Workshop on Welfare and Ethics

2–3 July 2025, Saarland University

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12:30 - 13:15	Mauro Rossi (Université du Québec à Montréal) <u>Ill-Being and Fitting Unhappiness</u>
	Lunchbreak
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14:15 – 15:00	Tomasz Żuradzki (Jagiellonian University Kraków) <u>Welfare and Identity: Beyond the Distinction Between Person-Affecting and</u> <u>Identity-Affecting Interventions</u>
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2 July, 11:15 – 12:00

Hasko von Kriegstein (Toronto Metropolitan University/Humboldt Foundation) *The Prudential Value of Correspondence between Mind and World*

One popular take-away from Nozick's experience machine thought experiment is that life on such a machine would be impoverished by the lack of connection with reality. In other words, many people seem to think that our lives go better for us when we are securely connected to reality. In this talk I explore one way of developing this notion.

I begin by giving the idea a somewhat formal expression via what I call the *Non-Accidental Correspondence Principle* and argue that this is a plausible principle within a pluralist theory of wellbeing. I then show that knowledge and achievement are both instantiations of that principle, which adds to its intuitive appeal. However, not all instantiations of the principle are also instances of knowledge and achievement. I discuss some cases of non-accidental correspondence that do not qualify as knowledge or achievement and argue that such instantiations also have prudential value. I then move to the question of ill-being. The non-accidental correspondence principle identifies no instances of negative prudential value. Thus, in order to account for ill-being, it would have to be amended. I argue, however, that no such amendment is necessary. While a complete theory of prudential value needs to account for both well-being and ill-being, not every component of a pluralist theory has to. I show that the non-accidental correspondence principle fits nicely into a pluralist theory that contains other elements that account for ill-being. I close with a few remarks about measuring non-accidental correspondence and its value.

2 July, 12:30 - 13:15

Mauro Rossi (Université du Québec à Montréal) *Ill-Being and Fitting Unhappiness*

In previous work, we have offered an account of well-being as fitting happiness. In this article, we extend our account by arguing that ill-being consists in fitting unhappiness and respond to an important objection that this extension faces.

Our theory of ill-being can be seen as the combination of four main claims. The first is that unhappiness consists in a broadly negative balance of affective states, such as emotions, moods, and sensory pleasures and displeasures. The second is that these states are different kinds of affective evaluations, which (non-conceptually)¹ represent their objects as being good or bad in specific ways. As kinds of affective evaluations, these states can be assessed as fitting or unfitting. Based on this, our third claim is that insofar as unhappiness is constituted by affective states that have 'fittingness conditions', unhappiness too can be assessed in terms of its overall fittingness. When unhappiness is

¹ For simplicity, we will omit this qualification in what follows.

fitting, it consists in a global affective experience of genuinely disvaluable items. Our fourth claim is that ill-being consists in fitting unhappiness thus conceived.

The objection that our account faces is that it seems to imply that if unhappiness is wholly unfitting, then an individual's life does not go badly for them when they are unhappy. This is counterintuitive. Unhappiness-constituting states, such as negative emotions and moods and sensory displeasures, are unpleasant, and their unpleasantness seems to make unhappiness bad for the individual experiencing it even when these states are otherwise unfitting.

Our response relies on a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' unpleasantness (unpleasantness₁ and unpleasantness₂) (see Boswell 2016). Unpleasantness₁ is the unpleasantness that negative affective states possess in virtue of the fact that they represent their objects as being bad in specific ways. By contrast, unpleasantness₂ is the unpleasantness characteristic of suffering negative affective states, and it consists in a representation of the unpleasantness₁ of these states as being bad.

The crucial point is that the representation of unpleasantness₁ as bad is typically a correct representation, since the unpleasantness₁ of a negative affective state is, indeed, typically bad. Since unpleasantness₂ consists in this representation, it follows that unpleasantness₂ is typically a fitting, and thereby ill-being-enhancing, affective experience. Crucially, this holds true even when the unpleasant1 affective state itself is otherwise unfitting, that is, even when its object does not possess the evaluative property it is represented to have.

