

**What is Good for Spock? A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism**

**Isaac Shur**

**Northeastern University**

**Introduction**

Attitudinal Hedonism is a theory of well-being which claims that welfare consists in states of attitudinal pleasure.<sup>1</sup> Fred Feldman characterizes attitudinal pleasure as a state of consciousness similar to attitudes of hope and fear or belief and doubt.<sup>2</sup> He employs the term, *enjoyment* for the relevant conscious state of attitudinal pleasure and *disenjoyment* for attitudinal pain.<sup>3</sup> Attitudinal pleasures and pains contrast with sensory pleasures like sex or drugs and sensory pains like cuts or bruises which are felt with the senses in the same way that temperature is felt. So someone who enjoys sitting at home alone to quietly read a book experiences not sensory pleasure, but attitudinal pleasure. This makes *Attitudinal Hedonism* a much more plausible theory of well-being than *Sensory Hedonism* which would maintain that activities like quietly reading cannot increase one's welfare even if one enjoys these activities.

But Attitudinal Hedonism has a different flaw according to Peter de Marneffe who claims the view leads to the implausible conclusion that the concept of welfare does not apply to beings which are not capable of enjoyment or disenjoyment.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I'll defend Attitudinal Hedonism against de Marneffe's objection. I'll begin by examining de Marneffe's objection more closely and identifying two distinct responses to it. First, I'll argue that it is not a

---

1 Feldman (2002), 604-628.

2 Ibid, 605-609.

3 Ibid, 607.

4 de Marneffe (2003), 198.

problem for Attitudinal Hedonism if the concept of welfare does not apply to the types of beings de Marneffe imagines. Second, I'll propose a broader definition of attitudinal pleasure which allows us to apply the concept to de Marneffe's hypothetical beings. For this purpose I'll argue that attitudinal pleasure is the subjective satisfaction of desire.

#### **de Marneffe's Objection: Spock's Horn**

de Marneffe imagines a being called Spock, loosely based on Spock from *Star Trek*, but different in some important ways. This Spock is capable of some propositional attitudes but not others. Among them he is capable of approval, disapproval and belief but not anger, fear or enjoyment.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of such attitudes, what motivates Spock are his normative judgements. He envisions himself as a successful officer of the Starship Enterprise, and eventually realizes this goal. He is a good officer who keeps his crew safe and demonstrates excellent propensity for rationality and reasoning. de Marneffe claims that if Attitudinal Hedonism is true, nothing is prudentially good or bad for Spock due to his lack of capacity for (dis)enjoyment. There is nothing that constitutes well-being, or ill-being, for Spock; he would be equally well off dead or alive. This seems intuitively wrong to de Marneffe who thinks that Spock can be well off or badly off despite his lack of capacity for certain attitudes.<sup>6</sup> This leads to what I'll call "Spock's Horn": we must either reject our intuitions about Spock or reject Attitudinal Hedonism, and de Marneffe chooses the latter.<sup>7</sup> His argument might be reconstructed as:

(P1): If Attitudinal Hedonism (AH) is true, then Spock cannot be well off or badly off.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

(P2): Spock can be well off or badly off.

(C): So, AH is false.

Feldman is unlikely to be moved by de Marneffe's objection. In her review of Feldman's book, Serena Olsaretti rejects the Spock objection as relying on too narrow a view of attitudinal pleasure.<sup>8</sup> In fact Feldman later expanded his paper into a book which includes a larger list of pro-attitudes that count as attitudinal pleasure by his lights. To enjoyment he adds being pleased, glad or delighted as well as contentment or satisfaction with one's life.<sup>9</sup> Despite Spock's lack of capacity for certain pro-attitudes, it seems that he is still capable of contentment and satisfaction with his own life. Olsaretti sees this as enough to escape de Marneffe's objection but she also argues that Feldman's book fails to give a adequate account of what exactly counts as attitudinal pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

This leaves us with two ways of responding to de Marneffe. We could take a broad view of attitudinal pleasure and reject premise P1 of Spock's Horn and assert that according to AH there is such a thing as welfare for Spock. But this would require a proper definition of what attitudinal pleasure actually is. Feldman's description is vague and incohesive, it isn't clear what unifies the attitudes he lists. Alternatively, we could reject P2 and assert that though the concept of welfare does not apply Spock, this does not constitute a serious problem for AH. In this paper, I'll undertake both tasks. First I'll adopt a narrow view of attitudinal pleasure as de Marneffe does and argue that our intuitions about Spock are mistaken. Then I'll adopt a broad view of attitudinal pleasure and argue for a definition of it endorsed by Chris Heathwood, specifically that welfare the subjective satisfaction of desire.<sup>11</sup> Although I find this broader view of attitudinal pleasure the more plausible approach, either approach is a

<sup>8</sup> Olsaretti (2007), 412n5.

