# The Value and Significance of Ill-Being

Christopher Woodard, University of Nottingham

Forthcoming in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*

Volume on 'Well-Being and Ill-Being', ed. Gwen Bradford

**Abstract**: Since Shelly Kagan pointed out the relative neglect of ill-being in philosophical discussions, several philosophers have contributed to an emerging literature on its constituents. In doing so, they have explored possible asymmetries between the constituents of ill-being and the constituents of positive well-being. This paper explores some possible asymmetries that may arise elsewhere in the philosophy of ill-being. In particular, it considers whether there is an asymmetry between the contribution made to prudential value by equal quantities of goods and bads. It then considers a similar question about the contributions made to moral value by equal quantities of ill-being and positive well-being. The paper explores some of the difficulties involved in assessing these questions. It ends by considering broader differences, both practical and theoretical, between the significance of ill-being and of positive well-being.

**Keywords**: ill-being, positive well-being, prudential value, moral value, liberty, care

## 1. Introduction

It is puzzling that philosophers writing on well-being should have persisted for so long with a confusingly ambiguous term for their topic. On one hand "well-being" refers broadly to how well, or badly, someone's life goes for them. On the other, it refers more narrowly to one

component of that overall picture: the positive component. It is as if we were to use a single term to refer both to someone's assets and to refer to their overall financial situation. In that circumstance we might expect confusion to follow and debts to be overlooked.

Perhaps this ambiguity has contributed to the relative neglect of the topic of negative well-being, or "ill-being". For, if we focus only on the positive aspect of well-being, we need not worry about whether "well-being" is used in the narrow sense or the broad sense. In any case, Shelly Kagan was surely right to draw attention to this neglect.[1] As he pointed out, with the exception of the hedonist tradition it has been common for philosophers to present and debate theories of positive well-being while saying little or nothing about ill-being. Yet it is obvious that ill-being matters, for pretty much the same reasons that positive well-being matters. And, as Kagan also pointed out, it is often not straightforward to derive a theory of ill-being from a theory of positive well-being. Unless we want to identify presence of the bad with absence of the good, we will need a separate theory of the bad.[2]

Many of the philosophical discussions of ill-being that have appeared since Kagan made this observation have focused on the traditional philosophical question about the nature of value. For any value or disvalue we may be interested in, this question asks what that value or disvalue consists in, or what its constituents are. In the case of positive well-being, we are familiar with a range of answers: pleasure, desire-satisfaction, knowledge, friendship, achievement, and so on. Correspondingly, recent discussions of ill-being have attempted to identify its constituents. They seek to specify the "bads" that constitute ill-being, just as theories of positive well-being seek to specify the "goods".[3]

[1] Kagan 2014: 263.

[2] Kagan 2014: 262-3. Sumner 1996: 13-4 also highlighted the need for a theory of well-being to include a theory of ill-being; see also Sumner 2020.

[3] Notable contributions to this recent literature include Bradford 2020, Kagan 2021, Östlund 2021, Pallies 2022, and Tully 2017.

This is, quite obviously, a very important topic. But once we absorb Kagan's observation about the relative neglect by philosophers of the topic of ill-being we may become interested in some other questions, too. This paper discusses some of these other questions, about the value of ill-being and about its practical and theoretical significance. The discussion is exploratory, but a guiding theme is the idea that there may be some asymmetry between ill-being and positive well-being. We begin by clarifying the concept of ill-being, in the next section.

## 2. Ill-being and related concepts

Kagan writes:

> Life going well, or better, *consists* in the presence of the various goods; its going badly, or less well, consists in the presence of the various bads. Of course, different theories of well-being disagree concerning what the positive and negative constituents are. But I take it that any reasonable theory of well-being will include not only intrinsically positive elements but also intrinsically negative ones as well.[4]

This passage employs several concepts which are worth distinguishing from each other. At its heart is the idea of goods and bads, where the goods are "intrinsically positive elements" and the bads are "intrinsically negative ones". Since the topic is well-being and ill-being, these are specific kinds of goods: the goods are *good for* the person whose life contains them, and the bads are *bad for* that person. These are, respectively, the constituents of positive well-being and of ill-being.

[4] Kagan 2014: 261, emphasis in the original.

Notice that Kagan is careful not to say that, when someone's life contains a good, it follows that their life is going well for them. Instead he says that it follows that their life is "going well, or better". Similarly, he says carefully that it follows from presence of one of the bads that the person's life is going "badly, or less well". Kagan is here distinguishing between positive well-being, which is constituted by the goods, and the overall state of someone's life. Likewise, he is distinguishing between ill-being, which is constituted by the bads, and the overall state of someone's life. Presence of a good makes the overall state of someone's life better, but it need not make it positive; and presence of a bad makes the overall state of someone's life worse, but it need not make it negative.

