

An Account of Wellbeing for Wellbeing Frameworks

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Abstract

Governments are increasingly using *wellbeing frameworks* as a primary way to measure economic and social progress. These frameworks aim to measure a population's wellbeing in order to develop policy that improves its wellbeing. However, there is strong disagreement as to what wellbeing consists in, both among philosophers and the general public. So, what is it exactly that governments should be trying to promote when they aim to measure and promote wellbeing—what account of wellbeing should they use in wellbeing frameworks? My method is to identify the primary conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks and find the account of wellbeing that best meets those conditions. When we do this, we find that no existing account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks is satisfactory. I describe an account of wellbeing that has not been used in government measures of national wellbeing, which I call the Reflective Value account. I argue this account succeeds in meeting our conditions and so is the best account of wellbeing for this purpose.

§1 Introduction

Governments in liberal democracies are increasingly using *wellbeing frameworks* as a primary way to measure economic and social progress. Such governments include those of New Zealand, Scotland, Finland, Iceland, Wales, the UK, Canada, and Australia. These frameworks purport to measure not just income, economic growth, and economic activity, but a range of aspects of life thought important

for people's wellbeing.¹ They aim to *measure* a population's wellbeing in order to develop policy that *improves* its wellbeing. However, there is strong disagreement as to what wellbeing consists in, both among philosophers and the general public. So, what is it exactly that governments should be trying to promote when they aim to measure and promote wellbeing in a liberal democracy? That is, what account of wellbeing should we use in wellbeing frameworks?

We might wonder whether we really *need* an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks. It might seem that we can have a list of things that are measured and improved as aspects of wellbeing without having any account of what wellbeing is. The problem with this approach is that in the absence of an account of wellbeing there's no explicit rationale for what goes on the list of things to be measured and improved and what doesn't. When the state improves some things and not others as good for the population there should be an explicit rationale available to the population for what the state decides to include and exclude. We know it isn't just *obvious* what goes on the list, because these lists can vary significantly between different countries' wellbeing frameworks and views of wellbeing differ significantly between cultures (Carlquist et al. 2017, Joshanloo 2014, Joshanloo and Weijers 2014, Sollis et al. 2024, Sollis et al. 2022).

It might seem that we can do without an account of wellbeing by measuring and improving not wellbeing itself, but just those things people need in order to have wellbeing. One way of doing that might be to measure and improve just the *resources* people need to pursue whatever they consider wellbeing to be. However, as Sen noted (1979, 1985a, 1999), the amount of resources a person has is not a good measure of her ability to pursue wellbeing, because people differ widely in their ability to convert the same amount of a resource into wellbeing; an income that allows a physically abled person to lead a good life might be insufficient for a physically disabled person who needs a greater income to afford medical support or specially adapted housing.² Another way of doing

¹ Wellbeing is what you have to the extent your life is going well for you, or what you have if you have a life that's good for you.

² Sen's argument is primarily against the view that justice is centrally concerned with the distribution of resources, but the point applies to using only resources as the basis of wellbeing measurement.

without an account of wellbeing by measuring and improving just those things people need in order to have wellbeing is inspired by Sen's Capabilities Approach, and this method is to measure and improve just people's *capabilities* to achieve wellbeing.³ The problem with this approach is that in the case of many important likely constituents of wellbeing—what the Capabilities Approach calls “functionings,” the things we do and states we're in—it isn't possible to improve the capabilities to achieve those functionings other than by improving the functionings themselves (Claassen 2014, Deneulin 2002, see also Jansson 2016). For example, you can't improve just the *capability* to live in a pollution-free environment or just the *capability* to live in a violence-free community without actually reducing pollution and violence in people's lives.⁴ Once we start measuring and improving certain functionings and not others as aspects of wellbeing, we are taking a stand on what wellbeing is, and so are—at least implicitly—employing an account of wellbeing.

So, we need an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks in liberal democracies, to provide an explicit rationale for what is included and excluded from government wellbeing frameworks. In this essay I aim to find which is the best such account. In doing so, I leave two questions aside. One is the question of which, if any, is the correct account of wellbeing *simpliciter*—the correct account of the ultimate constituents of wellbeing. There is entrenched disagreement among philosophers of wellbeing as to which account of wellbeing *simpliciter* is correct (Bishop 2014, Keller 2009: 27-30), and governments are not in an epistemic position to take sides in that dispute and cannot wait for the disagreement to be resolved before developing wellbeing frameworks. I leave that disagreement aside and instead aim to find just *the best account to use*. The other question I leave aside is which is the best account of wellbeing for all

³ I say *inspired* by Sen's approach, because Sen, as far as I can tell, does not take a stand on whether an account of wellbeing should be used in government measures of national wellbeing (he does oppose using the same list of capabilities for wellbeing measurement in all countries (Sen 2004a)); and because I am not describing the Capabilities Approach itself, which is a broad family of views, which don't all aim to avoid using an account of wellbeing.

⁴ For other arguments against using just capabilities in wellbeing measurement see (Claassen 2014, Deneulin 2002, Fleurbaey 2006, Robeyns 2016, Wolff and de-Shalit 2013).

contexts. Accounts of wellbeing are used in poverty alleviation by charities, and in medicine, psychology, and social work, amongst other contexts, and I don't presume that there is one account of wellbeing that will be best to use in all of them. Instead of trying to find the correct account of wellbeing simpliciter or the best account of wellbeing to use in all contexts, I will identify the primary conditions for an account of wellbeing just for wellbeing frameworks and find the account of wellbeing that best meets those conditions.^{5,6}

When we take this approach, we face a serious problem. There are three central conditions that any account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks must meet, and there seems to be no existing account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks that meets all of them. There are two broad kinds of account of wellbeing. One is *objectivism*, the view that there are at least some attitude-independent constituents of wellbeing. Objectivist accounts of wellbeing typically hold that there are a number of ultimate constituents of wellbeing, and that all or some of them are good for you regardless of your attitudes towards them. The other kind of account is *subjectivism*, the view that all constituents of wellbeing are attitude-dependent.⁷ For example, a subjectivist account might say that you have wellbeing to the extent your desires are satisfied, or that you have wellbeing to the extent you have an attitude of satisfaction towards your life.⁸ I'll

⁵ I give a full explanation and argument for the method used here in (Drake Unpublished-b).

⁶ Although presented as measures of national wellbeing, government wellbeing frameworks are often effectively measures of *adult* wellbeing. For example, New Zealand's Living Standards Framework states that although it does include some child-specific measures, it should be used alongside a particular child wellbeing framework (Te Tai Ōhanga/The New Zealand Treasury 2021: 1). So, in this essay I'm concerned with finding the best account of wellbeing for government measures of national *adult* wellbeing, though for concision I won't keep including that specification. I argue for a particular account of child wellbeing for public policy in (Drake Unpublished-a).

⁷ Only in part, because other things such as states of the world matter too. For example, consider the subjectivist view that wellbeing is getting what you desire. Your desire is an attitude, but that desire being fulfilled is not an attitude but a state of affairs.

⁸ I discuss objectivist and subjectivist accounts of wellbeing but not hedonism because hedonism can be classified as either objectivist, if your pleasure is considered to be

argue that all objectivist accounts face serious difficulties in meeting one of the central conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks and existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks face serious difficulties in meeting two of them. This raises the question: is there *any* account of wellbeing that meets the conditions for such an account for wellbeing frameworks?

I'll argue that there is. I'll describe a subjectivist account of wellbeing, the Reflective Value account, which has not been used in government measures of national wellbeing to my knowledge. I'll argue this account succeeds in meeting our conditions and is the best account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks. To conclude the essay, I'll explain how the Reflective Value account relates to a similarly motivated view, Pragmatic Subjectivism.

§2 The conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks

To find the best account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks, we need to establish what the primary conditions are for such an account to be one we can use to measure wellbeing in order to develop effective and politically legitimate public policy in a liberal democracy. I identify three such conditions, which I explain below: measurability, policy guidance, and political legitimacy. I take it these conditions are uncontroversial in the context of public policy. Despite that, as we shall see, some interesting conclusions follow about what kind of account of wellbeing will be suitable.

independent of your attitudes (Bramble 2013), or subjectivist, if your pleasure is considered to depend on your attitudes (Heathwood 2007) (see also Bradley 2014, Heathwood 2014). Crisp (2006: 102) distinguishes between accounts that enumerate the constituents of wellbeing (which includes objectivist accounts) and those that explain why some things are constituents of wellbeing (which includes subjectivist accounts); for simplicity and because little hangs on it in this context, I'll treat both objectivist and subjectivist accounts of wellbeing as enumerative.

2.1 Measurability

Recall that I'm using the term "wellbeing framework" to refer to a government system for measuring national wellbeing. Under an account of wellbeing for this context, then, wellbeing should be measurable.⁹

One motivation for having measures of wellbeing is to help determine which policies will increase wellbeing and which don't by measuring wellbeing before and after policies are implemented. Another motivation for measuring wellbeing is to be able to compare particular demographic and geographic sections of the population, in order to remedy or avoid structural inequalities and address problems for wellbeing that are specific to particular kinds of people or people in particular locations.