<sup>9</sup> Feldman (2004), 50, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Olsaretti (2007), 411-412.

sufficient objection to de Marneffe.

### The Narrow View of Pleasure: Spock Has No Capacity for Welfare

I'll begin with the narrow view of attitudinal pleasure according to which it is synonymous with (dis)enjoyment. Under this view of pleasure Attitudinal Hedonism implies that it doesn't make sense to speak of Spock's welfare. But our intuition goes against this conclusion; it does make sense to speak of his welfare despite Spock's incapacity for (dis)enjoyment. Thus there are two important tasks which must be accomplished to defend Attitudinal Hedonism. First, our intuitions about Spock must be explained. Second, a rejection of our intuitions must be justified.

### Explaining Our Intuitions

To begin explaining why we intuitively believe there is a sense in which Spock can be well off or not, we must make the distinction between well-being/welfare and *prudential value*. This subtle distinction is not often acknowledged. Whereas *welfare* and *well-being* are synonymous, *prudential value* is what *contributes* to welfare or well-being. As Tim E. Taylor puts it, some good X has positive prudential value for S if it increases S's well-being.<sup>12</sup> Taylor gives the example of a prisoner on death row who is eating his last meal before execution.<sup>13</sup> The meal itself has positive prudential value because it raises his well-being, slightly. But overall, the prisoner's well-being is bound to be low. He has endured horrible conditions on death row for a long time, and he is about to die. As an analogy we might say that one's welfare or well-being is like one's bank account and withdrawals and deposits are like goods with negative or

positive prudential value.<sup>14</sup> If Spock cannot be well off, then there are no goods which are of any prudential value to Spock.

However, Taylor also identifies another often overlooked distinction, the distinction between *potential* and *actual* prudential value. A good has potential prudential value if it is the sort of thing that will generally make someone's life go better, and this potential value is only realized once the good actually impacts someone's well-being.<sup>15</sup> Returning to the death row example, the steak only has potential prudential value until the prisoner eats and enjoys it, thus realizing this potential value and converting it into actual value. This is only possible because the prisoner enjoys steak and is able to eat it. If he were a vegan, or had no teeth, the steak would merely have potential value for the prisoner, and this potential would go unrealized. One way to make sense of our intuitions about Spock is to say that any and all goods have merely potential prudential value for him. We intuitively feel that making rank on the Enterprise is good for Spock because we recognize that it has *potential* prudential value. What we fail to acknowledge is that this potential cannot be realized by Spock. However, just as we might give dentures to someone so they can eat steak, perhaps we could give some cybernetic implant to Spock which allows him to feel enjoyment<sup>16</sup>.

Another way we might explain our intuitions is to say that we project the idea of welfare onto Spock because of our psychological altruism, our evolved tendency to sometimes disregard our own self-interest for the sake of others. This evolutionary phenomenon is one way of explaining why group members

---

14 *Ibid.* 11.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Perhaps we are even obligated to do so in the same way we might be obligated to provide amputees with prosthetics, or the blind with artificial eyes. It might be much easier to swallow the fact that Spock has no welfare naturally, if we had the technology to give him one artificially. This is an interesting line of thinking that I do not have the time to explore here.

---

11 Heathwood (2006), 539-563.

12 Taylor (2013), 12.

13 *Ibid.* 10.

tend to take care of each other, though culture and genetics contribute to this motivation as well.<sup>17</sup> I argue that this evolutionary factor would cause us to care about autonomous sentient beings such as Spock, even if those beings technically fail to satisfy the conditions for well-being. We can see why it would be advantageous for Captain Kirk and the rest of the crew to be inclined to attend to Spock's putative welfare and act accordingly. This would explain Captain Kirk and the crew's inclination to be altruistic to Spock which I take to be an obvious way for the crew of a vessel to behave with respect to one another. Even if these intuitions technically are false beliefs, they serve the useful purpose of promoting unity and cohesion on the Enterprise.

#### **Rejecting Our Intuitions**

I've just identified a useful aspect of our intuitions about Spock, but I want to argue for a rejection of those intuitions. Whatever their usefulness, we should not behave any differently towards Spock even if we reject those intuitions. We can admit that de Marneffe's Spock does not have the capacity for welfare while denying this is particularly problematic for Attitudinal Hedonism. Just because Spock lacks the capacity for well-being it does not follow that it would be permissible to treat him as if he had no moral worth. It would still be morally wrong to remove him unjustly from his post, to kill him or to deprive him of his rational capacities. Additionally, de Marneffe posits that Spock is motivated by normative judgements.<sup>18</sup> So as long as there are normative considerations apart from prudential welfare, Spock would not view himself as equally well off dead as alive. If you asked Spock whether he'd prefer to maintain his rational capacities or not, he'd likely answer he'd rather maintain them. Spock just has different motivations for answering these questions in these

17 Sober and Wilson (1999), 296-305, 324-326.

18 de Marneffe (2003), 198-199.

ways. He might make the normative judgement that good examples of his species maintain their lives and rational capacities. He would be a bad example of his species if he lacked these goods, so they're good for him in the perfectionist sense rather than the prudential sense. Any given state of affairs could be good for Spock morally, aesthetically, or perfectionistically, all of which are normative considerations aside from well-being. Thus, the actual implications of Spock not satisfying the conditions for well-being are not as drastic as de Marneffe suggests, and Attitudinal Hedonism remains a plausible theory of welfare.