To illustrate these distinctions let us consider an example, and for the purpose of exposition let us suppose that hedonism is true—or in other words that pleasure is the sole good and pain is the sole bad. Suppose that on Tuesday Laila breaks her arm, and that this is moderately painful. The pain that she experiences is a bad in her life, and constitutes ill-being for her. But it does not follow that her life is, overall, going badly for her. Indeed, it does not even follow that her life on Tuesday is overall going badly for her. The painful broken arm is one element in her overall state, which may yet be positive, even on the day that her arm is most painful. If pains and pleasures can co-exist at the very same moment, her overall state at the most painful *moment* may be positive, because she may be experiencing enough pleasure at the same time. The sense in which the pain is bad for her is that it makes her life worse, which may or may not make it negative overall.

Worse than what? We cannot say, simply: "worse than her life would have been without this feature", for then we would not be able to distinguish the presence of a bad from the absence of a good. Consider Ash, who loves chocolate. Usually, eating chocolate brings Ash significant pleasure. But one day something is wrong with his sense of taste, and eating chocolate brings him no pleasure at all. On this occasion, the pleasure that he usually gains is

absent. This feature—the absence of the pleasure he usually gets from eating chocolate—makes his life worse for him than it would have been, without this feature (that is, worse than if his life instead contained another episode of gaining pleasure from eating chocolate). But we should not say that, for this reason, this lack of pleasure is a bad feature of Ash's life. It is just the absence of a good that he normally obtains by eating chocolate.

To distinguish between goods and bads, or the constituents of positive well-being and the constituents of ill-being, we seem to need the concept of a neutral feature of someone's life. Since we want to be able to draw this distinction for theories other than hedonism, we should not define the concept of a neutral feature in terms of a quality of experience. Instead, we can say that a neutral feature of someone's life is a feature that makes no difference in itself to how their life goes for them overall. We can then distinguish between goods and bads. A *good* (or constituent of positive well-being) is a feature of a life that makes that life better for the person whose life it is than an otherwise identical life would have been, if that feature were replaced by a neutral feature. A *bad* (or constituent of ill-being) is a feature of a life that makes that life worse for the person whose life it is than an otherwise identical life would have been, if that feature were replaced by a neutral feature.[5]

Our basic concept is the concept of a neutral feature, which is a feature of a life that makes no difference to the person's overall state (no difference, that is, "in itself", or "noninstrumentally";[6] it may of course make a difference through what it causes or prevents). Using that concept we can define a good as a feature that makes a life better than an

[5] Perhaps this assumes a kind of atomism about goods and bads: an assumption that they make a difference individually, rather than as parts of wholes. If so, it would be better to develop a definition of goods and bads that does not take a stand on this issue. However, in this paper I will not try to do that.

[6] I use "noninstrumentally" to distinguish value that does not depend on what the feature in question causes or prevents from value that does so depend. In this discussion, the so-called "goods" are things that have positive noninstrumental value, and the so-called "bads" are things that have negative noninstrumental value. Goods may, in addition, have positive or negative instrumental value, and bads likewise may have, in addition, positive or negative instrumental value.

otherwise identical life in which it is replaced with a neutral feature, and we can define a bad as a feature that makes a life worse than an otherwise identical life in which it is replaced with a neutral feature.[7]

Note that we are defining these concepts in a way that operates at three conceptually distinct levels, as represented in Figure 1.

| Level 1 | Feature of the person's life | Bad | Neutral | Good |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Level 2 | Value constituted by the feature | Ill-being | None | Positive well-being |
| Level 3 | Overall prudential value of the life | Not determined | Not determined | Not determined |

Figure 1: Three levels of concepts

At level 1, we have three kinds of features of someone's life: neutral features, bads, and goods. At level 2 we have the kinds of value these features constitute: bads are constituents of ill-being, goods are constituents of positive well-being, while neutral features do not

[7] This way of distinguishing goods from bads comes with a theoretical cost, which is that it does not allow for the possibility that some goods are such that absence of them entails presence of a corresponding bad. If there are such goods, they could not be replaced with a neutral feature, so our criterion for distinguishing goods from bads could not apply. We might want to allow for the possibility that there are such goods. For example, perhaps *tranquillity* is a good, and perhaps absence of tranquillity entails presence of a bad (*disturbance*, perhaps). We could allow for this possibility if we instead distinguished between goods and bads by reference to an overall state with zero value (we could say that a good is a feature that, if it were the only feature a life contained, would give it greater than zero value overall; and we could define bads similarly). But that too comes with a cost: see footnote 10 below.

constitute any kind of value.[8] At level 3 we have the overall prudential value of the person's life, and we can see that the presence of a bad is compatible with all possibilities at this level, as is the presence of a good.