While any account of wellbeing is likely to allow wellbeing to be measurable in *some* sense, wellbeing frameworks require wellbeing to be measurable in particular ways. National wellbeing measurement aims to evaluate the wellbeing of large numbers of people. So, we want to represent the wellbeing of large numbers of people in an aggregated form, so that we can compare it to the wellbeing of other groups, or to the same group at other times.¹⁰ Also,

⁹ This is not to imply that there isn't a role in public policy in general for accounts of wellbeing under which wellbeing isn't measurable (nor, of course, that things of value in general need to be measurable in public policy). And there is at least one thing called a "wellbeing framework" that doesn't aim to measure wellbeing: the New Zealand Treasury has a framework for Māori wellbeing, He Ara Waiora ("a pathway to wellbeing"), the purpose of which is to "[help] the Treasury to understand waiora, a concept that relates to Māori perspectives on wellbeing and living standards" (Te Tai Ōhanga/The New Zealand Treasury 2023). He Ora Waiora involves no measurements of any kind. Here, the kind of wellbeing framework with which I'm concerned is the kind governments generally use, one that does aim to measure wellbeing.

¹⁰ It's common for wellbeing frameworks to use what's called a *Dashboard* approach, in which the wellbeing framework lists a set of *Domains*, or aspects of wellbeing, and does not aggregate all Domains into a single number for the nation or for each demographic group; however, in the Dashboard approach each Domain consists of several Indicators (particular measures for that Domain) and it's common for the Indicators for a Domain to be aggregated into a single value for that Domain, so we can see how different groups

measurement must use accessible data sources, that is, sources that either already exist or that can be developed without prohibitive cost and effort. Let's say that when it's practical for wellbeing to be measured in these ways under a particular account of wellbeing, wellbeing is *suitably measurable* (where the suitability in question is just for the context of wellbeing frameworks).

Under some important accounts of wellbeing, wellbeing is not suitably measurable. For example, according to eudaimonist accounts of wellbeing, being virtuous is of central importance for wellbeing.¹¹ But there isn't a practical way of measuring how virtuous each of a large number of individuals is and assigning each person a specific value, because the amount of information about each individual that we need to make that evaluation is too great.

Say that generosity is an important virtue, and it consists, as eudaimonists typically think, not in how much or what portion of a person's wealth they give away, but in giving at the mean between wastefulness and covetousness, and doing so in the right way, for the right reasons, to the right people or causes, and at the right times. There isn't a practical way a government agency could get this information about a large enough number of individuals to draw a conclusion about how generous the population is in general; or about how generous the main demographic and geographic sectors of the population are. Gathering this kind of information would also require settling very difficult questions in relation to each of the virtues. Where is the golden mean for generosity? What is the right way to give? What are the right people and causes to give to? What are the right

are doing with respect to each Domain. Also, Indicators are themselves aggregates of some kind or another.

¹¹ In wellbeing measurement, approaches are sometimes called "eudaimonist" that have little or no connection to eudaimonist views in philosophy (e.g., Waterman et al. 2010). Here I use "eudaimonist" in the philosophical sense. For discussions of the view that what is good for a person is just eudaimonia, see Annas (2008: 207), Baril (2013: 515), Crisp (2013), Foot (2001: 41-44), Hursthouse & Pettigrove (2016), and Kraut (2007: 3-8). For the view that virtue is necessary for wellbeing, see Hursthouse (1991: 226, 1999: 169); for the view that virtue is not necessary for wellbeing but the most reliable means to it, see Hursthouse (1999: 173-174) (Hursthouse argues for both the above views at different times); for the view that virtue is sufficient for wellbeing, see McDowell (1998: 17) and Phillips (1964: 50).

and wrong reasons for giving? When are the right times to give? Answering these questions and gathering the relevant information about each of a large number of people and across a range of virtues is not practical for government agencies. So, under eudaimonistic accounts of wellbeing, wellbeing is not suitably measurable.

2.2 Policy guidance

The reason we want to measure national wellbeing is to help shape public policy. We want to identify aspects of wellbeing that can be improved and identify groups of people whose wellbeing is relatively low, in order to develop policies that improve wellbeing and avoid policies that reduce it. So, an important condition for an account of wellbeing for government measures of national wellbeing is that it is policy guiding: when we measure wellbeing under the account, we want the result to be information that's helpful in finding areas that need attention and ways of addressing those deficits.

Accounts of wellbeing vary in their aptness for public policy guidance. For example, suppose the account of wellbeing we use says that you have wellbeing just when you are satisfied with your life. This kind of account of wellbeing is often used without further specification; the drivers of life satisfaction are not identified and measured. One measure used under this approach is the Satisfaction With Life Scale, which asks you to indicate your agreement on a seven-point scale with five statements that are different ways of expressing satisfaction with your life (Diener et al. 1985). Another such measure is the Cantril Ladder, which asks subjects to imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top, where the top of the ladder represents the subject's best possible life, and the bottom of the ladder represents the subject's worst possible life. Subjects are asked which step of the ladder they feel they stand on at the time (Cantril 1966). An advantage of such measures is that they can represent a person's overall wellbeing as a single numerical value and so can give the population's average wellbeing as a single value. This makes for easy comparisons between demographic groups within a nation, between the national average at different times, and between nations. However, these measures are very poor at giving guidance for policy (Benjamin et al. 2020, Fabian et al. 2021, Fabian and Pykett 2022, Johns and Ormerod 2008). If we find that a population has low levels of life satisfaction, that gives us no information

about how to improve wellbeing, because it gives us no information about *what it is* that makes people unsatisfied with their lives.

To get satisfactory information for policy guidance using a life satisfaction account, we need to identify the drivers of life satisfaction that we can affect through policy. But the variables that show significant measurable effects on life satisfaction are overwhelmingly institutional and systematic, such as political freedom and the rule of law (Robeyns 2017: 135, Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007), or very broad, such as “having one’s rights and dignity fully realised” (Beltran-Castillon, McLeod, and Smith 2021). This means that many important policy measures will have little or no measurable effect on overall life satisfaction. (As an example of an important policy having little such effect, Robeyns gives the example of improved childcare facilities (2017: 135).) Robeyns identifies the broad nature of life satisfaction drivers as a problem just with making policy for the regional and lower levels of society, but it seems to me also a problem at the national level: if our national wellbeing frameworks are to guide public policy in a satisfactory way, we need them to include indicators that are more fine-grained than the variables that drive life satisfaction.¹²

These problems with basing policy on a life satisfaction account of wellbeing show that not all accounts of wellbeing are apt for policy guidance.¹³ A good example of a kind of account of wellbeing that is apt for policy guidance is an *objective list* account of wellbeing. Such an account would say that you have wellbeing to the extent that you have the things on a given list. The purported constituents of wellbeing can be the kinds of thing that are targets for policy, such as health, knowledge, relationships, work, freedom, and so on. And it is much easier to identify ways to achieve these purported constituents of wellbeing than

¹² Arthur Grimes is reported as saying that we can use life-satisfaction as a single metric and track how different policy decisions affect that metric (McClure 2021). That seems to require an unsatisfactorily experimental approach to policy; we want to be able to have a good idea of what effects policy decisions will have *before* we make them.

¹³ By “not apt” I mean that such accounts face serious difficulties, not that they face difficulties I claim are impossible to overcome. But in a practical context like national wellbeing measurement, the fewer serious difficulties we have to try to overcome the better. For further discussion of problems with life-satisfaction accounts of wellbeing and policy guidance, see Section 5.2 below.

to identify the means to achieve something like life satisfaction. For example, if knowledge is on the list of objective constituents of wellbeing we can identify education as a means to knowledge, and our measures of people's quality and degree of education will give us information that helps us to shape policy and direct resources to improve knowledge through education.

2.3 Political legitimacy

The conditions of measurability and policy guidance are primarily functional: they're conditions an account of wellbeing must meet to be one we can use effectively in wellbeing frameworks. The third condition on an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks, political legitimacy, is primarily a matter of substantive principle: an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks must be one we can use without being at odds with the fundamental commitments of liberal democracy.

There are many ways in which a government wellbeing framework could fail to be politically legitimate. Here I will focus on two principles that are widely considered important in discussions of government measures of national wellbeing, and which are among the least controversial in that context.

I'll call the first principle *political neutrality*:

Political neutrality

A state is politically neutral to the extent that what it promotes as good for its population accords with what the population approves of as good for itself.

Political neutrality is motivated in part by the idea, thought to be a commitment of liberal democracy, that people should be free to explore and pursue their own view of what makes a life go well, within conditions such as not harming others or impeding others' ability to pursue their view of a good life: the idea is that it's not the state's role to decide for the population what a good life for them consists in. So, we must make sure our account of wellbeing is one we can use without violating political neutrality (hereafter often just "neutrality"). The principle is also motivated by the thought that in a democracy, policies are, ideally, in harmony with the will of the population as much as possible. So, for example, if the population strongly believes that a policy should not be enacted

(say, because they think it will be bad for them) it's at least problematic for the government to enact that policy, even if it might be permissible in some cases.

Note that the principle, as I've formulated it, is a very weak form of political neutrality. Stronger forms of political neutrality include the view that governments should not promote any conception of the good over any other, and the view that government policies should be justified independently of any conception of the good. Such forms of political neutrality are incompatible with Perfectionism, the view that the state should embrace and promote some particular conception of the good. As I've formulated it, however, political neutrality is compatible with some forms of Perfectionism: for example, it's compatible with this form of political neutrality for the state to embrace and promote a particular conception of the good with which the population agrees. Further, as—the way I've described it—a state is politically neutral to the extent that what it promotes as good for the population accords with what the population approves of as good *for itself*, this form of political neutrality is to do just with wellbeing: so, it's compatible with the state embracing and promoting some view of goods other than wellbeing, such as justice and liberty, whether that accords with what the population approves of or not.¹⁴

Nevertheless, some Perfectionists will disagree with even the weak and restricted form of political neutrality that I assume here. There is not space here to give a full argument for this form of political neutrality, but this project can be thought of as conditional on the kind of Perfectionism with which this weak political neutrality is incompatible being incorrect. If that kind of Perfectionism is correct, the questions of what a government wellbeing framework should include and exclude don't arise in the same way, as in that case a wellbeing framework should measure and promote just what the correct Perfectionist account of wellbeing says is good.

