

NOT LIVING MY BEST LIFE

A REPLY TO MASNY

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DESPITE THE EXTENT of their other disagreements, philosophers of well-being have tended to assume that the prudential goodness of a life is determined by what *actually* happens or its *actual* features. Following Michal Masny, I will call this assumption the “orthodox view” of the prudential goodness of a life.

In an interesting recent paper, Masny has put forward a novel theory of the goodness of a life that explicitly *rejects* the orthodox view: the *Dual Theory*.¹ The Dual Theory, if true, would have significant implications for various issues in normative ethics, such as duties of beneficence. It is thus worthy of serious attention. In this paper, I first explain the Dual Theory and the motivation that Masny provides for it. I then put forward three general problems for the Dual Theory and Masny’s case for it.

1. THE DUAL THEORY

Masny introduces the Dual Theory thus:

How good a life is for someone is determined jointly by their level of well-being and the degree to which they realize their potential. (7)

This contrasts with what Masny calls the “orthodox view”:

How good a life is for its subject depends exclusively on the things that actually happened within it. (6)

The crucial part of the orthodox view for Masny and for my discussion is the claim that the goodness of a life is determined by *actual* events or features of the life.

To give a sense of just *how* orthodox this assumption is, notice first that it is neutral on the division between all the main theories of well-being: hedonism, desire theories, perfectionism, objective list theories, hybrid theories, value-fulfilment

¹ Masny, “Wasted Potential.” All parenthetical page references are to Masny’s paper.

theories, etc. Furthermore, though it might superficially seem otherwise, the orthodox view is also neutral on various debates *within* such camps. For example, desire fulfilment theorists face questions about the relation between a subject's desire, the timing of the desired state of affairs, and the time of the prudential goodness generated.² The orthodox view is compatible with every view on this question. The orthodox view is also fully compatible with highly *idealized* forms of desire views, so long as such views maintain, as they do, that it is only the *actual* events or features of our lives that contribute to their goodness (by satisfying the desires of some hypothetical counterpart).³ Moreover, the orthodox view is compatible also with the possibility of posthumous harms and benefits, as long as only actual events determine someone's level of well-being posthumously. (It is also compatible with rejecting such posthumous effects.)⁴

Thus, to repeat, on the *orthodox* view, the goodness of a life is determined by one thing: how much well-being it *actually* instantiates. By contrast, on Masny's Dual Theory, the goodness of a life is determined by two things: how much well-being it actually instantiates *and* how much of its potential is realized.

I will examine the Dual Theory in more depth in the next section. It is helpful first to see the motivation for it. Masny provides two main cases to support the Dual Theory and to undermine the orthodox view. The first case involves Sophie Germain, a nineteenth-century mathematics prodigy:

She was born to a wealthy Parisian family and enjoyed a life rich in meaningful relationships, sophisticated pleasures, and important achievements. However, much of her exceptional academic talent was wasted because of the obstacles she faced as a woman. Early on, her parents tried to hinder her youthful fascination with mathematics. Later, she was barred from attending the Ecole Polytechnique and the meetings of the Paris Academy of Sciences, and both her manuscripts and published work were regularly ignored by her contemporaries. (6)

Masny argues that the case of Sophie evokes a kind of "evaluative ambivalence":

On the one hand, her story is uplifting: she experienced a lot of what makes life valuable. On the other, there is a sense of tragedy that we just

- 2 On these issues see, for example, Bradley, *Well-Being and Death*, sec. 1.3; Baber, "Ex Ante Desire and Post Hoc Satisfaction"; Dorsey, "Desire-Satisfaction and Welfare as Temporal" and Dorsey, "Prudence and Past Selves"; Bruckner, "Present Desire Satisfaction and Past Well-Being"; and Lin, "Asymmetrism about Desire Satisfactionism and Time."
- 3 For defense and discussion of such views, see Railton, "Facts and Values"; and Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person."
- 4 On posthumous harms and benefits, see Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead"; and Boonin, *Dead Wrong*.

cannot shrug off: she could have achieved much more, but didn't, and could have been more appreciated and spared many frustrations, but wasn't.⁵ (6)

This ambivalence seems genuine to me. Masny argues that the Dual Theory makes sense of this ambivalence, among its other virtues (and that the orthodox view cannot make good sense of such ambivalence). Let us now see the Dual Theory in detail.