The upshot is the following. Some unfitting negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures do contribute to fitting unhappiness, and thereby to ill-being, in virtue of their fitting suffering character. This is not true of all unfitting negative emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures, but only of suffering emotions, moods, and sensory displeasures. We think that this is consistent with our considered intuitions. Some unfitting negative affective states seem to be too mundane and irrelevant to leave a mark on an individual's ill-being (see also Haybron 2008). Thus, although our proposal vindicates the badness for the individual of only some unfitting unhappiness-constituting states, this is a plausible feature of, rather than a problem for, our theory.

2 July, 14:15 – 15:00

Willem van der Deijl (Tilburg University) *The good experience account of wellbeing*

A widespread (though contentious) idea about welfare is that it is subject to an experience requirement: if something does not affect our experience, it cannot affect our welfare (Lin 2021). Theories that ascribe to this requirement are experientialist theories. Until recently, experientialism has almost exclusively been formulated in hedonistic terms: what makes life good is the balance of pleasure over pain. But recently, some authors have argued for non-hedonistic experientialism (Kraut 2018; van der Deijl 2019). But so far, this has not been developed in detail. What could a plausible non-hedonic version of experientialism look like? I review and reject two possible answers – a

subjective view and a pluralistic view – and defend a novel monistic phenomenological account: the good experience view of wellbeing.

On a subjective view, good experiences are those experiences we have a particular pro-attitude towards. Such a view would be substantively similar to Chris Heathwood's (2006; 2007) version of attitudinal hedonism, though a non-hedonistic version would deny that all instances of experiential states that we have pro-attitudes towards are necessarily instances of pleasure. Beside familiar problems with subjective accounts of welfare, there is a particular problem with this view in this. Subjectivist experientialism takes the phenomenology out of the explanandum: on this view, the reason an experience is good – e.g. taking a lovely walk through the woods – is that we like it or desire it, not that it is pleasant, marveling, refreshing, and decompressing. This seems to fit poorly with the rationale for experientialism: if desires determine what is good, then why would only experiences count? And if experiences are all that matters, it seems that experiential features themselves also determine their goodness.

Kraut (2018) defends a pluralistic version of experientialism. On this view, there are a variety of experiential goods. Pleasure is one, but so is wonder, curiosity, aesthetic appreciation, or the experience of being loved, etc. While I argue that there is good reason to see all of these as valuable properties of experiences, pluralistic accounts provide no further explanation of why these properties are valuable, nor of how they combine in an overall judgment of wellbeing that can be compared between individuals and within individuals over time. Without such a unifying account, I argue, a list account is severely limited in its plausibility.

I argue that experientialism should adopt a third possibility. On this view, an experience is good for us insofar we contemporaneously experience it as good. In a slogan: life is good for us, when it is filled with experiences we experience as good when we experience them. "Experiencing as good" may appear to be an attitude, but I argue we should conceptualize it as a phenomenological property, by expanding Smuts' (2011) phenomenological account of pleasure. The resulting view accounts for wellbeing in experiential terms, while also providing a unifying account of different types of good experiences.

I discuss two objections: a first is that the view is still vulnerable to a version of the philosophy of swine objection, and a second is that the account lacks explanatory depth.

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Yuqi Liang (Oxford University) *Peak Experiences*

By "peak experiences," I mean experiences so wonderful that after having them, one sees no point in having more positive experiences and becomes indifferent to the prospect of having more positive experiences. Examples of activities that lead to peak experiences may include listening to extraordinary pieces of music (e.g. Wagner's "Liebestod"), achieving mastery in a field of study, engaging in certain religious or mystic activities, playing an extreme sport, being in the state of flow, making an original scientific discovery, and more. Although one does not deny that the additional positive experiences after a peak experience are still good in themselves, it appears that more of them will not add more value to one's life. To put it a bit too simply and bluntly, after one has peaked, it will not matter if one dies. I will discuss various questions raised by the unusual and paradoxical features of peak experiences, including the following: do peak experiences have infinite positive value? Will experiences cease to be enjoyable after the peak? Why is it that more positive experiences "will not matter anymore"? What does the existence of peak experiences suggest about the value of continued personal survival? Here I will make a connection to the contemporary debate about the desirability of immortality, initiated by Bernard Williams' 1973 article "The Makropulos Case." I will also discuss the epistemic problem of how one can know that the experience one had was a genuine peak experience, and how we should think about the badness of death in light of peak experiences.