It's worth noting that there's a functional aspect to neutrality. A population will not endorse the use of a wellbeing framework if it believes the government is using it to impose a particular view of the good life on the population against its will or is using the wellbeing framework to favour some sections of the

¹⁴ For overviews of accounts of political neutrality see Wall (2019, section 3.1), and Tahzib (2018).

population over others. It's also possible that if a wellbeing framework is seen as not being neutral, different groups will advocate for the wellbeing framework to favour *them*. So, if the wellbeing framework is going to be stable in the long term, it should be politically neutral.¹⁵

There is another challenge raised by the need for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks to be politically neutral. Political neutrality requires that the account of wellbeing a government uses must fit well with the population's view of wellbeing. But within the population of a typical liberal democracy there will be significant disagreement about what wellbeing consists in. Somehow, an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks must be one that works well despite strong disagreement about wellbeing among the population.

The other important way in which we need to take care that an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks is politically legitimate is to make sure it's one the use of which doesn't cause, maintain, or encourage oppression. (I'll call those things "furthering oppression.") Violating political neutrality can further oppression, as improving things as good for people when they don't endorse them can hinder their legitimate pursuit of what they view as a good life. But there are other ways an account of wellbeing can further oppression. One is by counting as aspects of wellbeing things that are in fact oppressive. These might be things people know are oppressive, and so policy based on such an account would not have the consent of the intended beneficiaries. But they might instead be things people wrongly think are not oppressive, but good for them, and that they believe should be counted towards their wellbeing. An account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks will have to be one that doesn't further oppression in these ways. It will be challenging to find an account that does this while being politically neutral: we will need an account of wellbeing the use of which will promote as good for people those things they endorse as good for them, while not counting those things that they *think* are good for them but are actually oppressive.

Again, political neutrality and not furthering oppression are not the only things that matter for political legitimacy. Other ways in which an account of

¹⁵ On the importance of public engagement and support for the success of wellbeing policy, see (Sollis 2023).

wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks could be politically illegitimate include being unjust towards those who aren't oppressed, being unjust without causing oppression at all, and violating conditions that apply just under particular accounts of political legitimacy (for example, if some kind of social contract account of political legitimacy is correct, a wellbeing framework could fail to be politically legitimate by violating the social contract).¹⁶ It isn't possible here to discuss how an account of wellbeing might fail in all these regards. However, the two principles I've discussed here are central requirements on an account of wellbeing.

That concludes the explanation of the conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks. I take it that these conditions are uncontroversial, if sometimes challenging to meet. I'll now explain why the existing accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks fail to meet them.¹⁷

¹⁶ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for raising some of these ways an account of wellbeing for public policy could be politically illegitimate other than by furthering oppression.

¹⁷ An interesting recent account of wellbeing for public policy that I won't discuss in detail is Gil Hersch's Intermediate Account (Hersch 2019), so called because it aims to be a compromise between the three main kinds of account of wellbeing, hedonism, subjectivism, and objectivism (for detailed discussion see my (Drake Unpublished-b)). According to the Intermediate Account, wellbeing consists just in "endorsed veridical experiences" (Hersch 2019: 53): you have wellbeing when you endorse an experience you have that you don't have any false beliefs about. The purpose of the veridicality condition is to "reject the possibility of well-being increasing through false beliefs of any kind" (Hersch 2019: 60-61). This account fails the measurability condition because wellbeing frameworks as a practical necessity rely heavily on people's reports of their own experiences, and it isn't practical to check the veridicality of those reports. Imagine, for example, that our wellbeing framework includes social connectedness as an aspect of wellbeing. A possible indicator for this is the extent to which people are loved and respected. However, under the Intermediate account we cannot measure whether people *believe* they're loved and respected, as it's possible that these beliefs are mistaken, and thus not veridical. So, our measure will have to work out whether people *are in fact* loved and respected. Similarly, we could not include as a measure whether people *believe* their lives have meaning and purpose, as they could be mistaken; we would have to measure whether people's lives *do in fact* have meaning and purpose. But it's beyond the resources

§3 Why existing accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks won't do

3.1 Problems with objectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks

The conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks described above seem uncontroversial, based on principles that are commonly accepted in liberal democracies. Despite this, an important class of accounts of wellbeing seems unable to meet them: it appears unlikely that any objectivist account of wellbeing can fulfil all three conditions. This is an important and perhaps surprising result, with significant implications for how we should construct wellbeing frameworks.

Recall that objectivism is the view that there are at least some constituents of wellbeing that don't depend on your attitudes. Under an objectivist account of wellbeing, there will be things that are good for you whether or not you have a positive attitude towards them; you might not approve of them as purported constituents of wellbeing and might even strongly disapprove of them as purported constituents of wellbeing. So, if a wellbeing framework employs an objectivist account of wellbeing, it will measure and promote a set of things as good for the population whether or not the population approves or disapproves of those things as good for them.¹⁸ As a state is politically neutral to the extent that what it promotes as good for its population accords with what the population approves of as good for itself, using an objectivist account of wellbeing in wellbeing frameworks will violate political neutrality. Thus, it seems that any objectivist account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks will fail the condition of political legitimacy. And so, despite the uncontroversial nature of the

of a government wellbeing framework to do this for a large number of people (or plausibly, at all). A response could be that people's self-reports can generally be trusted to be veridical; but if so, the veridicality condition plays no role in the account in public policy, and the account is, in effect, that wellbeing is endorsed experiences. This account is not the meaningful compromise between objectivism, subjectivism, and hedonism Hersch intends to achieve.

¹⁸ I'll often say "approves of" or "disapproves of" instead of "approves of as good for them" etc., for brevity.

conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks described in Section 2, any objectivist account of wellbeing faces great difficulty in meeting them.

It's possible there could be an objectivist account of wellbeing that accords with the population's view of wellbeing: the list of constituents of wellbeing is just those things the population values as good for themselves. However, in this circumstance neutrality would not be sufficiently *robust*; that is, the political neutrality of the account would be too much a matter of happenstance. If the general population changed their attitudes towards the objectivist account of wellbeing and came to disapprove of it, the account of wellbeing would not change in keeping with that change in attitudes. Further, if the objectivist account of wellbeing had popular support but the government decided the account was incorrect in some way, it would be in keeping with an objectivist approach for the government to alter the account to one the population disapproved of. Neutrality understood properly must be *robust* neutrality, and so an objectivist account that a population just happens to agree with is not properly neutral.

It might be thought that people consistently value roughly the same things for their wellbeing, and that what people so value tracks what's objectively good for them well (if not perfectly), so that a good objectivist account of wellbeing will consistently align well (if not perfectly) with what people value for their wellbeing in such a way that robust political neutrality is not a concern. However, this view underestimates the differences between different cultures' views of wellbeing. While there's widespread agreement on some aspects of wellbeing, there's considerable disagreement, especially cross-cultural disagreement, on others, both about what wellbeing consists in and what the relative weights of its different constituents are (Carlquist et al. 2017, Joshanloo 2014, Joshanloo and Weijers 2014, Sollis et al. 2024, Sollis et al. 2022).

Take for example Māori, the Indigenous people of New Zealand. If we take prominent views of Māori wellbeing as indicative of what Māori value, it's likely that the things Māori most importantly value as good for themselves are whānau (the wellbeing of your family), wairua (spiritual wellbeing), the natural environment (how well it's doing and whether you have the right relationship to it), physical health, and multigenerational prosperity (Durie 1985, Te Tai Ōhanga/The New Zealand Treasury 2023). Compare this list to the constituents

of wellbeing under an objectivist account of wellbeing, that of Guy Fletcher, a typical list for a Western philosopher:

| Fletcher's account of wellbeing | A Māori view of wellbeing |
|--|---|
| Achievement Friendship Happiness Pleasure Self-Respect Virtue | Whānau (family wellbeing) Wairua (spiritual wellbeing) The natural environment Physical health Multigenerational prosperity |

While Māori undoubtedly value the things on Fletcher's list, they don't appear to be among the things that Māori value most highly for their wellbeing.¹⁹ And the things that Māori do appear to value most highly for their wellbeing don't appear on Fletcher's list. Fletcher's list is typical of Western objectivist accounts of wellbeing,²⁰ but doesn't fit well with prominent Māori views of wellbeing. If the New Zealand government adopted Fletcher's account as the basis for its wellbeing framework, what policy based on that framework would promote as good for Māori would not accord well with what Māori value as good for themselves. So, using the account would not keep with political neutrality.²¹

¹⁹ It's also possible that in the case of virtue, Māori might tend to agree with the familiar view that virtue is valuable but not because it's beneficial for those who have it. There's a famous argument that it is best for you not to be virtuous from Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic, and arguments that the virtues don't benefit their possessor from (Doviak 2009), (Hooker 1996), (Hurka 2001: 232-245), (Hume 1751/1983: Chs. 2-5), and (Sidgwick 1907: 396-397). For the view that the virtues do benefit their possessor, see (Foot 1959, 1978/2002), (Hursthouse 1991, 1999), and (Sumner 1998).

²⁰ What's most distinctive about Fletcher's account of wellbeing is that he holds that to have any of these goods means having a pro-attitude towards it.

²¹ Note that Māori comprise 17 percent of the New Zealand population and have constitutional status as partner with the Crown under the Treaty of Waitangi, so are not

The example of Māori in New Zealand illustrates the general problem that as there's significant variation in what people value as good for them, it's challenging for objectivist accounts of wellbeing to accord with political neutrality.

