/neutrals. In fact, it is possible to agree with everything I say here yet still reject the category of welfare neutrals.

²⁹ At the very 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), and the 'kind of' qualification was intended to allow for subjects like Zero to count as welfare subjects.

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 is still clearly a welfare subject. On the most defensible ways of characterizing what it is to be a welfare subject, Zero counts.

The Plant Objection

Plants are the most prominent example of non-conscious entities that are candidates for being welfare subjects. But plants are probably not conscious, so any reasons for taking plants to be welfare subjects are also reasons for doubting the phenomenal theory.³⁰

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 founder (e.g., by being uprooted) and 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 is natural, for example, to talk about what is good or bad for a plant. But consider entities such as corporations, livers, and beehives. These entities are intuitively not welfare subjects, but they arguably still satisfy the criteria mentioned above. It is in the interest of a corporation to increase marginal revenue and attract investors; a beehive flourishes by preserving the structural integrity of the hive and maintaining a healthy population of bees; and we talk of how one's liver is doing well when it is healthy and free of toxins and badly when one consumes excessive amounts of alcohol. A natural response is that welfare talk about corporations, beehives, and livers is metaphorical. But then why not think that welfare talk about plants is also metaphorical?

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,

³⁰ See Varner [1998] and Marder [2013] for views that take plants to be welfare subjects. See also Attfield [1983], Taylor [1981], and Agar [2001] for views that take all living beings to have intrinsic value. Though having intrinsic value is different from being a welfare subject, those who take plants to be intrinsically valuable often also ascribe welfare properties to plants.

livers, and beehives are not. But suppose there were sophisticated robots that had capacities for pleasure, desire, and knowledge. These robots would not be organisms (they are made of non-organic matter and lack reproductive capacities) but they would arguably still be welfare subjects. Or consider bacteria, which are organisms but which are arguably not welfare subjects. These observations 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 would have to identify a criterion that includes plants, animals, and robots on the one hand, excludes corporations, livers, beehives, and bacteria on the other hand.³¹

What if the objector simply bites the bullet by endorsing 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 tollens* is another's *modus ponens*, there is also some danger of a verbal dispute. I do not disagree that we can use the term 'welfare subject' in a permissive way, but there would remain an intuitive difference between the sense of welfare we have in mind when talking about plants, corporations, livers, beehives, and bacteria on the one hand and the sense of welfare we have in mind when talking about conscious entities on the other hand.³² To elicit that asymmetry, consider how it is not clear that we can meaningfully ask whether a plant's welfare is above the threshold for a life worth living, or how it is 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 is 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.

³¹ There may also be the option of adopting *pluralism* about welfare subjecthood, according to which there are multiple grounds of welfare subjecthood and no property that unifies them all. For the purposes of this paper, I will take for granted that pluralism is false. Note here that pluralism about the property of welfare subjecthood is distinct from pluralism about the term 'welfare subject' (i.e., the view that 'welfare subject' is polysemous).

³² The idea that welfare language is polysemous has been discussed in more detail by a number of philosophers. See, for example, Sumner [1996, p. 43], Rosati [2009], Bradley [2015, p. 9], and Campbell [2017].

Let me end by turning to a more general point. Those who have argued that plants are welfare subjects are often motivated by the intuition that plants can be objects of moral concern. But it is possible to hold that plants can be objects of moral concern without taking them to be welfare subjects. Consider someone who endorses the phenomenal theory, who thinks that plants are intrinsically valuable, and who thinks that it is morally bad (other things being equal) to destroy intrinsically valuable things. On such a view, it would be morally bad (other things being equal) to destroy plants even though plants are not welfare subjects. In light of this, I suspect that a good number of philosophers who think that plants matter 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 we can define *death* as the permanent loss of the capacity for consciousness. Suppose, for example, that I slander you after you die, rendering your reputation unjustly damaged. On some views of welfare, I have made you worse off, even though you are already dead.³³ But if it is possible to be made worse off even after death, then we seem to have the result that welfare subjects need not be conscious subjects.

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 climate change will affect the welfare levels of future people that do not yet exist. Then it may seem that existence is not a requirement for being a welfare subject, since we are considering the welfare levels of people that do not yet exist. However, the conclusion that we have moral obligations towards

³³ See Blatti [2012] and Kagan [2012] for some discussions of death's harm.

future people is arguably 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. It is natural to think that the future people are not yet welfare subjects (since they do not yet exist) but that they will be welfare subjects (since they will be conscious).³⁴

The other version of the death objection holds that one continues to exist after death. But it is 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 might that be? 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 is nothing special about the set of atoms that constitute one's body (given that the members of that set is constantly in flux). Other wilder theories include the ideas 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 someone who thinks that embryos lack the capacity to have conscious mental states but are nevertheless welfare subjects. Unless one is prepared to adopt an extremely permissive view of what counts as a conscious subject, such a view is incompatible with the phenomenal theory. But note that (as with the death objection) an embryo may still become a welfare subject in the future even if it is not a welfare subject now, and that (as with the plant objection) denying that embryos are welfare subjects still leaves open questions about their moral status. I suspect that these options will be enough to satisfy most people who are tempted towards thinking that embryos are welfare subjects.

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, explains the widely-accepted idea that whether an

³⁴ A similar point can be made about non-actual people (who exist only counterfactually).

entity is conscious is a matter of ethical significance, predicts the existence of and asymmetries between various ethical debates, accounts for the idea that one ceases to be a welfare subject if one ceases to be conscious, explains our knowledge of welfare subjecthood in certain epistemically impoverished situations, and captures the fact that both welfare and consciousness are subject-relative properties. I also defended the phenomenal theory from objections concerning death, plants, conscious entities with welfare level zero, and anti-experientialist theories of welfare goods.

Along the way, this paper has aimed to motivate a shift in how we think about the philosophy of welfare. Philosophical discussions of welfare are dominated by investigations of welfare goods: in fact, theories of welfare goods are sometimes regarded as theories of welfare simpliciter. But without a story about welfare subjects, a theory of welfare is incomplete. I have explained why I think we should be careful in drawing conclusions about welfare subjects from premises solely about welfare goods, and I have given some reasons for being wary of deflationism about welfare subjects. But even those sympathetic to deflationism about welfare subjects should 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, I hope this paper's discussion of the metatheoretical issues is fruitful even for those who favor different first-order theories.

Nevertheless, I think that only the phenomenal theory of welfare subjects correctly identifies the connection between consciousness and welfare. And while philosophers have argued that consciousness itself is intrinsically valuable, or that sentience is what makes an entity a welfare subject, 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. To properly understand the connection between consciousness and welfare, 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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