#### **The Broad View of Pleasure: Spock's Welfare**

I now turn to the broad view of attitudinal pleasure which rejects P1 of Spock's Horn. This view of attitudinal pleasure counters de Marneffe's objection by claiming that Spock does indeed have the relevant pro-attitudes necessary for welfare. This is the view Olsaretti holds<sup>19</sup> but she argues this broad view is an inadequate account of attitudinal pleasure because of its lack of specificity and conceptual unity. If we're going to use the broad view to counter de Marneffe, we'll have to provide a specific definition of attitudinal pleasure. I propose the definition of attitudinal pleasure endorsed by Chris Heathwood.<sup>20</sup> Attitudinal pleasure is the *subjective satisfaction of desire*. This definition encompasses all of the attitudinal pleasures that Feldman posits: enjoyment, being pleased, glad, delighted, satisfied, or content.<sup>21</sup> It also clearly allows us to apply the concept of welfare to Spock's condition since de Marneffe denies Spock a capacity for enjoyment but he admits that Spock has goals he wants to achieve.<sup>22</sup> This

19 Olsaretti (2007), 412n5.

20 Heathwood (2006), 539-563.

21 Feldman (2004), 50, 56.

22 de Marneffe (2003), 198-199.

definition of attitudinal pleasure will surely face objections, which I turn to now.

### **Heathwood's Good Life: Is it Really Hedonism?**

It might seem as though I've now abandoned Attitudinal Hedonism in favor of another theory, Desire-Satisfactionism. But the beauty of this definition, as Heathwood argues, is it reveals that Attitudinal Hedonism and Desire-Satisfactionism are *the very same theory, described in different ways*.<sup>23</sup> In short, this is because the two theories do not disagree about the evaluation of lives. Heathwood argues that it would be extremely difficult to imagine a case where an agent desires a state of affairs, believes this desire to be fulfilled, and yet fails to enjoy, be pleased, glad, delighted, satisfied, or content about that state of affairs. Thus Attitudinal Hedonism and Desire Satisfactionism are the same theories of welfare because they wholly agree about what the good life looks like.<sup>24</sup>

However, Heathwood also claims that attitudinal pleasure reduces to the basic attitudes of desire and belief. One might claim the view is not purely Hedonist since it identifies goods other than pleasure as having intrinsic value, namely fulfilled desires.<sup>25</sup> But this argument would be mistaken. Fulfilled desires do not have value on their own, they require that some agent be aware of the fulfillment. Heathwood gives an example of meeting a sick stranger on a train and desiring that the stranger recovers their health.<sup>26</sup> Weeks after you've parted ways, the stranger has indeed recovered their health, but it seems incorrect to say your welfare has increased because of this. This demonstrates that fulfilled desires on their own don't have value, one must be aware they have been fulfilled, at which point attitudinal pleasure is obtained. So attitudinal pleasure remains what is truly of value.

---

23 Heathwood (2006), 556-560.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Defining a purely Hedonist view as Olsaretti does (2007), 413.

26 Heathwood (2006), 543.

### **False Beliefs and Defective Desires**

Heathwood is also convinced that one obtains attitudinal pleasure if they falsely believe a desire has been fulfilled.<sup>27</sup> Feldman instead posits that taking pleasure in true beliefs is more valuable than taking pleasure in false ones.<sup>28</sup> I side with Heathwood on this issue but even still we have good reason to prefer taking pleasure in true beliefs rather than false ones. It isn't that truth modifies the value of pleasure but rather that taking pleasure in true beliefs increases the likelihood that the attitudinal pleasure will persist over time. Consider two men both of whom desire that their wives be faithful and take attitudinal pleasure in believing this is the case. For the first man this belief is true, his wife is faithful. But for the second it is false, his wife is secretly cheating on him.<sup>29</sup> I maintain that both men feel equal amounts of attitudinal pleasure but there is a chance the second man will eventually learn the truth, at which point his pleasure will cease.<sup>30</sup>

One more objection to consider is defective desire. Olsaretti argues that attitudinal pleasure is distinct from desire because we sometimes remain unpleased from fulfilling desires or find ourselves pleased by states of affairs we did not previously desire.<sup>31</sup> But Heathwood has a good response to this.<sup>32</sup> First he considers a case where he desires froot loops after remembering them from

---

27 *Ibid.* 556.