Note that the problem of meeting political neutrality also applies to hybrid accounts of wellbeing, which hold that wellbeing has some constituents which depend on your attitudes and some constituents that don't (Woodard 2015). If a wellbeing framework employs a hybrid account of wellbeing, it will include some purported constituents of wellbeing that don't depend on people's attitudes, and policy based on the framework will promote those things as good for people whether they value them or not.

So, it seems the government can't employ an objectivist (or hybrid) account of wellbeing as the basis of a national wellbeing framework without violating political neutrality.

3.2 Problems with subjectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks

We've seen that objectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks face serious problems. So, we might think we can turn to one of the subjectivist accounts of wellbeing currently used in wellbeing measurement for a solution. (Recall from Section 1 above that subjectivism about wellbeing is the view that all constituents of wellbeing depend on your attitudes; in subjectivist accounts of wellbeing used in wellbeing measurement, the relevant attitude is usually being satisfied with your life.) However, existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing used in wellbeing measurement also fail to meet our conditions. They do this in two ways.²²

a part of the population who needn't be taken into account by a wellbeing framework. See Section 6 for more on this point and which groups wellbeing frameworks need to take into account.

²² Note that here I am talking just about subjectivist accounts of wellbeing that are designed for or are being used in government measures of national wellbeing; I'll go on to argue that there is a kind of subjectivist account of wellbeing simpliciter that *hasn't* been so used, and which provides a good resource for an account for this purpose.

The first way in which such subjectivist accounts of wellbeing fail to meet our conditions is that they don't give sufficient guidance for policy. In Section 2.2 we saw one way in which they struggle with this condition: the variables that affect life satisfaction are too few and broad for measures based on those variables to give sufficient information for policy guidance (Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007). However, life satisfaction accounts also struggle to be policy-guiding for other reasons.²³

Firstly, there's the problem of hedonic adaptation (also called "mental adaptation") (Robeyns 2017: 130). An example of this is that some sudden permanent changes to a person's life cause sharp decreases in her life satisfaction, but these tend to be followed by a return to the previous level. For example, this generally happens to abled people who suffer sudden permanent impairment; as Bagenstos and Schlanger write, "A massive body of research has demonstrated that people who acquire a range of disabilities typically do not experience much or any permanent reduction in the enjoyment of life" (2007: 763). As becoming impaired does not reduce enjoyment of life, it is unlikely to reduce life satisfaction, and so a wellbeing framework based on a life satisfaction account of wellbeing might not justify policies preventing people from becoming permanently impaired and might not justify policies that enable suddenly impaired people to improve their level of functioning. These policy implications are at least strongly counterintuitive.

Another problem mental adaptation causes for policy based on a life satisfaction account is that we adapt much more strongly to increases in our income than to reductions in it (Burchardt 2005, Robeyns 2017: 131). So, aggregate life satisfaction will decrease in a population if people change positions within an income distribution that itself remains the same. Policy based on a life satisfaction account thus suggests we should try to stop changes in people's position in the distribution of income. This is problematic because it doesn't allow people equal opportunities.

As well as problems from mental adaptation, life satisfaction accounts face problems for policy guidance because the average level of life satisfaction differs

²³In what follows I draw heavily on Robeyns' excellent summary of these issues (Robeyns 2017: 127-135).

systematically between demographic groups. For example, women have higher levels of life satisfaction than men, after controlling for variables (Robeyns 2017: 133). So, policy based on a life satisfaction account might favour, say, giving men priority in employment, if unemployment reduces men's life satisfaction more than it does that of women (Robeyns 2017: 133-134). This is problematic because it denies women equal opportunities to employment.

Thus, existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing measurement face serious difficulties in being adequately policy-guiding.

The second way existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing fail to meet our conditions is by furthering oppression and thus failing to be politically legitimate. They do this by counting towards people's wellbeing the satisfaction of *adaptive preferences*.²⁴ This is the problem that people who live under oppression can come to have different preferences from those they would have in a just and free society: to cope with their oppression, people can come to desire aspects of the oppressive circumstances under which they live. Say, for example, that within a liberal democratic society there's a deeply sexist and repressive subculture.²⁵ And say that a woman has been raised in that subculture and is now married to a deeply sexist man who is committed to that community. She may desire to remain uneducated, without income, and subject to her husband, when if her environment were not so oppressive she would desire education, income, and independence. People may have adaptive preferences in order to avoid the distress of living with deep desires that go unsatisfied, or because they internalize the oppressive norms of their society or community. Existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing for public policy contexts typically say wellbeing is being satisfied with your life. That allows counting someone as doing well if they're oppressed and satisfied with their life because their adaptive preferences are satisfied. Using such an account as the basis for public policy furthers oppression, so such an account as the basis for a wellbeing framework would fail to be politically legitimate.

²⁴ For arguments from adaptive preferences against using subjectivist accounts of wellbeing in national wellbeing measurement see Khader (2011), Nussbaum (2000, 2001), and Sen (1985b). I use the terms "preferences" and "desires" interchangeably here.

²⁵ The Gloriavale community in New Zealand, for example (Beale 2009, Tarawa 2017).

§4 The Reflective Value account

We've seen that objectivist accounts of wellbeing struggle to meet the conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks because they struggle to be politically legitimate. And we've also seen that existing subjectivist accounts used in wellbeing measurement struggle to meet our conditions, because they also struggle to be politically legitimate and because they struggle to give adequate policy guidance. I will argue that there is, however, a subjectivist account of wellbeing which does meet all the conditions for an account for wellbeing frameworks.²⁶ I'll describe the account and then explain how it fulfils our conditions.

The Reflective Value account

Wellbeing is having what you value as good for yourself, where to value something is to desire it on informed reflection.²⁷

The Reflective Value account is a *restricted* subjectivist account of wellbeing. An *unrestricted* subjectivist account of wellbeing says your wellbeing depends on a particular attitude you have, for example, your desires or how satisfied with your life you are, but doesn't limit the relevant desires or attitudes of satisfaction. For example, an unrestricted desire-based account of wellbeing says that you have wellbeing to the extent your desires are satisfied and includes any desires you might have. And an unrestricted life satisfaction account says you have wellbeing to the extent you are satisfied with your life but places no restrictions

²⁶ Recall that subjectivism about wellbeing is the view that all constituents of wellbeing are attitude-dependent, and that subjectivist accounts of wellbeing typically hold that there is just a single ultimate constituent of wellbeing, one which depends on some particular attitude: for example, such an account might say that you have wellbeing to the extent your desires are satisfied, or that you have wellbeing to the extent you are satisfied with your life.

²⁷ A more concise formulation of the account, though not as precise, is "Wellbeing is having what you value on informed reflection." This has some circularity as valuing, here, is desiring on informed reflection; but that may not matter in some contexts, such as giving a simple description of the account in public settings. I'll occasionally use this formulation for brevity.

on the kind of satisfaction: it doesn't matter, for example, whether you'd cease to be satisfied with your life if you knew more about your situation and the possibilities for living differently or were thinking more clearly about things. The subjectivist accounts of wellbeing used in government measures of national wellbeing have been unrestricted, and we've seen that they face a number of significant problems.²⁸

In contrast, restricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing count only some subset of the relevant attitude as relevant for wellbeing. For example, a restricted desire-based account of wellbeing says you have wellbeing to the extent just a certain kind of desire you have is satisfied. A restricted life satisfaction account of wellbeing says you have wellbeing to the extent that you are satisfied with your life just under certain conditions. (I'll just call the relevant attitudes "desires" for simplicity.)

There is a wide range of restricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter, and they are an underappreciated resource for accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks (and for public policy more generally).²⁹ If we're using a subjectivist account of wellbeing in a wellbeing framework or other public policy context, there are good reasons for it to be a restricted subjectivist account: we don't want public policy to be based on desires that are, for example, fleeting or in severe conflict with more fundamental attitudes; and we don't want public

²⁸ Recall that the problems for these subjectivist accounts for wellbeing frameworks are that they struggle to give adequate policy guidance as the variables that drive life-satisfaction are overwhelmingly institutional, systematic, or very broad (Section 2.2 above) and that they face the problems of mental adaptation, systematic differences in average life-satisfaction between groups, and adaptive preferences (Section 3.2 above).

²⁹ For various kinds of restricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter see Baber (2007: 107), Brandt (1979: 247, 268, 113), Carson (2000: 94), Dworkin (1977: 234), Griffin (1986), Haji (2010), Hare (1981: 101-106), Heathwood (2005, 2019), Raibley (2010, 2013), Railton (1986: 17), Rawls (1971: 92-93, 417), Sidgwick (1907: 109-111), Sobel (2009), Sumner (1996) and Tiberius (2018).

policy to be based on desires that are formed on the basis of misinformation, or that we wouldn't have if we were thinking more clearly.³⁰

We want the attitudes on which public policy is based to be those we have when reasoning well and well-informed, and so, likewise, we want the desires we count as mattering for wellbeing to be those we have when reasoning well and well-informed. Restricting the relevant desires to those you'd have if, say, *perfectly* informed and *perfectly* rational is called *idealization*. An idealized desire-based account won't do for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks, as we aren't in practice able to determine what people would desire under ideal conditions. We can, however, find out what people desire when they have a certain degree of information and are in a situation that facilitates good reasoning. The Reflective Value account thus says that you have wellbeing when you have what you desire when you're well-informed and reasoning well, where being well-informed and reasoning well are not necessarily ideal states.³¹

The degree of being well-informed and reasoning well described here is intentionally vague.³² We don't have ways to determine precisely how well-informed and rational a person is when they have some particular desire. But in

³⁰ These considerations against counting the satisfaction of any attitude towards wellbeing have often been raised as objections to unrestricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter. (For discussion, see (Enoch 2005), (Lukas 2010), (Murphy 1999), (Railton 1986), (Rosati 1995, 1996), (Sobel 1994), (Tiberius 1997), and (Velleman 1988).) Whether or not these objections succeed against unrestricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter, they make it unlikely an unrestricted subjectivist account will be the best account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks.