2. THE DUAL THEORY EXPLORED

The best way to appreciate the details of the Dual Theory of the prudential goodness of a life is by tracing Masny's route through various choices for this view. First, is someone's potential determined by facts about them as an individual or by some reference class to which the individual belongs? Masny holds that it is the *individual's* potential. Second, what is the relevant degree of potential? Is it someone's level of well-being in a close possible world or something more demanding? Masny suggests that their potential is their "*maximal* possible well-being" (16). Third, is it the well-being that was actually possible or that which the individual *believed* to be possible? Masny opts for the *objective* version.

I have no reservations about these choices (particularly the first and third).⁶ A trickier one, as Masny acknowledges, is the fourth choice: What is the relevant kind of possibility? Here there is a challenge. Construing possibility extremely broadly, such as logical possibility, would end up giving everyone the same, extremely high level of potential well-being. Thus the Dual Theory needs something more restrictive if it is not to end up dialectically uninteresting. Masny characterizes a more restrictive account of possibility in terms of "intrinsic potential":

We may refer to the distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* potential. The former is the potential whose attainment does not require any direct or significant alteration of the individual's constitution, whereas the latter notion is more encompassing. . . . Of these two notions, intrinsic potential appears to me to be closer to what matters. (18)

Masny illustrates this with his second case, the example of a boy named Billy, introduced earlier in the paper as having a "serious cognitive impairment" (12). Masny writes:

- 5 Nothing in Masny's discussion or this reply rules out *other* kinds of ambivalence—for instance, judging that a life was prudentially good but morally disappointing.
- 6 Masny's choice on the second question is one with which people who are attracted to the Dual Theory might want to disagree. Constraints of space preclude discussion here.

Billy’s intrinsic potential is not much higher than his actual well-being, whereas his extrinsic potential is considerably higher. Of these two notions, intrinsic potential appears to me to be closer to what matters. After all, there is something heartening about Billy’s life. I will assume this view for the remainder of the discussion. (18)

Thus, in sum, the full version of the Dual Theory holds:

The goodness of a life is determined by two factors: (a) the level of well-being actually realized and (b) the degree to which the individual attains the maximal level of well-being that it is possible for that individual to realize without direct or significant alteration of their constitution.

When it comes to the interaction between these two factors, Masny outlines two models:

According to the *Addition Model*, to determine the overall value of a life, we need to add the value of realized potential to the contribution made by well-being, where the former is represented by a non-negative number. . . . By contrast, the *Subtraction Model* determines the overall value of a life by subtracting the disvalue of unrealized potential from the value of well-being. . . . (19)

Here Masny opts for the Subtraction Model.

Having seen the Dual Theory in full detail, we can now apply it to the cases of Sophie and Billy, deploying some purely illustrative numbers (table 1). The Dual Theory can note that Sophie’s life contained a lot of well-being but fared poorly relative to the well-being she could have attained without direct or significant alteration of her constitution. (The relevant change needed was in her society.) Conversely, the theory can hold that while Billy fared less well in absolute terms, he fared *well* relative to the level of well-being he could have attained without direct or significant alteration of his constitution.

Table 1

	Well-Being Actually Instantiated	Maximal Possible Well-Being without Direct or Significant Alteration of Constitution	Unrealized Well-Being	Dual Theory (Subtraction Model)
Sophie	10	25	15	$(10 - 15) = -5$
Billy	2	3	1	$(2 - 1) = 1$

Note that the numbers here are purely illustrative. Understandably, Masny does not take a stand on the overall noncomparative goodness or badness of either Billy’s life or Sophie’s life, nor on what difference, if any, there is between them.

I use these numbers only to explain the *structure* of the view, not to make claims about its specific implications in the cases Masny mentions.

3. THE DUAL THEORY VERSUS THE ORTHODOX VIEW

3.1. Preserving Ambivalence

As noted above, Masny seems right about the case of Sophie. We do feel ambivalent. Her life was good and also tragic. Yet I think that an orthodox view, with proper supplementation, offers a satisfactory explanation of this.

The supplementation that the orthodox view needs is the addition of an alternative explanation (one that Masny rejects in the paper): treating our evaluative ambivalence as stemming from the fact that we make two different types of judgments about Sophie's life. We make a noncomparative judgment of how good it *was* (her life went well) and a comparative judgment of how good it *could have been* but for the prejudice that blighted it (her life could have gone much better). I will call this supplement the "two judgments strategy."