28 Feldman (2002), 614-616.

29 Feldman uses a similar example. It may be said that since Feldman and Heathwood evaluate the lives of these men differently, they use different theories. This is true. But Feldman is using an adjusted version of Attitudinal Hedonism. The more basic form of Attitudinal Hedonism is still identical to Desire-Satisfactionism, as Heathwood claims.

30 This analysis also side-steps the argument that Attitudinal Hedonism values truth for its own sake. The belief that one's wife is faithful only generates attitudinal pleasure if one desires their wife to be faithful. A man in an open marriage on the other hand, does not desire his wife to be faithful, and so receives no benefit from believing she is regardless of if this belief is true or not.

his childhood but once he acquires the cereal, he finds he dislikes the overly sweet taste. Heathwood argues that once he bit into the froot loops, he lost the desire for them. About being pleased at something we did not previously desire, he offers the example of his wife surprising him with a back massage; as soon as his wife begins the massage, he also forms a desire for it he did not have before. Essentially Heathwood is arguing that the cases Olsaretti seems to have in mind ignore the element of time, an argument I find convincing which defends the claim that Attitudinal Hedonism and Desire-Satisfactionism are the same theory.<sup>33</sup>

### **What is Good for Spock?**

Given this view of attitudinal pleasure as the subjective satisfaction of desire, we can see that Spock does indeed have a capacity for welfare according to Attitudinal Hedonism. But it does appear that Spock is not capable of achieving welfare to the same *degree* that humans do. Spock has desires he can satisfy but the states of attitudinal pleasure he can have are limited by his lack of capacity for certain pro-attitudes. Spock appears to be capable of contentment and satisfaction, but not enjoyment. We might say that Spock's attitudinal pleasures are not as intense as humans', which explains Spock's cold and stoic nature. But this is of little consequence, just as Spock's incapacity for welfare under the narrow view turned out to be of little consequence. Spock's lesser capacity for attitudinal pleasure surely does not affect his moral standing as an

---

31 Olsaretti (2007), 411. She also says Feldman shares this claim with her, but her citations make it unclear where exactly Feldman makes this claim.

32 Heathwood (2006), 558.

33 There is the issue of which moniker to use. Even though the theories evaluate lives identically, I think it is more semantically appropriate to use the name Attitudinal Hedonism given that the actual intrinsic good is still attitudinal pleasure. Whereas fulfilled desires are a mere component of attitudinal pleasure.

autonomous and sentient being. All this really means is that, for example, if you have a delicious apple that you want to gift to someone on the Enterprise, it makes more sense for you to give it to Kirk (or another human) than Spock. But Spock is likely to agree with this conclusion anyway, provided he has consumed enough calories for the day. Spock might be contented by the apple whereas Kirk might be delighted by it, so it is perfectly logical to give the apple to Kirk. I don't see this as a problem for Attitudinal Hedonism.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I've defended Attitudinal Hedonism by responding to de Marneffe's objection that according to AH, the concept of welfare cannot apply to beings who cannot experience (dis)enjoyment. I argued that de Marneffe is either mistaken about the consequences of this incapacity for welfare, or else mistaken that they lack the capacity in the first place. I've also argued that Attitudinal Hedonism and Desire-Satisfactionism are the same theory, due to the definition of attitudinal pleasure being the subjective fulfillment of desire. There are of course more objections that might be raised against Attitudinal Hedonism besides de Marneffe's. But I've focused on his since they apply broadly to any form of Attitudinal Hedonism whereas other objections often attack special variants.<sup>34</sup> I'm currently of the belief that Attitudinal Hedonism is the closest thing we have to a true theory of welfare, and thus it is important to defend its plausibility.

### **References**

- de Marneffe, Peter. (2003). "An Objection to Attitudinal Hedonism." *Philosophical Studies* 115: 197-200.  
Feldman, Fred. (2002). "The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65: 604-628.  
Feldman, Fred. (2004). *Pleasure and the Good Life*. Oxford University Press.  
Heathwood, Chris. (2006). "Desire Satisfaction and Hedonism." *Philosophical Studies* 129: 413-415.

---

34 See for instance Olsaretti (2007), 413-415.

- 128 (3): 539-563.
- Olsaretti, Serena. (2007). "The Limits of Hedonism: Feldman on the Value of Attitudinal Pleasure." *Philosophical Studies* 136 (3): 409-415.
- Sober, Elliot and David Sloan Wilson. (199). "The Evolution of Psychological Altruism." Ch. 10 in *Unto Others*. Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Tim E. (2013). "Well-being and Prudential Value." *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly* 31 (2): 10-17.