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Folk Theories of Well-Being: Variation Across Contexts?

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Abstract

The nature of well-being has long been a central question in philosophical ethics. In a series of studies we tested lay support for three theories of well-being: hedonism, desire theories, and objective list theories. Participants were presented with vignettes where they were asked to judge which of three options would be best for a given individual, each corresponding to one of the three theories. Our findings suggest considerable variation in the criteria for well-being people employ in different contexts, especially for people of different ages. Hedonism and objective list theories garnered the most support, for older and younger individuals respectively. Desire theories received very little support. These results cast doubt on the acceptability of desire theories of well-being to much of the public and offer suggestive evidence for what might be called contextualist conceptions of well-being among the folk, perhaps lending some support to philosophical views of this sort.

Keywords: well-being; welfare; ethics; experimental philosophy; variantism; contextualism; variabilism; hedonism; desire theories; objective list theories

Introduction

Philosophical theories of well-being have traditionally been tendered in a kind of monolithic way: whatever is ultimately good for human beings—say, pleasure, desire-fulfillment, or a list of objective goods—is the same for all individuals in all contexts. Of course, the specific items that *bring* those goods will differ: performing music for one, writing novels for another. But the ultimate standard remains the same in each case: these activities bring pleasure, say, or objective goods like knowledge or achievement. Far less common is this sort of thought: a hedonistic theory of well-being applies to Ahmed, while an objective list theory applies to Nadia. Indeed, until recently this sort of claim appears to have been entirely absent from the Western philosophical tradition.

But lately there has been a flurry of interest in the suggestion that the standards for well-being somehow vary across contexts. This idea can take multiple forms, including contextualism, on which the meanings of terms vary with

context (Alexandrova, 2017; Fletcher, 2019); variantism, which holds that different theories of well-being are suited for different contexts (Alexandrova, 2017); and variabilism, which holds that different theories of well-being apply to different subjects (Lin, 2018). All of these doctrines could be invoked to explain, say, differences in well-being attributions for humans and other animals. For convenience we will use the relatively generic ‘contextualism’ for the genus that encompasses these doctrines.¹

What do the folk think about well-being? Do they tend to favor one theory over the others? For background, philosophers have commonly distinguished three major approaches to well-being (Parfit, 1984):

1. Hedonism: well-being consists in pleasure, versus pain or suffering.
2. Desire theory: well-being consists in the fulfillment of a person’s desires.
3. Objective list theory: well-being consists in the attainment of the items on some list of objective goods, such as knowledge, achievement, virtue, or the realization of one’s human potential.

Earlier empirical work has found broad support for non-hedonistic theories of well-being in American samples. For example, about two-thirds of participants judged someone to be happy but not doing well when their positive mental states were paired with bad external conditions like unfaithful family and friends that the individual was unaware of (Kneer & Haybron, 2025). But those studies did not test for which non-hedonistic theories were favored. Other research examined the role of moral virtue in well-being, finding no significant difference in ascribed well-being between individuals judged to be morally good than those deemed morally bad (Kneer & Haybron, 2024, 2026). A third line of inquiry, by Bronsteen et al., studied the impact of factors associated with different theories of well-being on lay judgment and reported a pluralist approach among the folk, who deemed that goods characteristic of all three approaches impacted individuals’ well-being (Bronsteen et al., 2024). But hedonic goods played the largest role in driving ascriptions of well-being, a result corroborated by other findings (Kneer & Haybron, 2025).²

¹ A downside of this term is that variabilism might not be dubbed contextualist in some cases: the same theory of well-being might apply in all contexts to humans, e.g., while another applies always to plants. But we can also define contexts according to their subject matter: e.g., a context in which we are concerned with humans.

² Other recent studies of lay thinking about well-being and related concepts include (Brigard, 2010; Carlquist et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2023; Diaz & Reuter, 2021; Hindriks & Douven, 2018; Joshanloo, 2013, 2014; King & Napa, 1998; Mogilner et al., 2011; Oishi et al., 2013; Olivola et al., 2013; Pflug, 2009; Phillips et al., 2011, 2014,

The pluralism Bronsteen et al. report admits of a couple of interpretations. It could simply be a theory of well-being with multiple components, as with objective list theories, which often include subjective goods like pleasure (Mitchell & Alexandrova, 2020). But it could also mean that the folk employ multiple concepts or theories of well-being, perhaps even in the same context. (So pluralism does not entail contextualism.) This would not be terribly surprising since each major theory of well-being has intuitive support, and the folk need not have committed to just one of them; nor need their unreflective opinions be coherent.