2 July, 16:45 – 18:15

Chris Heathwood (University of Colorado, Boulder) *Are Adaptive Preferences a Problem for Subjective Theories of Well-Being?*

An adaptive preference is one formed or changed in response to what the subject of the preference takes their feasible options to be. The problem of adaptive preferences for some theory of well-being is that the theory appears to generate an intuitively mistaken result about one or more cases of adaptive preference. Against conventional wisdom, I argue that the problem of adaptive preference is not much of a problem for subjective approaches to well-being; and the only subjective theories that it is a problem for are the least plausible versions of subjectivism anyway. This can be shown if we are careful to attend to three crucial distinctions within subjective theories of well-being that most writers on adaptive preference appear insensitive to.

Luca Hemmerich (Goethe University Frankfurt) *Three Accounts of Irreducibly Collective Interests*

This paper explores the nature of irreducibly collective interests – interests attributable to groups themselves that are irreducible to their individual members (Wiland 2022). Assuming such interests exist for at least some groups, particularly group agents like corporations or states, what might they consist in? I examine this question by applying the Parfitian trichotomy of theories of well-being – hedonism, subjectivism, and objective list theory (OLT) – to groups.

First, I briefly defend the plausibility of the existence of irreducibly collective interests. Intuitions about things going better or worse for groups (e.g., a company thriving, a state declining) and the explanatory requirements of social science support attributing interests to at least some groups. Furthermore, arguments from multiple realizability suggest these group-level interests resist reduction to the interests of individual members. Building on this, I then evaluate the three main accounts of group interests:

Hedonism requires that groups can have pleasurable and painful experiences and, hence, phenomenal consciousness. It fails as an account of collective interests because groups, while potentially capable of cognitive awareness, probably lack the phenomenal consciousness required for subjective experiences like pleasure or pain (List 2018). Hedonists' best bet may therefore be to be fictionalists about group interests.

Subjectivism identifies interests with a subject's (idealized) pro-attitudes (desires, preferences, values). This account fits reasonably well with group agents, as they arguably possess the capacity to form collective pro-attitudes (List & Pettit 2011). A corporation, for instance, can have preferences and values. However, subjectivism-for-groups inherits the standard problems faced by subjectivism-for-individuals. Group agents, like individuals, might hold pro-attitudes that seem pointless or adaptive, casting doubt on whether satisfying these attitudes always constitutes a genuine benefit to the agent. Consequently, the viability of subjectivism for groups largely mirrors one's assessment of its viability for individuals.

Objective List Theory (OLT) posits certain objective goods as fundamental interests. A straightforward application, using a universal list derived from human interests (e.g., knowledge, friendship, pleasure), looks problematic. Many typical human goods seem either unattainable by groups (e.g., pleasure) or irrelevant to the intuitive interests of many group agents (e.g., friendship). A potentially more promising variant of OLT is perfectionism, on which interests consist in realizing the specific nature of the entity in question. Applied to group agents, this could imply, for instance, that maximizing profit is among the fundamental interests of a stock corporation if that is part of its nature. This approach potentially yields results that appear extensionally adequate. However, it relies on the contentious claim that group agents possess (social) natures, which would require further defense. Nevertheless, perfectionist OLT may warrant further examination.

Finally, building on van der Deijl's (2021) coherence argument for welfare experientialism, I offer an indirect argument for collective interests: If either subjectivism or OLT is the correct general account of interests, and if group agents possess the relevant capacities (forming pro-attitudes or attaining objective goods), then coherence suggests these theories should accommodate group interests. This provides indirect systematic support for the existence of irreducibly collective interests.

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3 July, 11:15 – 12:00

Luca Stroppa (University of Turin) *Soritical Superiority*

Can many small benefits ever outweigh fewer but significantly greater benefits? According to a series of impossibility theorems in population ethics, this question has no satisfying answer: no theory of value aggregation can meet all plausible adequacy conditions (Arrhenius 2000).

