



Objective List Theories and Ill-Being

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Objective list theories hold that a number of basic goods directly benefit people—goods such as knowledge, friendship, and achievement. But, what about things opposed to these goods?

Do false beliefs, unhealthy relationships, and failed projects directly detract from well-being?

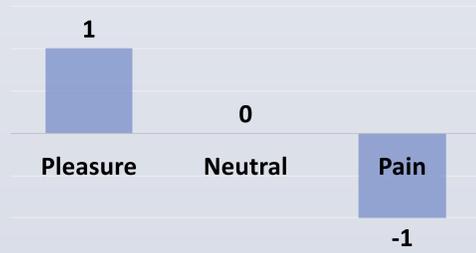
This project answers: **No.**

These things can have bad parts or effects, or hinder the realization of basic goods, but do not themselves carry negative weight with respect to well-being.

THE CONCEPT OF ILL-BEING

Ill-being is the negative side of well-being and concerns things that directly detract from well-being.

For example, within standard hedonism, pleasure adds to well-being while pain subtracts from it:



In “An Introduction to Ill-Being,” Shelly Kagan notes that ill-being has often been overlooked.

Although pleasure and pain are often viewed as symmetrical, we should not assume that every basic good has a symmetrical basic bad (Kagan, p. 275).

Kagan considers several possible basic bads opposed to knowledge (pp. 276-284).

But, maybe there are no basic bads opposed to the goods of knowledge, friendship, and achievement...

FALSE BELIEFS

While knowledge benefits people, false beliefs do not directly detract from well-being:



Comparative Cases

Persons A, B, and C are identical except that:

- **A knows how stars are formed.**
- **B has no beliefs about how stars are formed.**
- **C has false beliefs about how stars are formed.**

After setting aside the effects of belief, B and C do not differ in well-being.

Similarly with weightier claims, like $2+2=4$ or “my family loves me”—having false belief is a lack of valuable knowledge, but so is having no beliefs about these topics.

Negative Well-Being

Even a large number of false beliefs does not seem to put a person at risk of negative well-being overall.

Here, we can contrast false belief to how many thinkers view great pain and suffering.

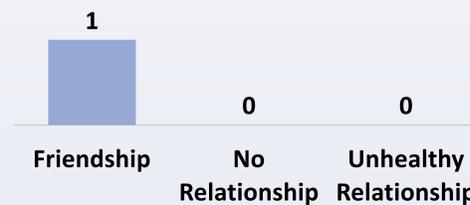
Risk and the Pursuit of Goods

The pursuit of knowledge often leads to false belief, but is not thought to be intrinsically risky, as would be the case if false belief were a basic bad.

For example, **Aristotle** may have had many more false beliefs than knowledge, but it is not plausible that his intellectual work lowered his well-being.

UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

While friendship benefits people, unhealthy relationships do not directly detract from well-being:



Comparative Cases

A, B, and C are identical except that, over the past year:

- **A entered a healthy friendship with a new coworker.**
- **B did not enter a new relationship.**
- **C entered an unhealthy relationship with a new coworker.**

After setting aside the pleasure and pain and effects of relationships, B and C do not differ in well-being.

That is, the fact of being manipulated or disrespected in a relationship does not directly lower well-being.

Negative Well-Being

Even a large number of unhealthy relationships does not seem to put a person at risk of negative well-being.

The pain they cause may lead to negative well-being on some views, but not their features as relationships.

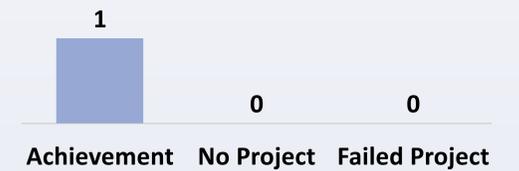
Risk and the Pursuit of Goods

The pursuit of friendship often leads to unhealthy relationships, but is not thought to be intrinsically risky, as would be the case if these were a basic bad.

Relationships are risky due to the pain and negative effects they can bring, but not because each unhealthy relationship counts against well-being.

FAILED PROJECTS

While achievement benefits people, failed projects do not directly detract from well-being:



Comparative Cases

A, B, and C are identical except that, over the past year:

- **A tried to write a great novel and succeeded.**
- **B did not try to write a novel.**
- **C tried to write a great novel, but failed.**

After setting aside the effects of projects, B and C do not differ in well-being.

Negative Well-Being

Even a large number of failed projects does not seem to put a person at risk of negative well-being overall.

Risk and the Pursuit of Goods

The pursuit of achievement often leads to failure, but is not thought to be intrinsically risky, as would be the case if failed projects were a basic bad.

For example, **Gandhi** may have had many more failed projects than achievements, but it is not plausible that his practical efforts lowered his well-being.

REFERENCE

Shelly Kagan, “An Introduction to Ill-Being,” *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 4, (2014): 261-288.