Here we report the findings from three studies using a different approach to assess lay support for each of the three main theories of well-being. In each study, participants were presented with vignettes where they were asked to judge which of three options would be best for a given individual; each option corresponded to one of the three major theories of well-being. The persons whose welfare was in question varied by age and (imagined) relationship to the participant. The other point of variation was the type of judgment elicited: advice, or desires regarding how someone's life has gone up to the present, for their sake.

Our findings suggest considerable variation in the criteria for well-being people employ in different contexts, with hedonism and objective list theories garnering the most support, and desire theories being distinctly less popular. These results offer suggestive evidence for contextualist conceptions of well-being among the folk, perhaps lending support to philosophical views of this sort. Other interpretations of the data remain possible, but further study of these questions is certainly called for.

Experiment 1

Our first study asks participants to consider how they would advise a friend about how to live: what sort of life would be best for the individual? In one variant, the advice concerned the friend herself, while in the other the advice had to do with raising her son.

Participants

We recruited 199 participants (120 female, 78 male, 1 other; $M^{age} = 43$ years, $SD = 13$ years, range = 22–82 years) via Prolific, restricting the IP address to the US. All participants provided informed consent and received monetary compensation.³

Methods & Materials

Participants read a vignette in which they were asked to provide advice about how to live to a friend, where the advice either regarded the friend's life or their child. In this between-

subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. The question and response options for the friend condition read:

Imagine that a friend, Susan, is trying to make the best decisions she can [for herself/for her child, Tom,] and is seeking your advice. No matter what she chooses, [she/her child] will be equipped to lead a reasonably satisfying, worthwhile life. But she wants to do the best she can for [herself/him].

What, in your judgment, would most benefit [your friend Susan/her child Tom]?

[Hedonism] That Susan do what will result in a life that is most enjoyable and satisfying for [herself/Tom].

[Desire satisfaction] That Susan do what will result in a life in which [she/Tom] most gets the things [she/he] wants.

[Objective list] That Susan do what will result in a life in which [she/Tom] most realizes [her/his] potential, successfully pursuing worthwhile goals.

Since objective list theories take so many forms, we scripted that option to highlight items that seemed most likely to enjoy widespread support, for instance realizing one's potential versus having knowledge.

Having completed the main task, participants then provided written explanations for their choices and completed a short demographic questionnaire.

Results

The results are graphically represented in Figure 1. Response distributions differed significantly between conditions, $\chi^2(2, N = 199) = 11.25, p = .004, V = .24$. In the *Friend* condition, participants favored hedonism (52.0%) over an objective list approach (43.0%), with both significantly above chance ($ps \leq .044$). In the *Child* condition, this pattern reversed: participants strongly favored an objective list approach (66.7%) over hedonism (30.3%), $p < .001$. Desire satisfaction theory was consistently rejected across both conditions (3.0%–5.0%), both $ps < .001$. Notably, hedonism was not significantly different from chance in the Child condition (30.3%, $p = .594$), while objective list theory was not significantly different from chance in the Friend condition (43.0%, $p = .044$, marginally significant).

A multinomial logistic regression with condition (Friend = 0, Child = 1) predicting response choice (reference: hedonism) confirmed a significant overall effect, $\chi^2(2) = 11.37, p = .003$, McFadden's pseudo $R^2 = .035$. Giving advice to a child (vs. friend) significantly increased the odds of choosing objective

2017; Pölzler et al., 2024; Prinzing et al., 2023, 2023; Prinzing & Fredrickson, 2023; Reuter et al., 2022; Scollon & King, 2011; Sotgiu, 2016; Weijers, 2013, 2014; Yang et al., 2021).

³ The preregistrations, materials, and datasets for all experiments are available on the project's OSF website under: https://osf.io/9wz3c/overview?view_only=5fd229289eb9417cb3e8674500f89b88.

list theory over hedonism (OR = 2.66, 95% CI [1.47, 4.82], $p = .001$), but did not significantly affect desire satisfaction choices (OR = 1.04, 95% CI [0.23, 4.70], $p = .959$). These results demonstrate that the relationship to an advice recipient systematically influences which theory of well-being people endorse: when advising adult friends, people favor hedonistic theories emphasizing enjoyment, while when advising them on their children, people favor objective list theories emphasizing potential and achievement.