³¹ There are restricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter that are not idealized but which are not suitable for wellbeing frameworks for other reasons. For example, Tiberius's value-fulfillment account of wellbeing holds that "[W]ell-being is served by the successful pursuit of a relatively stable set of values that are emotionally, motivationally, and cognitively suited to the person" (Tiberius 2018: 13). It seems too difficult, in government measures of national wellbeing, to determine whether subjects' values are emotionally, motivationally, and cognitively suited to them, given the very large numbers of diverse subjects involved. (This is in no way an objection to Tiberius's account as an account of wellbeing simpliciter, which is how it is intended.)

³² For simplicity I'll sometimes call being in a situation which facilitates good, informed reasoning just "reasoning well" or "informed reflection."

practical matters, this isn't a problem; if you have an important decision to make about what's good for you, you can try to be well-informed and reason well, and we don't consider your judgement unreliable just because we don't know precisely what levels of information and rationality are required, or precisely what levels of being informed and rational you've achieved. In the context of public policy, the setting of wellbeing frameworks, we aim for people's views and decisions to be reasoned and well-informed but don't require them to be *ideally* reasoned and informed or to meet any precise standard.

We do, though, need at least a rough guide to the degree of informed reflection wellbeing frameworks will require, and an indication of how we will go about seeing that this rough threshold is met. I suggest that we should count the relevant judgements as being made on informed reflection when they are made in a situation conducive to those making the judgements being informed and reasoning well. This means we focus on the *situation* in which people make the relevant judgements, not directly on their degree of being well-informed and rational. This is because when finding out what people desire as good for them, we can facilitate their doing so in a situation conducive to informed reflection but cannot control how well-informed or rational people are as a result. And to operate within democratic principles, we cannot exclude people from contributing to the wellbeing judgements that will influence a wellbeing framework because we think they're insufficiently well-informed and rational. The best a government agency can do when developing a wellbeing framework is to design its processes of finding out what people value as good for themselves in such a way that it is facilitating those people making the relevant judgements under informed reflection. I'll discuss this process in more detail in Section 5.1.

Note that this low threshold for informed reflection is not unusual in philosophical approaches to national wellbeing measurement. For example, Sen argues that we shouldn't measure people's wellbeing by whether they live lives that they value, but instead by whether they are able to live lives they *have reason* to value. In Sen's view, we can judge that people have reason to value something if they value it after the kinds of process of public deliberation common in liberal democracies—if people value something under that degree of informed reflection, we should count it as part of their wellbeing. (See Section 5.3 below for more detailed discussion of this point). The Reflective Value approach, then, is not unusual in having a low and vague bar for informed reflection.

I use the term “values” for the desires you have for things as good for you when you’re well-informed and reasoning well. This is in keeping with the tradition that uses “values” instead of “desires” or “preferences” to avoid the association of “desire” and “preference” with attitudes that might be misinformed, uninformed, unreflective, or trivial (e.g., Davidson 1978, Frankfurt 1971, Haybron and Tiberius 2015, Hubin 2003, Lewis 1989, Raibley 2010, Sobel 2016, Street 2012).

The Reflective Value account thus draws on the tradition of restricted subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter, but without requiring idealization or other restrictions which would be impractical to include.

§5 Meeting the conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks

I’ll now argue that the Reflective Value account fulfills all our conditions for an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks. I’ll discuss how it does so for each condition in turn.

5.1 The Reflective Value account and measurability

Under the Reflective Value account, wellbeing is suitably measurable: using it in government measures of national wellbeing, we can find out what people value as good for themselves and measure the extent to which people have those things in the way needed for policy development.³³ There are existing wellbeing

³³ The measurability problem for eudaimonist accounts of wellbeing might seem to apply here. We saw that eudaimonist virtues are not suitably measurable. So, if what we aim to measure is the extent to which people have what they desire as good for themselves, and people desire the eudaimonistic virtues as good for themselves, we have a problem, as we can’t suitably measure the degree to which people have the eudaimonistic virtues. The solution is for the approach to be subjectivist about the *attainment* of those virtues. In that case, if people value being virtuous in the eudaimonist sense we measure the extent to which those people are satisfied with the degree of virtue they believe, on informed reflection, they have attained. While this is likely unsatisfactory from the eudaimonist’s point of view, it is possible in practice, unlike objectivist measures of virtue. As a practical matter, the number of people in a nation who have the eudaimonist’s typically Aristotelian conception of virtue will be very small; I explain in

frameworks that do this, called *participatory wellbeing frameworks*.³⁴ Participatory wellbeing frameworks use a variety of methods, but central to these is in-person consultation with the intended beneficiaries of the framework, usually in representative groups.

Some existing national wellbeing frameworks use participatory methods, to varying extents. An example is Canada's Quality of Life Framework. Included in the participatory process were members of the public, experts on wellbeing measurement, and policy makers (Department of Finance Canada 2021: 12). The public were consulted through a survey of 2001 Canadians and a series of focus groups held in different regions, and consultations were held with National Indigenous Organizations (Department of Finance Canada 2021: 12). The think tank Canadian Policy Research Networks took a slightly different approach to consultation, which served as the foundation for the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.³⁵ This process began in 2000 with forty structured "dialogue discussions" lasting three hours in 21 towns and cities (Michalski 2001: 6). These discussions were the basis of a set of Domains of wellbeing that were then the subject of a round of further consultations (Canadian Index of Wellbeing).

In participatory processes like these, we identify the Domains of wellbeing as those things the population most values as good for them, and find the best set of particular measures, or Indicators, for different aspects of that Domain. For example, if one Domain is Health, we can find the best Indicators for health; New Zealand's LSF, for example, uses the Indicators Health Status, Healthy Life Expectancy, Mental Health, Suicide Rate, Food Insecurity, Unmet Health Needs, and Physical Activity (Te Tai Ōhanga/New Zealand Treasury 2021). Participatory processes can extend to the choice of Indicators, to ensure that

Section 6 how the Reflective Value account works when there is a small number of people who value something statistically unusual as good for them.

³⁴ Participatory wellbeing frameworks can be used on a national scale or on a small scale for a particular community or organization. For an overview of participatory wellbeing frameworks see Sollis, Yap, Campbell, & Biddle (2022). For a detailed example on a small scale, see Alexandrova & Fabian (2022).

³⁵ The CIW is not a government wellbeing framework but one created for research purposes, and currently managed by the University of Waterloo. It is, though, indicative of a possible approach for government wellbeing frameworks.

what is being measured as contributing to a Domain fits with the way people value that Domain.

Participatory wellbeing frameworks use processes that are natural applications of the Reflective Value account, as they aim to find out what people value as good for themselves in settings that facilitate informed reflection. Under the Reflective Value account, then, wellbeing is suitably measurable.

5.2 The Reflective Value account and policy guidance

We saw that the subjectivist accounts of wellbeing commonly used in wellbeing measurement, life satisfaction accounts, are problematic for policy guidance because the variables that drive life satisfaction are overwhelmingly institutional, systematic, or very broad (Section 2.2 above), and because such accounts face the problems of hedonic adaptation, systematic differences in average life satisfaction between groups, and adaptive preferences (Section 3.2 above). The Reflective Value account doesn't treat wellbeing just as life satisfaction, so doesn't face the problems of mental adaptation, comparison between groups, and lack of specificity in indicators.

As we've seen, the Reflective Value account is compatible with multi-dimensional wellbeing frameworks such as the CIW above (Section 5.1), which work by identifying a number of aspects of life that are thought to be of central importance to wellbeing. The Reflective Value account works well with such frameworks because on informed reflection, people tend to value a number of things as good for themselves, not just one thing (Sollis et al. 2022). A disadvantage of so-called Dashboard approaches of this kind for policy guidance is that they give no single overall measure by which to compare groups or by which to compare the same group at different times.³⁶ They do, however, allow

³⁶ Multi-dimensional wellbeing frameworks which don't aggregate the Domains of wellbeing into a single metric are said to take a *Dashboard* approach. The reason given for multi-dimensional indices arriving at no single overall result in national wellbeing frameworks is that aggregating the different Domains of wellbeing would either require determining the relative importance for wellbeing of each of the Domains in order to assign each a weight, which is too difficult, or would require giving each Domain the same weight, which is arbitrary. I leave aside whether that is correct. Aggregated frameworks are commonly used by international bodies, as they are useful for comparing

comparison between groups or between the same group at different times for each Domain individually (for example, how different demographic groups compare on the Domain of Health). And the multi-dimensional approach gives useful information to guide policy: if a population measures poorly in the Domain of Health, for example, that indicates that policy changes or additional resources are required in that area, and the Indicators for the Domain give greater specificity. The Reflective Value account, then, is apt for policy guidance.

5.3 The Reflective Value account and political legitimacy

Existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing measurement struggle to be politically legitimate when used in wellbeing frameworks, as they further oppression by counting the satisfaction of people's adaptive preferences towards their wellbeing. The literature on adaptive preferences and wellbeing measurement is extensive, and it isn't possible to discuss each objection to subjectivism from adaptive preferences here, or to provide a single response that will answer all such objections.³⁷ Instead I'll discuss how the Reflective Value account fares in relation to two of the most influential forms of the objection to subjectivist measures from adaptive preferences, those of Sen and Nussbaum, and show that objectivist approaches to wellbeing measurement can also count adaptation to oppression as wellbeing.