This classification of levels will help us later, when we consider possible asymmetries of value between bads and goods. To make exposition easier, I will use the phrase "prudential state" to refer to how well or badly someone's life goes for them overall (level 3). On this usage, someone's prudential state is a result (perhaps not a mere sum) of the ill-being and positive well-being their life contains (level 2), which itself depends on the presence of goods and bads in their life (level 1). We can apply the concept of prudential state to a person's whole life, or to some part of it.

One (more) fussy point. Note that the way we have defined these concepts does not presuppose that a life containing only neutral features—if such a life were possible—must be a life in which the overall prudential state is neutral, or at a zero point. The concept of a neutral feature was not defined with reference to a neutral prudential state, but instead with reference to making no difference to the overall prudential state. For all that we have said, it could be that a life containing only neutral features is one in which the overall prudential state is positive, or negative.[9] Perhaps merely being alive has positive (or negative) prudential value, independently of the features the life contains.[10]

---

[8] The terms "bad" and "good" are confusing, since they sound like kinds of value. But they are used in this literature to refer to the *things* that contribute positive or negative value—to the things that are good for or bad for the person concerned. Thus they refer to constituents of prudential value, not to kinds of value.

[9] It may be that there must be a zero point at levels 1 or 2. Sidgwick wrote: "If pleasures, then, can be arranged in a scale, as greater or less in some finite degree; we are led to the assumption of a hedonistic zero, or perfectly neutral feeling, as a point from which the positive quantity of pleasures may be measured" 1907: 124. This seems to me to express the idea of a neutral feature of a person's life, according to a hedonist. The point in the text is that the idea of a neutral feature is compatible with the idea that a life containing only neutral features need not have zero overall prudential value.

[10] Kagan 2012: 379 discusses this possibility. Sumner 2020: 421 assumes that a life containing no bads must have at least zero prudential value: "privations [absences of goods] alone cannot push a life (or life stage) into negative value; the worst they can do is to reduce its value to zero". We seem to face a trade-off here. If we distinguish goods from bads as I have done, we can (a) make room for the hypothesis that merely being alive

## 3. Ill-being and prudential value

Let us turn now to consider whether there is an asymmetry in the value of goods and bads, once again using pleasure and pain to illustrate the more general issue. The idea that there is some such asymmetry has certainly been suggested in the specific case of pleasure and pain. Karl Popper wrote that "[i]t is, I believe, the greatest mistake of utilitarianism (and other forms of hedonism) that it does not recognize that from the moral point of view suffering and happiness must not be treated as symmetrical".[11] Though Popper's advocacy of "Negative Utilitarianism" has been subject to a great deal of criticism, the idea that there is some asymmetry in value between pain and pleasure retains currency. For example, Jamie Mayerfeld writes: "Suppose some drug became available that gave people a joy as intense as the pain averted by anesthesia, and suppose that there were no drawbacks in the consumption of this drug. It seems quite clear to me that the provision of this drug would be less important than the administration of anesthesia".[12]

As Mayerfeld is careful to point out, we might think that there are stronger moral reasons to relieve suffering than to increase happiness by the same amount without thinking that there is any asymmetry in value between them.[13] To get at the question about value more precisely, it is helpful to set aside questions about what any agent ought to do, or has reason to do, so far as possible. Since the relationship between value, reasons, and oughts is not obvious, or beyond reasonable dispute, we are liable to muddy the waters if we try to address questions about value by asking what someone should do. Questions about action also run the

has positive or negative prudential value, but we cannot (b) make room for the idea that absence of some particular goods entails presence of corresponding bads. If we instead distinguish goods from bads by reference to a state of zero prudential value, then the costs and benefits are reversed.

[11] Popper 1943: 205 n. 6.

[12] Mayerfeld 1999: 133.

[13] Mayerfeld 1999: 129. This is also the central point in Walker 1974.

risk of mistaking an asymmetry between doing and allowing for an asymmetry in value. So we should avoid asking about "promoting", "preventing", or "reducing" happiness or suffering, or "harming" or "benefiting" people, if our aim is to think about the value of goods and bads, strictly speaking. Posing questions in these action-implicating ways invites confusion between different issues.