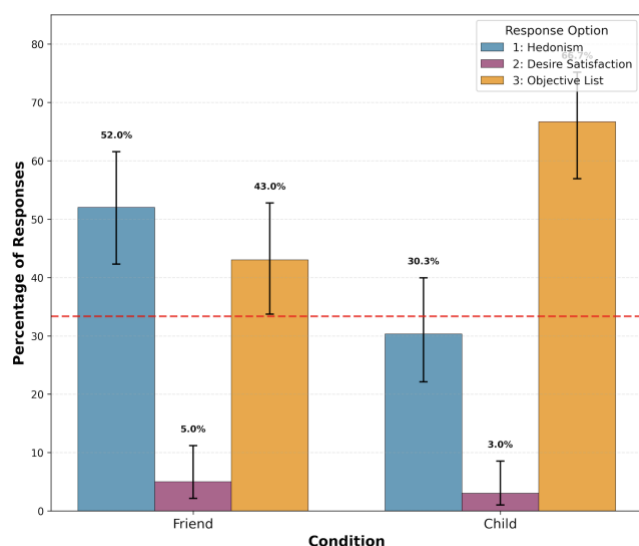


Figure 1: Proportions of responses across conditions with 95% Wilson Confidence Intervals.

Discussion

Our findings in this study found remarkably little support for desire theories of well-being, with virtually all participants preferring advice that would yield the best results in either hedonistic or objective list terms. Given the prevalence of desire theories and near relations in philosophy and especially economics over the last century, this result is surprising.

Equally striking is the reversal of support for hedonistic versus objective list theories depending on whether an adult or child's welfare was at issue, with a slight majority favoring hedonism when advising an adult friend, while roughly two-thirds focused on objective goods like realizing one's potential in worthwhile pursuits when the advice concerned a child's life.

Experiment 2

By examining only advice scenarios, our first study leaves open a possible confound: participants might have focused on *strategies* for promoting well-being rather than the ultimate criteria for a good outcome, as they had been instructed. This would not be implausible given that people tend to be more interested in practical methods for achieving happiness or well-being than in philosophical questions about what ultimately matters.

Experiment 2 controls for this possibility by shifting attention to *ex post* reflections on how a person's life has gone for them, where whatever transpires is already a *fait accompli* and questions of strategy are moot. Again, two variants were tested, involving an adult friend versus her child.

Participants

We recruited 198 participants (98 female, 94 male, 6 other; $M_{age} = 40$ years, $SD = 12$ years, range = 20–72 years) via Prolific, restricting the IP address to the US. All participants provided informed consent and received monetary compensation.

Methods & Materials

In this experiment, we used a slight variation of the materials of the materials of our Experiment 1. Instead of providing *advice*, participants were asked to think of how the life of a hypothetical friend, Susan (54), had gone to date. They were then asked: “Which sort of life would you most want your friend to have had so far, for her own sake?”. Participants could pick from the following options, similar to those of Experiment 1:

[Hedonism] A life that is most enjoyable and satisfying for her.

[Desire satisfaction] A life in which she most gets the things she wants.

[Objective list] A life in which she most realizes her potential, successfully pursuing worthwhile goals.

In the second condition, participants were thinking not of Susan's life, but that of her child Tom (16), and could choose from the same options. In this between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

Results

The results are graphically represented in Figure 2. Response distributions differed significantly between conditions, $\chi^2(2, N = 198) = 33.89$, $p < .001$, $V = .41$. In the *Friend* condition, participants strongly favored hedonism (73.7%) over an objective list approach (19.2%), both significantly different from chance ($ps \leq .003$). In the *Child* condition, this pattern reversed: participants favored an objective list approach (58.6%) over hedonism (40.4%), with objective list significantly above chance ($p < .001$) and hedonism not significantly different from chance ($p = .137$). Desire satisfaction was consistently rejected across both conditions (1.0%–7.1%), both $ps < .001$. Notably, the *Child* condition showed a more moderate pattern than Study 1 (prospective advice), with hedonism at 40.4% (vs. 30.3% in Study 1) and objective list at 58.6% (vs. 66.7% in Study 1), suggesting somewhat less polarization in retrospective evaluations.