Sen argues that because of the problem of adaptive preferences, we cannot measure wellbeing by seeing the extent to which people live lives that they value. Instead, Sen claims, we should measure wellbeing by seeing the extent to which

the wellbeing of different countries (e.g., Barbier et al. 2023). International comparisons also often use a life-satisfaction account, without any indicators other than average national life-satisfaction (e.g., the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2024)). Here I am concerned just with national, not international, measures of wellbeing.

³⁷ For versions of the objection not discussed here, see (Dorsey 2012, Levey 2005, Okin 1994, Stoljar 2000, and Superson 2000). These discussions are about subjectivist *measures* of wellbeing; there are also objections from adaptive preferences to subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter (e.g., (Sumner 1996: 162 ff.)). Importantly, the Reflective Value account doesn't purport to be the right account of wellbeing simpliciter; so, if there's a successful objection to subjectivism about wellbeing simpliciter from adaptive preferences, that needn't be a problem for the Reflective Value account.

people are able to live lives they *have reason* to value. In Sen's view, to find what we have reason to value we apply "reasoned scrutiny" to our values (Sen 2004b: 46-47). Sen does not explain what this entails but often mentions an unspecified process of public deliberation (Sen 2009: 44, 89-90, 110).³⁸ He seems to have in mind the normal processes of public discussion and political decision-making that take place in a healthy liberal democracy.

Sen has no objection to treating wellbeing as having what you value as good for yourself on informed reflection, if informed reflection takes the form of public deliberation. Participatory processes that flow naturally from the Reflective Value account, such as those used in participatory wellbeing frameworks, are such a form of public deliberation. So, the Reflective Value account restricts desires in a way that escapes Sen's objection to subjectivism from adaptive preferences.

The Reflective Value account also escapes Nussbaum's objection from adaptive preferences to using subjectivist accounts of wellbeing in wellbeing measurement. Recall that the problem of adaptive preferences is that in situations of oppression, people may come to desire what isn't good for them. Nussbaum argues that this problem rules out subjectivist measures of wellbeing (Nussbaum 2000: 111-166). However, Nussbaum also holds that when they have the relevant information and can reason clearly, people *do* reliably come to desire what is good for them. Thus, she writes (2000),

[W]omen who have become literate find literacy valuable and even delightful . . . they report satisfaction with their new condition, and . . . the transition in their lives begun by literacy is not one that they would wish to reverse. The same is evidently true for health and sanitation, for learning to stand up against domestic violence, and for acquiring political liberties and capabilities: people who once learn and experience these capabilities don't want to go back, and one really can't make them go back. (pp. 152-153).

Nussbaum calls this characteristic of preference formation its being "unidirectional": "the preference for the central human capabilities [the

³⁸ For discussion, see (Jansson 2016).

opportunities to have those things most important for wellbeing] is not merely habitual or adaptive, but has much more the unidirectional structure of preferences formed by learning” (Nussbaum 2000: 152). That is, as people gain relevant information and their reasoning is less subject to distorting forces like coercion, the more they desire what contributes to their wellbeing, and this desire formation only works in one direction: on informed reflection, people come to desire what contributes to their wellbeing and don’t come to desire what *doesn’t* contribute to their wellbeing.

From that point of view, there’s no objection from adaptive preferences to treating wellbeing as what you have when you have what you value as good for yourself on informed reflection, as what you value on informed reflection reliably tracks what’s actually good for you. So, the Reflective Value account restricts desires in a way that escapes Nussbaum’s objection from adaptive preferences to subjectivist measures of wellbeing.

Again, Sen and Nussbaum are not alone in making an objection from adaptive preferences to using subjectivist accounts in wellbeing measurement. But that the Reflective Value account escapes at least two prominent forms of the objection, those of Sen and Nussbaum, indicates that it promises to do well in this regard in comparison to other subjectivist accounts.

It’s also worth noting that objectivist accounts of wellbeing used in wellbeing measurement can also count adaptation to oppression as wellbeing. For example, in Sen’s Capability Approach something that counts towards wellbeing is the functioning of being able to appear in public without shame (Sen 1993: 36-37). What is required for you to appear in public without shame depends on the conventions of your society, which can be oppressive. So, there can be *adaptive functionings*—for lack of a better term—such as the functioning of appearing in public without shame by meeting oppressive conventions of personal appearance. Sen’s Capability Approach appears to count these functionings as aspects of wellbeing.

Another way in which objectivist accounts of wellbeing can count adaptation to oppression as wellbeing is by relying on self-reports for some Domains, something that is extremely difficult to avoid. For example, say that the objectivist or hybrid account holds that achievement is a constituent of wellbeing, as many do (e.g., (Dorsey 2012), (Fletcher 2013), (Keller 2009), and (Raz 1986: 308); for an overview, see (Bradford 2016)). In a government measure of national

wellbeing, it is hard to measure achievement other than by surveying the extent to which people believe that they have made significant achievements, or something similar. If a woman so surveyed believes she has achieved a great deal by fulfilling her submissive role as a wife as her religion dictates, and by successfully persuading other women to submit to their husbands, she will be counted as having a high level of achievement, and this will count towards her wellbeing. The only way I can see to avoid this while retaining achievement as a Domain of wellbeing in a national wellbeing framework is to identify the long list of specific things that count as genuine achievements, so achievement is not open to interpretation by those surveyed. But this seems to require far more detail than a government wellbeing framework can practically manage. Similarly, it's common for objectivist and hybrid accounts of wellbeing to include happiness or pleasure as a constituent of wellbeing. But surveys of national happiness or hedonic levels rely on self-reports and aren't in practice able to exclude positive responses by people who are happy or feel pleasure because they have come to enjoy aspects of their oppression.

Thus, there doesn't seem to be a practical way to ensure that we entirely exclude people's adaptations to oppressive circumstances from being counted towards wellbeing in a government measure of national wellbeing, whether we are treating wellbeing as having what you value under informed reflection or are employing an objectivist or hybrid account of wellbeing. But that the Reflective Value account satisfies at least two of the most prominent versions of the objection to using subjectivist accounts of wellbeing in wellbeing measures indicates that it does comparatively well in this regard.

§6 The Reflective Value account and disagreement

Recall that when discussing the condition of political legitimacy in Section 2.3 we saw that an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks must be one that works well despite strong disagreement about wellbeing among the population and without violating important political principles. The Reflective Value account—like all accounts—faces this problem. How do we treat wellbeing, on a national scale, as people having what they value as good for themselves, when there's significant variation in what people within a nation so value?

Using the Reflective Value account in a wellbeing framework is very unlikely to result in a list of Domains of wellbeing that everyone in a population agrees

on. Nor will it result in every individual having the government trying to improve for her just what she values as good for herself. Neither of these two outcomes is practically possible, regardless of what account we use. However, I believe the Reflective Value account achieves the greatest degree of political neutrality possible in practice and deals well with the existence of different views of wellbeing within a society. I'll explain how this works.

We know from studies of what people value as good for themselves that there is broad cross-cultural agreement on what many Domains of wellbeing should be. These include relationships, physical health, positive affective states, financial security, recreation and leisure, community and a sense of belonging, and education (Sollis et al. 2022). So, within a particular nation, we can expect a high degree of consensus on several of the Domains, perhaps even most of them.

However, we also know from such studies that there are purported aspects of wellbeing on which there is significant disagreement (Carlquist et al. 2017, Joshanloo 2014, Joshanloo and Weijers 2014, Sollis et al. 2022). Such disagreement comes in two kinds, and each requires a different approach. In one kind of disagreement, some purported aspects of wellbeing are valued only by a very small number of people who do not constitute a political or demographic group. Say, for example, that spread among people of different genders, ages, ethnic groups, degrees of wealth, and locations, there are a very small number of people for whom recreational fishing is central to wellbeing. Let's say the country is New Zealand, which has a population of five million, and there are 20 people there who consider recreational fishing the most important aspect of their wellbeing. (I'll call these people *Recreational Fishers*, without implying that they're like most people who recreationally fish.) In this case, the wellbeing framework shouldn't include recreational fishing as a Domain of wellbeing: including things valued by such small numbers of demographically and geographically scattered people would require a more fine-grained approach than is practical for national public policy.

We can see this in the extreme, by considering the case of a single person. Say there is one Recreational Fisher in the nation, that is, one person who values recreational fishing as the most important aspect of their wellbeing; call her Maki. Imagine the government regularly measures the degree to which Maki fishes, and if Maki is not fishing as much as she would like, enacts policies to increase the amount of fishing Maki can do. This approach is too demanding: in a country

with a population of even only a few million, the resources it would take to find out what each person values as good for herself, and to then enact policies to promote those things just for each of them, are beyond what governments are capable of. Just as a wellbeing framework can't include Recreational Fishing as a Domain just for Maki, it can't do this for 20 Recreational Fishers who are not in the same geographical area or demographic group.³⁹

The wellbeing framework can still help these unusual fishing-centred people, however, to a significant extent. That's because the framework can include among the Domains broadly described resources and capabilities that people value as good for them.⁴⁰ For example, the wellbeing framework used in New Zealand—the Living Standards Framework, or LSF—measures income, which is a general-purpose resource that someone can use for recreational fishing if she wishes. And the framework measures people's ability to participate in recreation, which for our Recreational Fishers is most importantly their ability to fish. The Domain of Health is important for people's physical ability to engage in recreational fishing, and Indicators for the Domain of The Environment include measures for the health of waterways. So, even people whose wellbeing values are odd enough for recreational fishing to be of central importance to them are accommodated to some extent by the wellbeing framework in various ways. While this is not perfect if we're trying to improve for people what they value as good for themselves, it's acceptable given the practical limits on how fine-grained policy can be and the extent to which it can take into account very small and odd minorities that are geographically and demographically dispersed.

