

*A Theory of Subjective Well-Being*, Mark Fabian. Oxford University Press, 2022, x + 305 pages.

doi:[10.1017/S0266267123000214](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267123000214)

In *A Theory of Subjective Well-Being*, Mark Fabian embarks on an ambitious project: to integrate insights from economics, psychology, medicine, and analytic and continental philosophy, in order to develop a comprehensive theory of subjective well-being that is descriptively, normatively and empirically adequate. Fabian's book is published in Oxford University Press's new Philosophy, Politics and Economics series, and it is a genuinely good representative of the insights one can arrive at when reaching across academic silos in order to develop a theoretical account that is sensitive to the insights and findings of many different research programmes. Fabian is refreshingly honest and forthcoming in recognizing the presumption of his endeavour. He aims to undertake a truly interdisciplinary project, and he recognizes the difficulties both for the author in doing so and for the audience in having the tools to understand aspects of disciplines that are not their own. Nevertheless, Fabian does succeed in integrating a broad swath of disparate academic literatures into a cohesive account in what I would consider as close a feat to what a contemporary Renaissance Man could hope to do.

Before getting into the content of the book, it is necessary to discuss some terminology, as different disciplines often use similar words to mean different things. In Fabian's account 'subjective well-being' (SW-B, *hyphenated*) 'refers only and specifically to affect, life satisfaction, and (to a lesser extent) meaning and purpose, and to the literatures in hedonic psychology and happiness economics (and occasionally other disciplines) that have studied these items' (3). 'Subjective wellbeing' (SWB, *unhyphenated*), which is what Fabian is aiming to provide a holistic theory of, refers by contrast 'broadly to how well individuals believe themselves to be', which is also contrasted to objective wellbeing, which relies on criteria that are independent of the individual's own assessment or perception. SWB is broader than SW-B, and is Fabian's focus in this book.

Fabian treats 'wellbeing' as synonymous with 'prudential good' that is the subject of the 'good for' relationship. While this synonymous treatment is standard in the philosophical literature on the subject, Fabian does distinguish between 'wellbeing' and 'welfare', and reserves 'welfare' to refer to matters concerning objective standards of living. This distinction might be somewhat odd to philosophers, who usually treat these two as interchangeable as well. As not all these distinctions are standard, and much hinges on what precise term Fabian is referring to, reading the book can be confusing at times if one is not sufficiently focused and keeps all of Fabian's definitions in mind. Several times while reading this book I found myself perplexed as to why Fabian would make some claim, only for the claim to make sense once I referred back to Fabian's definitions. I am not sure if there is any better way of doing things, but this is part of the challenge an interdisciplinary broad scope project such as Fabian's faces.

In the first two and a half chapters of the book, Fabian provides a helpful summary of the state of the academic research as it pertains to wellbeing. Chapter 1 reviews the SW-B literature, along with its historical development, focus, terminology and

strengths. This is a chapter that I imagine offers a lot of novelty to philosophers, while probably seeming fairly rudimentary to economists and psychologists of well-being. This is just the challenge such an interdisciplinary book must face, but given the clarity with which Fabian presents ideas and the subject matter of each chapter, he threads the needle impressively well.

Chapter 2 turns to discuss some of the myriad problems and concerns raised against SW-B over the years. The central concern is that some of the ways in which SW-B developed in order to be taken more seriously as a scientific programme ended up making it less adequate for the purposes it is often employed these days – those of therapy and public policy. As a field, SW-B must, according to Fabian (and I agree), develop into a ‘theory-based’ science as well as recognize the normative underpinnings of the topic that become extremely important when the science is thought of as meant to be action guiding in some sense. Perhaps this chapter is best read by the social scientists working on SW-B who wish to gain a better appreciation for the potential challenges to their area of study.

The first half of Chapter 3 offers a good summary of the philosophical work on wellbeing. While analytic philosophy often emphasizes differences between views, progressing by offering arguments, counterarguments and rebuttals, Fabian nicely stresses the broad agreement that actually exists among philosophical theories of wellbeing. The focus on differences that is common in the philosophical literature is often counterproductive and lamentable, so I commend Fabian for his approach, perhaps one that is more easily adopted by an outsider. That Fabian views Chapter 3 as the beginning of his positive approach, yet spends the first half of it on an overview of philosophical theories of wellbeing, is a testament to who his intended audience is. While this book is intended to be of interest to philosophers, its real audience are the social scientists working on well-being measures.

These two and a half chapters act to provide the requisite background and motivation for Fabian’s main goal – developing a comprehensive theory of subjective wellbeing (SWB, *nonhyphenated*). Chapters 3–9 are where Fabian develops his project of providing a single, unified, encompassing, integrated, coherent and usefully guiding subjective wellbeing theory.