One advantage for the two judgments strategy over the Dual Theory is that it preserves the *ambivalence* that Masny uses to motivate the Dual Theory. Taking the two judgments strategy, we can think that Sophie's life went well and that it could have gone much better. We can be simultaneously pleased for her and frustrated or disappointed.

The Dual Theory view, by contrast, removes the ambiguity. This is because the two factors—well-being actually realized and attainment of maximal possible well-being—serve to generate a single verdict about the goodness of her life (through either the Addition or Subtraction Models). This makes it surprising that Masny articulates evaluative ambivalence thus:

A full and accurate description of the quality of her life seems to preclude merely summing the two evaluations, positive and negative. Instead, it requires that we maintain both judgments at once. (9)

The Dual Theory of course gives the overall goodness of life two subparts. But it precisely does *not* require that we maintain both judgments at once. Instead, it holds that there is one overall fact about the goodness of the life—one determined by the interplay of two factors. We see this in the way that the Dual Theory would give us *one* verdict about each case. This might be, for instance, that Sophie's life went badly and that Billy's life was minimally good. By contrast, the orthodox view, with the two judgments strategy, can preserve ambivalence. We judge that Sophie's life went well, which pleases us. And we judge separately that it could have gone much better, a source of regret. Thus one

strike against the Dual Theory—and one source of support for the orthodox view—is that the Dual Theory removes evaluative ambivalence.

One might reply that the Dual Theory can say that the different *subsidiary* evaluations of the actual well-being and the realisation of potential well-being, even if they feed into a single judgment, are still sufficient to preserve ambivalence. But this explanation of ambivalence is no better than the explanation that the orthodox view offers. The orthodox view says that we are ambivalent because we make a positive (noncomparative) judgment of the goodness of the life and a negative (comparative) judgment of how good it was relative to how good it could have been. The Dual Theory holds that the inputs into the single judgment of the goodness of the life that it provides are a positive judgment and a negative judgment. If the subsidiary judgments were enough to preserve ambivalence, it is unclear why the two judgments that can be offered by the orthodox view are any worse. Thus, to put the objection of this section more concessively: the Dual Theory either eliminates ambivalence or has no advantage over the orthodox view in explaining it.⁷

3.2. Irrelevant Potentials and Differences

The orthodox view can allow that unrealized potential goodness contributes *instrumentally* to the goodness or badness of a life (via unhappiness, etc.). What is at issue between the Dual Theory view and the orthodox view is whether unrealized potential well-being affects the goodness of a life *intrinsically* and *separately* from actualized well-being.⁸ When we note this point, we see one way in which the case of Sophie is a less than pure test case. After all, Sophie was aware and presumably anguished by the ways her circumstances prevented her life from going better than it did. Let us consider another case—about someone named Megan—that amends this feature, through which we see another objection to the Dual Theory view:

Megan: Megan “enjoyed a life rich in meaningful relationships, sophisticated pleasures, and important achievements.” Megan’s developed talents, unlike Sophie’s, lay in the kinds of activities that were unrestricted to women at that time. However, Megan, like Sophie, lived before the

7 Masny appears to concede that the orthodox view is able to say satisfactory things about some of the cases. He provides other cases in the paper that he claims speak against the orthodox view (sec. 6). I regret that I lack the space to address Masny’s interesting cases there.

8 The “separately” is necessary to distinguish the Dual Theory from a theory of well-being with “unrealized potential” on its list of actual well-being determinants. The difference between such a view and the Dual Theory is an interesting question I lack the space to pursue.

development of soccer as a sport. Unbeknownst to anyone, Megan had the potential to be the greatest soccer player of all time, and this would have enhanced her well-being greatly.