There is another kind of aspect of wellbeing on which there isn't consensus, which needs to be treated differently than the case of the Recreational Fishers.

³⁹ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to explain why it is not practical to include the values of tiny demographically and geographically dispersed groups in national wellbeing frameworks. It's worth noting that if it *is* practical to include in a wellbeing framework the wellbeing values of everyone in society, even tiny, dispersed groups, disagreement isn't a problem for the Reflective Value account in the first place.

⁴⁰ I argued in the introduction against approaches that try to avoid using an account of wellbeing by measuring and improving *just* resources or *just* capabilities; there is no such general problem with including resources or capabilities in a wellbeing framework when not trying to avoid using an account of wellbeing.

Recall that the Recreational Fishers were extremely small in number and did not belong to any particular demographic, geographic, or political group: they were of various ages, genders, ethnicities, economic statuses, locations, and so on. A different problem can arise when there is a demographically, geographically, or politically unified group of people who represent a particular way of life and who value something as central to their wellbeing which the rest of the population doesn't. Take Māori, for example, the Indigenous people of New Zealand. A number of studies of Māori views on wellbeing have been published (Durie 1985, Ministry of Māori Development—Te Puni Kōkiri and The New Zealand Treasury 2019, Te Tai Ōhanga/New Zealand Treasury 2023). There's significant variation between what these studies identify as important to Māori for their wellbeing, but there are strong common elements as well, and some of these are not widely shared by other New Zealanders. For example, although the LSF includes the Domain of The Environment, it does not capture the value of that Domain for wellbeing the way Māori see it. In the LSF, the environment is described explicitly as an *amenity* and is instrumentally valued for its importance for people's health and opportunities for recreation. For Māori, however, human wellbeing is *partly constituted* by the health of the environment. Further, Māori believe human wellbeing is also partly constituted by having a particular *relationship* with the natural world, one that involves being "responsive to the natural and living environment" (Ministry of Māori Development—Te Puni Kōkiri and The New Zealand Treasury 2019: 15) and fulfilling "responsibilities and obligations to sustain and maintain the wellbeing of Te Taiao [the natural world]" (New Zealand Treasury 2023). The LSF, however, doesn't measure whether people are responsive to the environment or act in a way that sustains it. This is just one example of the difference between the LSF and Māori wellbeing frameworks.⁴¹

The case of Māori views of wellbeing is different from the case of the Recreational Fishers. The Recreational Fishers were demographically and geographically scattered individuals with nothing in common other than an unusual view about one aspect of wellbeing. Māori are an ethnic group which represents a particular way of life, and a political group which has constitutional

⁴¹ See also Section 3.3 above.

status as partner with the Crown under the Treaty of Waitangi, a status which guarantees the protection of that way of life. It would thus be inappropriate (and unconstitutional) for New Zealand's wellbeing framework to ignore the distinctive things that Māori value as aspects of wellbeing. This is a case, then, where certain things should be added to a wellbeing framework as aspects of wellbeing, despite the absence of a consensus on their value.

We've looked at two examples, the hypothetical case of a tiny, scattered number of people in New Zealand who consider recreational fishing to be a central aspect of their wellbeing, and the real case of Māori, a large ethnic and political minority indigenous to New Zealand with a particular constitutional status and distinctive views on wellbeing. These two examples can be seen as near the ends of a spectrum of situations in which there's disagreement about a possible Domain of wellbeing: recreational fishing definitely should not be included as a Domain of wellbeing, and aspects of life valued as central for wellbeing by Māori definitely should be. The point on this spectrum at which Domains that lack consensus should be included is appropriately vague, and although I've indicated some of the kinds of considerations that favour and disfavour inclusion, I don't believe there's a tight set of conditions that can be applied in a simple way in all cases.

It might seem impractical to have different Domains of wellbeing that apply to different groups within a country, but in fact it's fairly straightforward. As we saw, multi-dimensional wellbeing indices typically don't produce a single aggregated index for wellbeing. As the Domains aren't aggregated, some Domains can apply to just some demographic groups. This happens already at the level of Indicators, the specific measures used for Domains. For example, The LSF has a Domain of Cultural Identity, and one of the Indicators for that Domain is the percentage of Māori adults who feel strongly connected to their ancestral marae (a marae is a tribal meeting place, where social events, political events, meetings, weddings, and funerals take place). As the Domains aren't aggregated into a single index for the comparison of different demographic groups, the existence of Domains specific to particular groups isn't problematic.

Thus, the lack of a consensus on all Domains of wellbeing is not an obstacle to using the Reflective Value account, and it's possible to have Domains that are specific to particular groups which have distinctive views of wellbeing. So, the

account works well when there's disagreement between people's views of wellbeing.

§7 The Reflective Value account and wellbeing simpliciter

A concern with the approach taken here, in which we leave aside the question of which is the right account of wellbeing simpliciter and instead find the account that works best in wellbeing frameworks, is that the account of wellbeing we use in public policy might bear no relationship to wellbeing simpliciter. Perhaps the best account of wellbeing to use in wellbeing frameworks is thoroughly incorrect as an account of wellbeing simpliciter—that is, it consistently counts as good for people what's bad for them and counts as bad for them what's good for them.

This would be avoided if we simply used the correct account of wellbeing simpliciter in our wellbeing frameworks; but that isn't a possibility, as we don't know which it is. Within any nation there will be policy makers, philosophers, and members of the general public who firmly *believe* that they know what the right account of wellbeing simpliciter is, and some of them could well be right, but governments and national populations don't have a way of picking out who. The adherents of any one of the accounts of wellbeing simpliciter, if certain they know that account to be correct, might wish to impose that account on everyone else; but basic principles of liberal democracy preclude them doing so. So, if someone is sure she knows which is the right account of wellbeing simpliciter, she has to live with the government not adopting that account as long as significant numbers of her compatriots disagree with her.

Nevertheless, something has gone wrong if the set of things an account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks picks out as good for us doesn't bear at least a decent resemblance to those things that plausible accounts of wellbeing simpliciter pick out.

How does the Reflective Value account do in this regard? The Reflective Value account is subjectivist, so of course does a good job in this regard in relation to subjectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter. But how does it do in relation to objectivist accounts: does the set of things that people value as good for themselves on informed reflection bear a decent resemblance to those things that plausible objectivist accounts of wellbeing simpliciter pick out?

Here the Reflective Value account seems to do well—it's standard for objectivists (like proponents of other accounts) to argue that their accounts of

wellbeing simpliciter fit well with our reflective judgements about what's good for us; and I haven't encountered an objectivist philosopher of wellbeing who holds that if people are reasonably well-informed and thinking reasonably well, they won't value as good for themselves just those things the philosopher's account includes. In fact, we have already seen in Section 5.3 one pair of objectivists about wellbeing who think what people value on informed reflection reliably tracks what is good for them, Sen and Nussbaum.⁴²

Of course, a standard argument against subjectivist accounts of wellbeing is that they allow that *very odd* people can value very odd things as good for themselves, things that don't fit well with our reflective judgements about wellbeing; but as discussed in Section 6, an account for public policy is applied to large numbers of people or demographic groups, not individuals, and under the Reflective Value account we don't need to incorporate what every odd person values as good for themselves into a wellbeing framework.

The disagreement between objectivists and subjectivists about wellbeing simpliciter is not about what the accounts say is generally good for us in ordinary life, but about *why* those things are ultimately good for us. Philosophers of both kinds tend to think that what people generally value on informed reflection is fairly well in harmony with wellbeing simpliciter, but the order of explanation differs: objectivists about wellbeing simpliciter say we value those things because they're good for us, whereas subjectivists about wellbeing simpliciter say those things are good for us because we value them.

Here the formulation of the Reflective Value account is important. The account says that wellbeing is having what you value as good for yourself on informed reflection but doesn't say *why* having what you value as good for yourself counts towards your wellbeing. The account thus differs from what we might call a *thoroughgoing* subjectivist account of wellbeing, according to which

⁴² I find it unclear whether Sen's view of wellbeing simpliciter is objectivist or subjectivist, in part because he is not much concerned with accounts of wellbeing simpliciter, but he is generally taken to be an objectivist (see e.g., (Arneson 2000: 46-47, Deneulin 2002: 500, Jansson 2016: 75)). For perhaps the strongest indication on Sen's part of his view being objectivist, see (Sen 1997: 363).) For an argument that Sen is not committed to either objectivism or subjectivism about wellbeing simpliciter, see (Sugden 2003: 794).

something is good for your wellbeing if and only if *and because* you value it (or desire it, etc.). That's the kind of subjectivist account that's at issue when we consider accounts of wellbeing simpliciter, and thus the kind of account to which objectivists about wellbeing simpliciter object. The Reflective Value account, however, is not a thoroughgoing subjectivist account.

So, members of the public who are objectivists need not object to having their wellbeing treated as what they value as good for them on informed reflection. They believe that what they value on informed reflection *is* good for them: they just think that the reason they value those things is that they are objectively good for them, not—as subjectivists might think—that those things are good for them because they value them. The Reflective Value account is neutral on that issue, not being a thoroughgoing subjectivist account; so, it can be acceptable to objectivists.