Yet recent work shows that Value Superiority theories can indeed meet these conditions (Thomas 2018, Carlson 2023). These theories hold that some goods—intellectual fulfillment; meaningful relationships—are so valuable that no number of lesser goods—instants of conversation; trivia knowledge—can make up for their absence. Outcomes are ranked lexically: the best population is the one with the greatest total of Superior goods; if tied, Inferior goods serve as tie-breakers. While promising, Value Superiority faces two key challenges:

Small Steps. Any excellent life can be degraded into a poor one through a finite series of imperceptibly small changes. If so, there must be a step where a life with a Superior good becomes one without it—a sharp shift in kind triggered by a tiny difference in degree. This seems implausible (Arrhenius 2005).

Weak Repugnant Conclusion. Suppose we concede that no number of compliments is as valuable as a single deep friendship. Then Value Superiority implies that, for any population, there is a better one where everyone has only one true friendship. This variant of the Repugnant Conclusion, though less jarring than the original, is still hard to accept.

This paper proposes Soritical Superiority, a novel theory that keeps the strengths of Value Superiority

while avoiding its pitfalls. The core idea is drawn from Sorites paradoxes—puzzles where individually negligible changes add up to major shifts. Take the "bald man" paradox: no single hair makes the difference between being hairy and bald, yet remove enough and baldness results.

Well-being, I argue, works the same way. No single minute of silence makes a relationship hollow—but enough can. No single ache makes life unbearable, yet enough of them do. These transitions are gradual and vague, but they track real differences. Thus, any solution to the aggregation problem must account for this soritical structure in well-being.

Many leading theories of vagueness—epistemicism, supervaluationism, and some versions of contextualism—agree that vague terms have sharp cutoffs, even if they're unknowable, indeterminate, or context-sensitive. These views are incompatible with Small Steps, and allow that small changes can yield real, if vague, differences in kind. This justifies a tiered structure of well-being with vague but meaningful thresholds.

Moreover, soritical structure can be iterated. As no amounts of minutes of conversation is as good as a meaningful relationship (but enough such minutes may result in a meaningful relationship!), in the same way, no number of meaningful relationship is as good as a truly loving community (e.g a loving family). But enough meaningful relationship may result in a truly loving community. A truly loving community is at a higher level of Superiority than relationships, as relationships are at a higher level of Superiority than minutes of conversation. This defuses the Weak Repugnant Conclusion: it's not counterintuitive to think that, for any population, there's a better one where everyone is part of a genuinely loving community. And if needed, I argue that further iterations are possible.

Thus, Soritical Superiority is extremely promising, as it satisfies all impossibility theorems adequacy conditions, avoiding both versions of the Repugnant Conclusion.

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July 3, 12:30 – 13:15

Jonas Harney (TU Dortmund University) *Prospects of Welfare Losses*

We have moral reasons to prevent welfare losses to individuals, to prevent them from being worse off than they could have been. This is so, it is claimed, even if the individual's existence depends on that choice (McDermott 1982, Temkin 2012, McMahan 2013). The recent debate revolves around whether the reasons welfare losses provide are limited by the (existential) good that acts confer on them or others. I will presuppose that welfare losses provide moral reasons in themselves and rather investigate their reason-giving force under conditions of risk.

I distinguish two fundamentally different ways to understand the welfare-loss-provided reasons for choices under risk. On the standard understanding, we consider the expected welfare for the people in each option and compare the options based on the expected welfare. This is based on

Loss of Expected Welfare

Regarding welfare losses, prospect A is worse for a person than prospect B if, and to the extent that, the person's expected welfare in A is lower than their expected welfare in B.

Alternatively, however, we could consider the options state-wise based on

Expected Welfare Loss

Regarding welfare losses, prospect A is worse for a person than prospect B if, and to the extent that, we expect the person to lose welfare in A relative to B.

I'll argue that, if we believe that welfare losses provide moral reasons in themselves, we should accept Expected Welfare Losses rather than Loss of Expected Welfare.