A multinomial logistic regression with condition (*Friend* = 0, *Child* = 1) predicting response choice (reference: hedonism) confirmed a significant overall effect, $\chi^2(2) = 35.54$, $p < .001$, McFadden's pseudo $R^2 = .110$. Evaluating

the life of a teenage child (vs. the life of a friend) significantly increased the odds of choosing an objective list approach over hedonism ($OR = 5.57$, 95% CI [2.92, 10.63], $p < .001$), but did not significantly affect desire satisfaction choices ($OR = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.03, 2.19], $p = .216$). These results replicate the basic pattern from Study 1, demonstrating that the type of relationship systematically influences which theory of well-being people resort to – no matter whether they evaluate their lives retrospectively or provide advice.

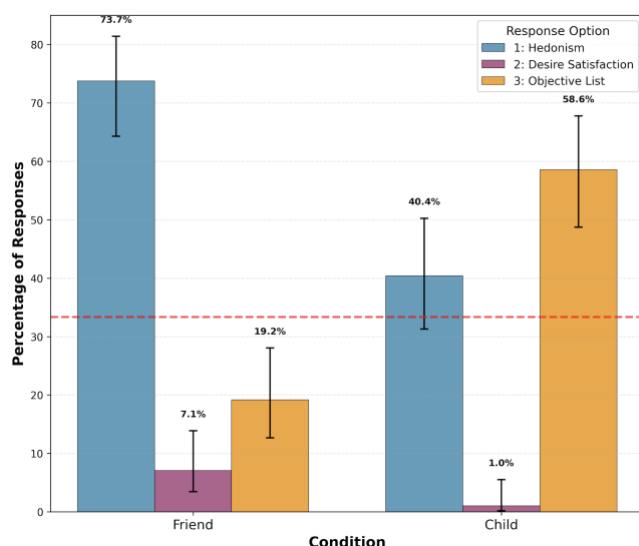


Figure 2: Proportions of responses across conditions with 95% Wilson Confidence Intervals.

Discussion

This study found the same basic pattern as Experiment 1, though hedonism enjoyed a greater advantage in the adult case and a lesser disadvantage in the child case. For the adult, nearly three-quarters preferred hedonism, with only a fifth favoring objective list theory. In the child's case, nearly three-fifths favored objective list views, while the remaining two-fifths based their response on hedonistic criteria. One reason the gap is narrower in this study may be that the child's age was not specified in the first experiment, with participants possibly assuming an age younger than 16. Virtually no one thought it best for the child to have done well in terms of desire-fulfillment, rather than doing well by objective standards or enjoyment.

It is possible that the advice framing in Experiment 1 amplified support for objective list theories compared to the retrospective design in this study—for instance, focusing on objective goods might be a good strategy for leading a pleasant life. But the overall pattern suggests that participants in both studies answered the questions as intended, focusing on the ultimate standards for doing well rather than strategies for getting there.

Experiment 3

Since the effect of age on folk conceptions of well-being appears to be robust across the first two studies, we ran a third experiment looking across the lifespan: do lay criteria for well-being track only the adult/child divide, or are the distinctions more fine-grained?

For experiment 3 we returned to the advice framing, with three variants in play, where advice is given directly to an individual who is either young (16 years old), middle-aged (38), or old (65).

Participants

We recruited 295 participants (156 female, 134 male, 5 other; $M^{age} = 43$ years, $SD = 13$ years, range = 22–81 years) via Prolific, restricting the IP address to the US. All participants provided informed consent and received monetary compensation.

Methods & Materials

In this experiment, we used the exact materials of the *Friend* condition of our Experiment 1, manipulating merely the age of the friend across the three conditions: *Young* (16 years), *Middle-aged* (38 years) and *Old* (65 years). The scenario, question and response options were the same as specified above. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions.

Results

The results are graphically represented in Figure 3. Response distributions differed significantly across conditions, $\chi^2(4, N = 295) = 17.81$, $p = .001$, $V = .17$. In the *Young* condition, participants favored an objective list approach (51.5%) over hedonism (47.4%), with both significantly above chance ($ps \leq .005$). In the *Old* condition, this pattern reversed: participants strongly favored hedonism (67.0%) over an objective list theory (25.8%), $p < .001$. The *Middle-aged* condition showed intermediate preferences (hedonism: 52.5%, objective list: 38.6%). Desire satisfaction was consistently rejected across all conditions (1.0%–8.9%), all $ps < .001$. Pairwise comparisons revealed significant differences between *Young* and *Middle-aged* conditions, $\chi^2(2, N = 198) = 8.18$, $p = .017$, $V = .20$, and between *Young* and *Old* conditions, $\chi^2(2, N = 194) = 16.09$, $p < .001$, $V = .29$. The *Middle-aged* and *Old* conditions did not differ significantly, $\chi^2(2, N = 198) = 4.45$, $p = .108$, $V = .15$.