Note that Megan’s realizing her potential would not have involved a direct or significant alteration of her constitution. Rather, as for Sophie, it would simply have required the wider world to have been different (by containing soccer).⁹ Structurally speaking, as shown by table 2, the Megan case thus looks like the Sophie case, according to the Dual Theory:

Table 2

	Well-Being Actually Instantiated	Maximal Possible Well-Being without Direct or Significant Alteration of Constitution	Unrealized Well-Being	Dual Theory (Subtraction Model)
Megan	10	25	15	$(10 - 15) = -5$

Yet the fact that Megan had such unrealized and entirely unknown potential does not itself seem to make her life less good or regrettable, considered non-comparatively (even if we can regret that it prevented her life from being *even better*). Nor does it seem like it would have made her life better to have *lacked* this unrealized, unknown potential—an implication of the Dual Theory that Masny is commendably explicit about (14). To see this, consider Megan’s twin sister Twegan, who differed only in some minimal way that would have prevented her from being a successful football player.¹⁰ Comparing the two sisters, we get table 3:

Table 3

	Well-Being Actually Instantiated	Maximal Possible Well-Being without Direct or Significant Alteration of Constitution	Unrealized Well-Being	Dual Theory (Subtraction Model)
Megan	10	25	15	$(10 - 15) = -5$
Twegan	10	12	2	$(10 - 2) = 8$

The Dual Theory will contend that Twegan’s life went better than Megan’s because Megan *could* have had a higher level of well-being (in a world containing soccer). This is despite the facts that neither Megan nor Twegan had

9 We could substitute some other talent or attribute here. All that must be true is that it be something that someone could have without being aware of it (or without being aware of how it could unlock substantially more well-being for them).

10 I here assume that such a case could be compatible with the “significant alteration of constitution” clause of the Dual Theory.

any inkling of this; they both lived in a world without soccer; and their lives contained the same amount of actual well-being.

To reiterate a point from above, it is consistent with the orthodox view to lament that Megan lived in the world without soccer and so missed out on the better life that she could have had. But the fittingness of this is distinct from taking this to detract from the actual goodness of her life and thinking that Megan’s life was a worse life than Twegan’s.

To take the point further, suppose that Megan had a friend, Fregan, whose life instantiated more well-being (+12) than Megan’s but had a lower maximum possible well-being than Megan’s. Consider table 4:

Table 4

	Well-Being Actually Instantiated	Maximal Possible Well-Being without Direct or Significant Alteration of Constitution	Unrealized Well-Being	Dual Theory (Subtraction Model)
Megan	10	25	15	$(10 - 15) = -5$
Twegan	10	12	2	$(10 - 2) = 8$
Fregan	12	20	8	$(12 - 8) = 4$

The Dual Theory would rank these lives as follows: Twegan > Fregan > Megan. Yet it seems reasonable to be indifferent between the lives of Megan and Twegan and to rank Fregan’s life over the other two, given that it contained more well-being. This, I suggest, is because we can—and do—separate our judgments of how good a life could have been from how good it actually was, with the latter tracking the well-being actually instantiated. This is easier to see once we think about *unknown* potential.

3.3. Extreme Skepticism

The previous problem for the Dual Theory stemmed from the verdicts that it would reach about cases and how it would reach them. A further worry is the degree of *skepticism* about the goodness of lives that the Dual Theory thereby produces. Masny introduces and then dismisses the worry:

One might also worry that as we expand our understanding of the goodness of a life, it becomes less transparent what is in our interest at any given time and how our lives are going as a whole. This is because now we need to know not just facts about the actual world, but also about various possible worlds. And this, in turn, might be taken to have a paralyzing effect on the ability of our theory of prudence to inform our lives. . . . This concern is overstated. Even the orthodox view on which the goodness of a life is determined solely by the level of well-being

gives us at most rough guidance regarding matters of self-interest. For example, we would all be hard-pressed to report our lifetime hedonic scores as of this morning. Likewise, the primary ambition of the Dual Theory is not to guide us through every single decision, but rather to help us better understand what makes life good. I believe it is successful in this regard. (32)

Masny is correct that the orthodox view generates difficult questions. But that does not undermine the comparative point. The Dual Theory makes it hugely more difficult to know whether a life went well because we must know both how well it went and how maximally well it *could* have gone. But this latter test seems so difficult to pass as to generate an extreme kind of skepticism, one where we could never, or almost never, know that someone's life had gone well. But this seems too stringent. It seems more plausible that our judgments about whether a life went well are not so modally sensitive, because they track something noncomparative: the actual amount of well-being attained. This is why we are able to know that some lives are good despite our not knowing how good they could have been.

4. CONCLUSION

I have provided three main objections to Masny's Dual Theory. As compared with the orthodox view of the prudential goodness of a life, the Dual Theory eliminates ambivalence or is no better at explaining it than the orthodox view. It makes the goodness of lives sensitive to irrelevant factors and differences, and it generates an implausible degree of skepticism about our ability to know when a life goes well.¹¹

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