The Reflective Value account, then, does a good job of picking out as good for us a set of things that bears a decent resemblance to those things that plausible accounts of wellbeing simpliciter pick out, including plausible objectivist accounts. *Why* those things are good for us is not something the Reflective Value account takes a position on, so the account is effectively neutral with regard to accounts of wellbeing simpliciter. And objectivists need not object to using the Reflective Value account in wellbeing frameworks, as they agree with the government promoting as good for them just those things that they value.

§8 Pragmatic Subjectivism

It will be helpful to clarify where the Reflective Value account stands in relation to another approach which has similar motivations, Pragmatic Subjectivism. According to this view, argued for by Dan Haybron and Valerie Tiberius (2015), in public policy governments shouldn't take a position on what wellbeing is and should instead improve just what the intended beneficiaries of policy value. The reason for this is respect for persons, which requires allowing people the freedom to choose the lives for themselves they think best.

Traditional philosophy of wellbeing (for lack of a better term) is concerned with which is the right account of wellbeing simpliciter, so identifies accounts of wellbeing by what they say the ultimate constituents of wellbeing are; and when two views have the same metaphysical or normative commitments but use

different language, the disagreement between them is said to be “merely verbal” (Chalmers 2011). From the perspective of traditional philosophy of wellbeing, there is no significant difference, if any, between the Reflective Value account and Pragmatic Subjectivism, as neither takes a position on what the ultimate constituents of wellbeing are. But here, we are not doing traditional philosophy of wellbeing: we are finding the approach to government measures of national wellbeing that works best. So, what matters here is how the two views function in practice, which is not just a matter of whether they take a different position on what the ultimate constituents of wellbeing are. And as we are not doing traditional philosophy of wellbeing, a verbal disagreement can be important, as what language is used can make a significant difference in practical matters.⁴³

How Pragmatic Subjectivism and the Reflective Value account relate to each other depends on how we understand Pragmatic Subjectivism. I see two ways in which Pragmatic Subjectivism can be interpreted, a weaker version and a stronger version. Under the weaker version, Pragmatic Subjectivism is the combination of two claims: a government should take no stand on what wellbeing simpliciter is, and government wellbeing policy should promote just what people value as good for themselves. Under this version, Pragmatic Subjectivism is neutral on whether, in public policy, we should use an account of wellbeing that is *not* an account of wellbeing simpliciter. So, it’s consistent with this version of Pragmatic Subjectivism to use the Reflective Value account in a wellbeing framework. In fact, using the Reflective Value account can be seen as a natural application of Pragmatic Subjectivism: if government should take no stand on what wellbeing simpliciter is, and should in wellbeing policy promote just what people value as good for themselves, then it makes sense to use an account of wellbeing intended just for public policy according to which wellbeing is just what people value as good for themselves.

Under the stronger version of Pragmatic Subjectivism, the view is the combination of three claims, the two claims of the weaker version—a government should take no stand on what wellbeing simpliciter is, and government wellbeing policy should promote just what people value as good for

⁴³ See for example the extensive literature in psychology and political science on framing effects.

themselves—and an additional claim, that government and its agencies should employ no account of wellbeing of any kind, whether an account of wellbeing simpliciter or not. Under this interpretation, Pragmatic Subjectivism rules out using the Reflective Value account, along with all other accounts of wellbeing.

There is a problem with the stronger version of Pragmatic Subjectivism, which is that it's difficult in practice for policy makers and agencies to apply it in a wellbeing framework. We can see this in New Zealand's LSF, which in effect aims to take a Pragmatic Subjectivist approach. The New Zealand Treasury says that it takes no position on what wellbeing is; if you ask them what "wellbeing" means they'll say they don't know and believe it's not their place to work it out, and Treasury often refers to the LSF's Domains as measuring "what New Zealanders value" (e.g., (New Zealand Treasury 2018: 9); for discussion by the Treasury see (Hughes 2021: 33-34, Weijers and Mukherjee 2016: 16-20)). Despite claiming to take no stand on what wellbeing is, the Treasury makes many judgements about people's degrees of wellbeing, claiming, for example, to successfully categorize people as having low, medium, or high wellbeing, to have successfully measured the wellbeing of each participant in some surveys, and so on (e.g., (Te Tai Ōhanga/New Zealand Treasury 2019: 5)).

If the Treasury takes no position on what wellbeing is, what does it mean when it says things like "This group has low wellbeing," "The wellbeing of this group is increasing," "Here is advice on improving wellbeing," "Here is an analysis of New Zealanders' wellbeing," and so on? It means here by "wellbeing" something like "what New Zealanders value as good for themselves." This is however, in effect, subjectivism about wellbeing: the Treasury is treating wellbeing as having what you value as good for yourself. So, despite aiming to *not* use an account of wellbeing, this approach uses a specific, subjectivist account of wellbeing. This matters, because for a wellbeing framework to be politically legitimate, what it is doing should be transparent to policy makers and the public.

To avoid implicitly using a subjectivist account of wellbeing and instead succeed in taking a Pragmatic Subjectivist approach, Treasury would need to stop claiming that it measures wellbeing and stop claiming that certain people or demographic groups have high or low wellbeing: they would need to say they measure *what New Zealanders value as good for them*, or something similar. This would make wellbeing talk in and around wellbeing frameworks impractically

awkward and wordy, with each instance of “wellbeing” replaced with “what New Zealanders value as good for them.” Not only would this kind of language go on through hundreds of pages of Treasury documents and webpages, including material explaining the LSF to the general population, but politicians would need to use this language or something similar when speaking in public. Since New Zealand adopted the LSF and started calling its annual national budget the “Wellbeing Budget,” government members and representatives have spoken frequently about aims such as “designing policies to improve *wellbeing*,” frequently make claims that specific policies will “improve *wellbeing*,” and so on. Talking instead on the public stage of “designing policies to improve *what New Zealanders value as good for them*” and “improving *what New Zealanders value as good for them*” would be impractically wordy and clumsy, even if politicians could consistently manage it.

It might seem that implicitly using an account of wellbeing while claiming not to use an account of wellbeing isn’t problematic because when it makes judgements about wellbeing, the Treasury is just speaking loosely. This is often fine; for example, many scientists publishing on wellbeing use the term loosely to refer just to whatever aspects of wellbeing they are measuring. This can be unproblematic partly because looseness can be clarified clearly at the outset of an academic paper or book, partly because the audience in this context is generally a small number of expert readers, and partly because easy transparency to the general public is not a normative requirement in science. However, when a government and its agencies implicitly use an account of wellbeing, things are different. It is unlikely we can expect political leaders to frequently explain they are using “wellbeing” loosely when speaking to the public and the media, and even if they were able to manage to do so, it’s unlikely we can expect such explanations to be regularly included by the media in its space- and time-constrained content. And the audience for a government’s talk about wellbeing is not a small number of experts, but a national audience of up to many millions of people varying widely in their ability to understand technical talk; and government wellbeing talk often takes place in contexts where transparency about government intentions and functions is important. So, it’s very likely

people will take government statements about wellbeing at face value and take the government to have a view of what wellbeing is.⁴⁴

It might be possible to have a wellbeing framework in which wellbeing is treated as having what you value without implicitly using a subjectivist account of wellbeing by using some particular technique of clever framing; but close acquaintance with government documents, websites, and public speech about wellbeing frameworks, and the discussions I've had with staff at government agencies which develop and maintain wellbeing frameworks, make it difficult to identify a specific, practical way to achieve that. And not having to find and consistently employ that clever framing is a practical advantage of using the Reflective Value account: the government can then use wellbeing talk in ordinary ways, and when necessary, specify that it's treating wellbeing as having what you value, just for the purposes of wellbeing frameworks.

So, under the weaker version of Pragmatic Subjectivism, that view is compatible with the Reflective Value account, which complements Pragmatic Subjectivism by allowing the government to take no stand on what wellbeing simpliciter is and promote in wellbeing policy just what a population values as good for itself, while also allowing the government to talk about wellbeing in and around wellbeing frameworks in a natural way. Under the stronger version of Pragmatic Subjectivism, no account of wellbeing of any kind can be used in wellbeing frameworks or public policy generally, even if it is not an account of wellbeing simpliciter but an account of wellbeing just for the purposes of public policy. The Reflective Value account is then not compatible with Pragmatic Subjectivism, but this stronger version of Pragmatic Subjectivism faces practical obstacles that make it an unattractive option.

⁴⁴ This is currently demonstrated in Australia, where the government has introduced a national wellbeing framework called "Measuring What Matters." In my experience discussing the framework with philosophers, social scientists, and members of the general public in Australia, people take the government to be purporting to be actually measuring what matters for wellbeing; they don't take the government to be speaking loosely.

§9 Conclusion

I have made the case for a particular account of wellbeing as the best account for use in government measures of national wellbeing (which I've called "wellbeing frameworks" for concision). The account I've argued for, the Reflective Value account, holds that people have wellbeing when they have what they value as good for themselves on informed reflection. I haven't argued that the Reflective Value account is the right account of wellbeing simpliciter, or that it is the best account for all contexts, just that it is the best account of wellbeing to use in one particular context, wellbeing frameworks. Objectivist and hybrid accounts of wellbeing have great difficulty in adhering to the principle of political neutrality, and thus struggle to be politically legitimate. Existing subjectivist accounts of wellbeing for wellbeing measurement struggle to give adequate policy guidance, and struggle to be politically legitimate as they are prone to furthering oppression through counting satisfied adaptive preferences towards wellbeing. The Reflective Value account does not have these problems and meets all the conditions for an account of wellbeing for this context. So, it is the best account of wellbeing for wellbeing frameworks.

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