A multinomial logistic regression with a linear contrast (*Young* = -1, *Middle-aged* = 0, *Old* = 1) predicting response choice (reference: hedonism) confirmed a significant overall effect, $\chi^2(2) = 15.17$, $p < .001$, McFadden's pseudo $R^2 = .030$. Moving from younger to older friend advice significantly decreased the odds of choosing objective list theory over hedonism ($OR = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.80], $p = .001$), but did not significantly affect desire satisfaction choices ($OR = 1.48$, 95% CI [0.76, 2.88], $p = .248$).

Our findings demonstrate that the perceived age of an advice recipient systematically influences which theory of well-being people employ: younger people are given advice consistent with objective list theories emphasizing potential and achievement, while older people tend to be given advice with greater support for hedonistic theories, emphasizing enjoyment and satisfaction.

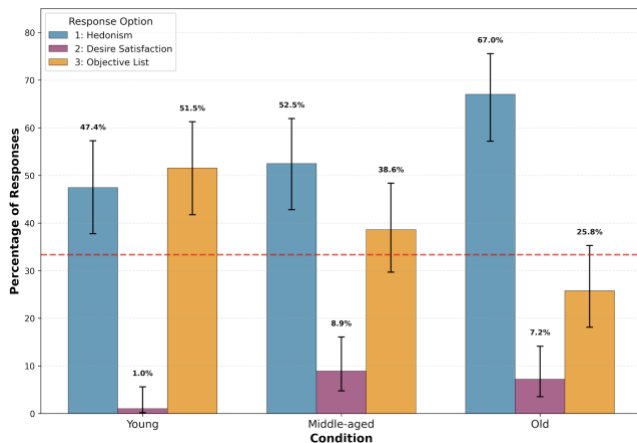


Figure 3: Proportions of responses across age group of advisee with 95% Wilson Confidence Intervals.

Discussion

This study continued the pattern of favoring objectivism for the young and hedonism for adults, with the hedonistic tilt increasing with age. As in the other studies, desire theory was consistently rejected, with virtually no support when applied to a young person.

General Discussion

Across three studies, involving both advice scenarios and after-the-fact reflection on a person's life, we found a consistent pattern in lay ascriptions of well-being: a tendency among laypersons to favor *hedonistic* standards of well-being for adults that increases with age, and *objective* standards for the young. In stark contrast, desire-theoretic standards receive very little support.

We will return to the age-related shift in thinking about well-being momentarily, but first some clarification is in order: our studies allow participants only to choose which of three types of outcome they deem *best* for the person in question.

This leaves open the possibility, suggested by earlier findings, that people employ a plurality of criteria in thinking about well-being, drawing on two or more theories of well-being (Bronsteen et al., 2024). Alternatively, people might embrace an expansive objective list theory that includes subjective items like pleasure. (Few objectivists think you could flourish even while hating your life.)

A pluralistic interpretation of folk well-being theory can resolve what may seem to be a tension between our studies

and earlier findings, on which hedonism for adults appears to be endorsed by no more than thirty to forty percent of people (Kneer & Haybron, 2025). Further scrutiny may reveal the differences not to be that large, but they are noteworthy. Yet if the folk are pluralists about well-being but *prioritize* hedonic criteria in assessing adult welfare, then the dominance of hedonistic standards in the present studies is compatible with the rejection of hedonism as a complete conception of well-being that was reported earlier.

With these clarifications in mind, we can summarize the upshot of the present studies:

1. *Contextualism?* The folk apparently use different understandings of well-being when assessing welfare across the lifespan, consistently with contextualism. This could take the form of applying different criteria, or assigning different weights to given criteria.
2. *Hedonistic* criteria tend to dominate in judging the well-being of adults, more so with advancing age. Our results are consistent with both pure hedonism and pluralism in that case.
3. *Objectivist* criteria centering on the realization of potential and success at worthwhile pursuits tend to be favored for children. Our results are consistent with both purely objective theories as well as pluralism in that case, though it should be noted that objective theories tend to be pluralistic already, including subjective criteria as well.
4. *Desire-fulfillment* appears to be the least important of the standards tested, for all ages, if it is deemed criterial for well-being at all.