First, I anticipate the objection that Expected Welfare Loss violates the plausible Ex-Ante Pareto principle. As I show, however, the principle can be understood in two ways corresponding to the two understandings of the prospects of welfare losses. Thus, which understanding we should choose, cannot be decided by the principle but depends on the underlying structure of what we believe to provide moral reason: the loss of (expected) welfare or the (expected) welfare loss.

Second, I provide positive arguments for Expected Welfare Losses. As I show by the means of a more vivid example, only Expected Welfare Losses captures the intuition that the welfare losses to individuals morally matter. Furthermore, welfare losses provide moral reasons only if they satisfy a plausible condition: only if we can, in fact, expect an individual to lose welfare. As I argue, only Expected Welfare Losses is compatible with that. Loss of Expected Welfare, by contrast, assigns lossprovided reasons even if we cannot expect *anyone* to lose welfare, because it is fundamentally concerned with absolute, not comparative welfare.

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Welfare and Identity: Beyond the Distinction Between Person-Affecting and Identity-Affecting Interventions

In distribution ethics a common distinction is made between "person-affecting" and "identityaffecting" interventions. Person-affecting interventions influence the welfare of specific individuals, either harming or benefiting them. Examples include short-term policies or administering drugs to pa ents. Iden ty-affecting interventions, on the other hand, determine which individuals come into existence and their welfare levels. Examples include long-term policies affecting future generations or embryo selection.

This distinction is often considered disjunctive and normatively significant. It is generally assumed that reasons to benefit existing individuals are stronger than reasons to bring better-off individuals into existence instead of less well-off ones. This view is supported in discussions on distributive ethics (Otsuka 2018, Segall 2024) and bioethics (Sparrow 2022, McMahan, Savulescu 2024). Some argue that one outcome can be evaluated as better than another only if it is better in terms of the welfare of specific individuals.

This paper challenges these assumptions. When an act is performed, there are many possible alternative outcomes. For instance, in gene editing scenarios, the benefited person might exist in some counterfactual scenarios but not in others (e.g., if the embryo is discarded or a different person develops from the same embryo). This makes it impossible to definitively classify interventions as person-affecting or identity-affecting.

Some positions attempt to resolve this by assuming 'counterfactual determinism' (Bykvist 2003), which posits that there are facts about what would have happened in any given situation instead of the actual course of events. Others focus on what could have happened instead of the actual course of events (McMahan & Savulescu 2024). However, both approaches face issues.

Ontologically, they assume the existence of primitive modal facts that serve as truth-makers for all counterfactual claims (Hájek 2024). Yet, many counterfactual questions, such as 'what would have happened if gene editing was not employed?', are often false (Lewis 1973) or indeterminate (Stalnaker 1968).

Epistemologically, for this distinction to have practical implications, it requires that an agent evaluating the state of affairs from an ex-post perspective knows either what would have been done at a particular time instead of (knowledge of the specific possible world that would have existed instead of the actual) or what could have been done (knowledge of all possible worlds that could have existed instead of the actual). This places a significant burden of proof on those who insist on the disjunctive distinction between person-affecting and identity-affecting interventions, questioning its normative significance and practical importance.

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3 July, 15:30 – 17:00

Hilary Greaves (Oxford University) *For goodness' sake*

"It is (quite) uncontroversial that welfare has moral value and provides moral reasons." So says the website for this workshop, and I agree. Going slightly beyond this, it is also (quite) uncontroversial that there is a morally important notion of overall welfarist goodness (or betterness). It is not, however, entirely uncontroversial. In my talk, I will discuss some of the grounds that have been given for rejecting the claim that any notion of overall welfarist goodness (or betterness) plays any important role in moral theory. I will focus especially on reasons that have been given for thinking that a moral theory with that feature is not even a coherent possibility. Responding adequately to those lines of thought, I will argue, requires understanding the notion of overall goodness (or betterness) as something of an accounting device to track the normative upshot of myriad competing welfarist considerations. From this point of view, it is prima facie an open question whether or not betterness has the formal properties that are usually associated with axiology (for example, transitivity and choice set independence). I will survey in particular the case for thinking that although this question is prima facie an open one, its answer is affirmative.