The first step for Fabian is to differentiate between two aspects of his theory. The first, the ‘subjective wellbeing production function’ (SWBPF), focuses on subjective wellbeing as an end and is comprised of several parts, whereas the ‘coalescence of being’ is the process by which subjective wellbeing comes about. This, then, is a theory of both state and process. It distinguishes wellbeing as outcome, or well *being*, and the process of achieving wellbeing, or well *living*. This in itself is already a wonderful way to conceptualize the subject matter of wellbeing in a way that adds complexity that seems much truer to our lived experiences than many philosophical theories of wellbeing care to be.

The SWBPF is composed of three components, or answers three questions: whether life is pleasant, whether it is fulfilling and whether it is valuable. These correspond to hedonia, eudaimonia and conscience, respectively. In turn, each of these is comprised of several components, with hedonia comprised of positive affect, negative affect and hedonic satisfaction; eudaimonia of autonomy, competence and relatedness; and conscience of identity, meaning and virtue. If all this seems like a lot, it is. Fabian embarks on a very comprehensive endeavour to really try and capture a wide

variety of aspects of subjective wellbeing. Throughout Chapters 4–8 Fabian walks the reader through these different aspects in much more detail.

The second broad aspect of Fabian's SWB theory deals with the process of self-actualization towards the endpoint of SWB. This aspect of the account also has three components, that need to be brought into alignment – a person's actual self, ideal self and ought self. A person's actual self is associated with their actual motivations and values; their ideal self is associated with the values and behaviours that they identify with and wish to embody; and their ought self has to do with the specifically ethical values that they identify with. Coalescence, then, is the process of getting these different aspects of one's identity to align through calibrating the nine items of the SWBPF for their individual case.

Coalescence is one aspect of his theory that Fabian appropriately criticizes philosophers for under-theorizing about. Indeed, I was barely familiar with this term, let alone have thought at all deeply about how well-being comes about. Mostly philosophers focus on the question of what wellbeing *is*, or the SWBPF aspect of Fabian's theory. In our defence, while we philosophers should indeed do better on the question of process rather than just focus on end, whether the process will reveal something helpful regarding the end of wellbeing, as Fabian claims, is a contingent one. It seems likely that Fabian is right, but it is not a forgone conclusion that the how will reveal something important about the what.

Chapters 10 and 11 round up the book by exploring how SWB as Fabian conceives of it can be measured, and by engaging in a normative discussion of wellbeing science in the public policy context. Because Chapter 11 is the most philosophical chapter of the book, I devote most of my attention to it. In this chapter Fabian raises and rebuts some philosophical objections to his account of wellbeing. Fabian admits that this is merely a brief and cursory discussion that he does not expect will satisfy philosophers of wellbeing. Rather, his aim in this chapter is to make SWB scholars aware of some of the philosophical complications. This, yet again, is a testament to Fabian's ability to engage with and speak across a variety of academic disciplines.

Fabian recognizes that no matter how inclusive his SWBPF might be and how well it incorporates what appear to be the essential parts of alternative theories, it is ultimately what philosophers would call a mental-state theory of well-being. As it stands, I do not think that Fabian has sufficiently established that SWB is the prudential good. My view is that in Fabian's discussion of the five critiques of mental-state theories of wellbeing that he mentions, he is perhaps doing his interdisciplinary project a slight disservice. I write this because, as Fabian recognizes, his quick rebuttals are not going to satisfy philosophers who have spilled much ink going back and forth on these issues. What we then end up with is the appearance of a robust philosophical defence of his account for the social scientists, along with a deep dissatisfaction of his account for philosophers. Insofar as Fabian's project aims, and often successfully manages, to bridge disciplinary gaps, leaving the two camps in such a state regarding the philosophical arguments deepens the divide. The philosophers walk away feeling like they were treated to a glib response, whereas the social scientists walk away convinced that the philosophers are simply being dogmatic in their refusal to accept the commonsense proposal.

Instead, I would have liked to see Fabian be clearer in his admitting that one must accept his philosophical commitments, however controversial they may be, in order to ultimately accept his framework. Then, showing that his philosophical commitments are less controversial than they might first appear, make clear that it is not too big of a bullet to bite. To make pretty much any philosophical progress, some potentially controversial philosophical assumptions must be made. If someone rejects one's assumptions, of course they will remain unconvinced. The goal is to start from the least controversial assumptions one can muster in order to arrive at one's conclusion. I think that if Fabian accepted that, he would frustrate the philosopher in me less.