These results settle no philosophical questions by themselves, but they are suggestive. Philosophers advocating contextualism about well-being or related views may be on to something, at least so far as lay opinion is concerned: we just might need different accounts of well-being for different populations or situations. Philosophers have already noted that plausible-seeming ideas about the good for typical adults can seem less enticing for children (Kraut, 1979; Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015; Skelton, 2018).

Many philosophers and especially economists have endorsed some form of the desire theory, which has substantial attractions from a theoretical perspective—at least when thinking about the typical subjects of theory: normal, rational adult human beings. But the thought that what's best for a ten-year-old is getting what they want may not often survive contact with an actual ten-year-old (Kraut, 1994). Judging from the findings presented here, desire theories may not seem that compelling in practice for any age: we've all witnessed the seemingly boundless potential for human folly. Perhaps desire theories get the traction they do, not out of a sincere conviction that getting what we want tends to work out very well for us, but because people are loath to pronounce on others' choices. That is a question for further study.

Limitations and Future Avenues of Research

A potential confound in these studies is that participants might tend to focus on particular variables of interest depending on context, taking certain others for granted: for example, assuming that a 65-year-old who enjoys life probably has a handle on whatever else matters. Whereas a young person still has much development ahead of them, and has greater need to realize their potential. So judgments about the welfare of children and adults might focus on different criteria not because they invoke different conceptions of well-being across contexts but because different aspects of well-being merit practical attention in different cases. Generally, it is not trivial to distinguish what *constitutes* well-being versus what is *practically* of greatest significance in a given case. (Should the education of a terminally ill child completely cease?)

The question at hand, note, is not whether participants are focusing on practical strategies for promoting well-being, which appears to have been ruled out by Study 2's focus on retrospective evaluation. Rather, it concerns variation in the (perceived or real) practical salience of a given aspect of well-being across contexts. E.g., worthwhile activities might matter equally across the lifespan but merit greater attention for the young than the old. Teasing these questions apart more clearly is another task for future research.

Another potential confound involves lay aversion to paternalism. For example, hedonism may be favored over objective views for adults because it is deemed less paternalistic. It is also possible that participants imagine their friends to be wiser than average, and hence are less likely to rely on objective criteria than for strangers. Perhaps future studies could assess participants' personal ideals of well-being, where objective criteria might more comfortably be embraced without fear of paternalism.

The reported suite of studies is intended as a conversation starter, and our astonishing findings merit considerable follow-up work. Such studies should vary the framing of the response options, potentially allow the choice of multiple options, introduce free-text responses for a more detailed understanding of people's views, and could complement the between-subjects designs with a within-subjects design to allow for participant-level analysis.

To establish further external validity, more complex empirical paradigms—e.g., contrastive evaluations of different characters whose well-being across approaches is systematically varied—would be helpful; less abstract and hypothetical stimuli would constitute another fruitful addition. Finally, our population is limited to US participants and studies across different languages and cultures, in particular non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies are important (see Henrich et al., 2010; Stich & Machery, 2023).

Conclusion

We suggest that the present results lend support for contextualist or related theories of well-being, again with

several important qualifications. But those qualifications are themselves of interest for that debate: philosophers' intuitions are not immune to the influence of confounds, and the present inquiry may shed light on the limitations of current arguments for contextualist accounts of well-being.

Setting aside the question of contextual variation, our findings indicate far greater support among the folk for hedonistic and objectivist theories of well-being than desire-fulfillment accounts. It would be hard, for instance, to reconcile our findings with the idea that desire theories enjoy broad support among laypersons.

This alone is quite significant: desire theories form the moral backbone of the dominant approaches to policy analysis in contemporary economics (Hausman et al., 2016). Related ideas drive large strains of empirical work on well-being, such as the emphasis on life satisfaction metrics in well-being research: life satisfaction is meant to reflect the individual's judgment about how far they are getting what they want in life, so its appeal hinges on the plausibility of desire-based views of well-being (Angner, 2009; Kneer & Haybron, 2025; Plant, 2025). It may be, then, that a great deal of research and policymaking intended to benefit the public rests on conceptions of benefit that most of the public rejects. This includes traditional approaches to policy analysis that rely on preference satisfaction, as well as most of "happiness economics," which purports to improve on the preference model but operationalizes happiness in terms of life satisfaction (Layard & De Neve, 2023). Such a result would not be easy to reconcile with ideals of democratic governance (Haybron & Tiberius, 2015). These questions naturally merit further research.

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