To avoid that trap, let us try to pose the question in a way that avoids reference to actions. We can do that by asking about the value of different outcomes, and making comparisons between pairs of outcomes. For example, we can ask about the following two pairs of outcomes:

| Outcome A | Outcome B | Outcome C | Outcome D |
|---|---|---|---|
| Smith at -10 | Smith at -1 | Smith at 1 | Smith at 10 |
| Pair 1 | | Pair 2 | |

Figure 2: Two pairs of outcomes

Each of these outcomes should be interpreted as a distinct world which does not interact with any other world. In each of these outcomes there is a single inhabitant, Smith. In each outcome he is experiencing a different level of pain or pleasure, represented by the numbers shown. We can then ask how the values of these outcomes compare.

Before we try to answer this question we need to specify what kind of value we have in mind. In the next section we will consider the moral value of goods and bads—where that is understood as a kind of impartial value, of the sort that features in consequentialist theories of rightness of actions. Before we get to that, however, we can consider how these pairs of

outcomes compare in terms of prudential value—in terms of how good or bad they are *for Smith*. Is the difference between outcomes A and B, so far as Smith's prudential state is concerned, smaller than, greater than, or equal to the difference between outcomes C and D?

Note that, to make sense of this question, we have to be careful to interpret the numbers in Figure 2 as representing quantities of goods and bads (for present purposes, pleasure and pain) rather than as representing quantities of prudential value. If they were to represent quantities of prudential value, it would be obvious that the difference in Pair 1 is equal to the difference in Pair 2. Thus, to pursue Mayerfeld's question about whether there is an asymmetry in the contribution of pleasure and pain to prudential value, we have to be able to define equal quantities of pleasure and pain in a way that is independent of their contribution to prudential value. It is not obvious whether we can, or cannot, do this. It seems clear that we can draw a distinction between the quantity of a pleasure and the contribution it makes to prudential value; and that we can draw the equivalent distinction for pain. But it is less clear whether we can define equal amounts pleasure and pain, independently of their contribution to prudential value.[14] Similar questions apply if we adopt a non-hedonist theory of the constituents of ill-being and positive well-being.

In the specific case of pleasure and pain some think we can define a common unit. Some psychologists believe that it is possible to match the perceived intensity of different modalities of sensation in a way that generates valid measurement scales.[15] For example, they believe that it is possible to match the perceived loudness of a sound to the perceived sweetness of a taste. If we can use this method to match the intensity of a pleasure to the intensity of a pain, and we assume that the quantity of each is equal to its intensity multiplied by its duration, then we may be able to match a given quantity of pleasure with an equal

[14] Mayerfeld 1999: chs. 3 and 6 claims that we can do this.
[15] Bartoshuk 2014 and Stevens 1959.

quantity of pain—for a single individual.[16] This may give us some assurance that we can make sense of the numbers in Figure 2 when they are interpreted as representing quantities of pleasure and pain of a single individual.

This suggests that Mayerfeld's question is indeed coherent. However, it remains a difficult one to answer. To try to get a grip on it, we can try to imagine pairs of pleasures and pains that we judge to be of the same duration and intensity. We can then ask whether adding that pair to a life—both the pleasure and the pain—would make any net difference to the prudential value of that life. If they are equal in quantity, but we judge that adding the pair would make the life worse overall, then that is some evidence that a given quantity of pain makes a greater difference to prudential value than the same quantity of pleasure. (Of course, if instead we were to judge that adding the pair would make the life better overall, that that would be some evidence that pleasure makes a greater difference.)

I am not confident in my own ability to apply this method. The difficulty seems to be maintaining a grasp on quantity of pleasure and pain that is independent of judgements of their prudential value. For example, I might judge that the pleasure of a warm bath at a specific temperature is equal in intensity to the pain of being cold to a certain degree. I can then ask myself whether adding 30 minutes of that pleasure together with 30 minutes of that pain makes a net difference to the prudential value of my life. I cannot reach a confident answer to that question, however; and to the extent that I am inclined to give an answer, I suspect that my judgement of quantity may reflect, rather than precede, a judgement of prudential value. Perhaps this reflects poor imagination, or phenomenological ineptitude, on my part. In any case, I do not mean to suggest that we cannot make any progress on this question, but only that it looks difficult. It might be that others are better equipped to make the judgements in question, or perhaps we can use the methods developed by psychologists to

[16] For a recent and more sceptical discussion see Narens and Skyrms 2020: ch. 11.

match pleasures and pains that are specified more concretely and vividly, and perhaps we can then form more confident judgements about their value.