Fabian's discussion in Chapter 11 regarding the role of government is a particularly interesting normative one. Fabian argues that viewing the role of government as that of promoting the prudential good of its citizens is an assumption at the heart of the social planner tradition, yet this assumption requires an argument to support it. This is the case because there are alternative frameworks for thinking about the role of government, including the social contract and deliberative democracy traditions. I should note that even if we deny that the stronger claim that promoting the prudential good *is* the role of government, we might make the weaker claim that *one* of the roles of government, *among others*, is to promote the prudential good. This would only require a commitment to weak, rather than strong, welfarism. It is true that even this position requires an argument in its defence, but I believe it is one that is much easier to make. Regardless of the political philosophical tradition we ascribe to, it is akin to claiming, for example, that some of the roles of government are to provide national defence, to care for children, or to protect the natural diversity in its geographic region.

Fabian argues that while SWB is the prudential good, governments should not make it their goal. Instead, governments should aim to increase welfare. Recall that for Fabian welfare is distinct from wellbeing, and he saves this term to refer to matters concerning objective standards of living. Fabian argues that the goal of government should be welfare, understood as referring to the option set available to individuals from which they choose the life that is best for them. As Fabian notes, this bears resemblance to Sen's (1987) capabilities and functionings, yet he fails to engage with the criticisms that Sen's capabilities approach give rise to. Most prominent in my mind is the worry that focusing on capabilities can be inappropriate if the individual does not translate the capabilities they have into actual functionings, for example because the individual is particularly vulnerable to risk (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). It is not necessarily the case that, using Fabian's terms, promoting welfare would indirectly promote wellbeing/SWB/prudential good. More welfare *might* promote wellbeing, but this need not be the case. A person could have a higher level of welfare, yet not necessarily enjoy any additional wellbeing. Increasing an individual's opportunity set from two options to three might be extremely costly to society, only to have them still choose one of the two that were originally available to them. Moreover, given that Fabian does not think that SWB is the appropriate goal of government, it is not clear what, if any, the practical upshots of generating a theory of SWB ends up being.

While arguing about the role SWB should play in government policymaking is not the focus of the book – which is, rather, generating a novel account of subjective

wellbeing – it seems that in light of Fabian’s criticisms of other paradigms of the goals of government, he would make a more substantive effort to defend his own alternative. Ultimately, Fabian’s claim is that individuals should pursue SWB – a substantive philosophical normative claim, and that governments should promote welfare – another substantive philosophical normative claim. I am not convinced he does either of these normative claims justice in this single chapter.

This book is interdisciplinary in nature and genuinely impressive in its engagement with, and knowledge of, a variety of academic disciplines and literatures. Nevertheless, it ultimately seems that its main target are those social scientists working in the SW-B project. It is them that Fabian seems to most wish to convince of the need to broaden their investigation and add theory to it. This book should be of interest to philosophers wishing to get a solid understanding of both the state of the literature in wellbeing science along with an insightful proposal of how to improve the current state of the field. Yet, ultimately, they are not Fabian’s target. He seems to generally assume that his reader is someone in the weeds of wellbeing normal science (borrowing Kuhnian terminology), who could greatly benefit from stepping back and seeing the forest rather than the trees (or weeds, to mix metaphors).

This is not a critique. It is indeed a worthwhile endeavour, and one that I believe Fabian is probably one of the few people with a sufficient breadth of knowledge to embark on. But as a philosopher of wellbeing, I often found too many of the claims made in Chapters 4–9 in particular as lacking the sort of careful philosophical argumentation that my kind values. Again, I must emphasize, this is not a genuine criticism, as there is only so much one can expect of a single monograph that has a certain target in mind and aims to accomplish a certain goal. Such is the nature of interdisciplinary projects, that not every background expertise can be fully satisfied. The philosophical level and sophistication that Fabian achieves in his work is genuinely impressive for a social scientist mainly engaging with social scientists. Again, this is not meant as backhanded compliment, but a genuine one. As someone who tried going in the other direction, I believe I have fared much worse in my endeavours, so I appreciate all that Fabian has achieved.

Gil Hersch 

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Email: [Hersch@vt.edu](mailto:Hersch@vt.edu)

## References

- Sen A. 1987. *Commodities and Capabilities*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.  
 Wolff J. and A. De-Shalit 2007. *Disadvantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Gil Hersch** is an Associate Professor at the Virginia Tech Department of Philosophy and a core faculty member of the Kellogg Center for Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Hersch’s primary focus is on political, ethical and methodological questions at the intersection of economics, policy and business, especially as they relate to happiness and well-being. URL: [www.gilhersch.com](http://www.gilhersch.com).