Whether or not we are optimistic about our ability to do this in the case of pleasures and pains, we should ask whether we are able to evaluate parallel claims about different candidate goods and bads. Consider, for example, how we might compare quantities of the candidate good *achievement* with quantities of the candidate bad *failure*. Recall that the initial task is to quantify these goods and bads themselves—amounts of achievement and failure—before we ask about their contribution to prudential value. Now, it is fairly uncontroversial to claim that the quantity of a pleasure or pain is equal to its intensity multiplied by its duration. Since we know how to measure duration, the problem of quantifying pleasure and pain reduces to the problem of measuring their intensity. However, it seems less clear what determines quantity of achievement or failure.

Gwen Bradford has developed the leading philosophical account of the nature of achievement.[17] On her view, achievements involve excellent exercise of the will and excellent exercise of rationality. Now, as it happens, she argues that these two dimensions contribute equally to the value of achievements—and she argues that we can estimate quantities of each, so that it makes sense to say (for example) that there is more exercise of the will in one achievement than there is exercise of rationality in a different one.[18] If she is right about this, we would have learned that these different dimensions of achievement contribute equally to the *value* of achievement. But our question was about how they contribute to the *quantity* of achievement. We need to be able to specify quantities of achievement and failure in order to determine whether equal amounts of achievement and

[17] Bradford 2015.
[18] Bradford 2015: 154–60.

failure make the same difference to prudential value. If we go directly from the dimensions to value, we have bypassed that question.[19]

Once again, I am not trying to argue that these judgements cannot be made. But it does seem fair to say that it is difficult to assess the quantities of candidate goods and bads independently of the differences they make to prudential value. Even when it seems possible (as, perhaps, with pleasure and pain) it remains hard to assess the hypothesis that they make asymmetrical contributions to prudential value.

## 4. Ill-being and moral value

We have been asking whether there is an asymmetry in the way that goods and bads contribute to a person's overall prudential state. We can now ask a separate question about whether there is an asymmetry in the way that quantities of ill-being and positive well-being contribute to the moral value of outcomes, where "moral value" is understood as impartial value.[20]

Negative Utilitarians believe in an asymmetry of this sort. The starkest form of Negative Utilitarianism claims that only suffering matters, and that it should be minimised. This view is extremely implausible, and it has been widely dismissed on the ground that it implies that it would be right to painlessly destroy all life.[21] Moderate forms of Negative Utilitarianism claim more modestly that suffering matters more than pleasure, in the sense that one unit of suffering makes a greater difference to the moral value of an outcome than is

[19] Bradford 2015: 63 distinguishes between the magnitude of an achievement and its value, but leaves aside the question of how to account for magnitude.

[20] Some philosophers are sceptical of this concept of value. For example, see Foot 1985.

[21] Smart 1958 directed this argument against Popper 1943: 205 n. 6 and 241–2 n. 2. Smart may have misattributed the stark version of Negative Utilitarianism to Popper: Popper wrote that "the promotion of happiness is in any case much *less* urgent than the rendering of help to those who suffer" 1943: 205 n. 6, emphasis added. For a recent discussion of the world destruction objection see Knutsson 2021.

made by one unit of pleasure. This is to claim that there is an asymmetry in their contribution to moral value.

Belief in this asymmetry is only one of the commitments of moderate Negative Utilitarianism. As usually understood, Negative Utilitarianism also involves claims about the rightness and wrongness of actions, and a commitment to welfarism (the claim that the value of outcomes depends only on facts about prudential value). Both of those commitments are separable from the idea that the contributions of ill-being and positive well-being to the moral value of outcomes are asymmetric. Our interest is in this possible asymmetry, rather than in theories of rightness or in welfarism.

Once again it is important to take care over the details in formulating this question about asymmetry. In section 3 we considered the contribution made by goods and bads, such as pleasure and pain, to prudential value. We were interested in whether a specific quantity of the bad (pain, for illustration) made a greater difference to prudential value than is made by the same quantity of the good (pleasure, for illustration). I claimed that it is difficult to assess this idea, since it is difficult to have a vivid grasp of equal quantities of these goods and bads. The same problem would arise, obviously, if we asked about the contribution made to moral value by equal quantities of these goods and bads—interesting as that question is. So I propose to ask a different question, in which the equal quantities to be considered are not quantities of pleasure and pain (or other goods and bads), but instead equal quantities of ill-being and positive well-being—that is, equal quantities of prudential value or disvalue.

Our question, then, is whether there is an asymmetry in the contributions made by ill-being and by positive well-being to the moral value of outcomes. The salient possibility is that ill-being makes a greater contribution, as the Negative Utilitarian claims. Figure 3 represents one version of this hypothesis.

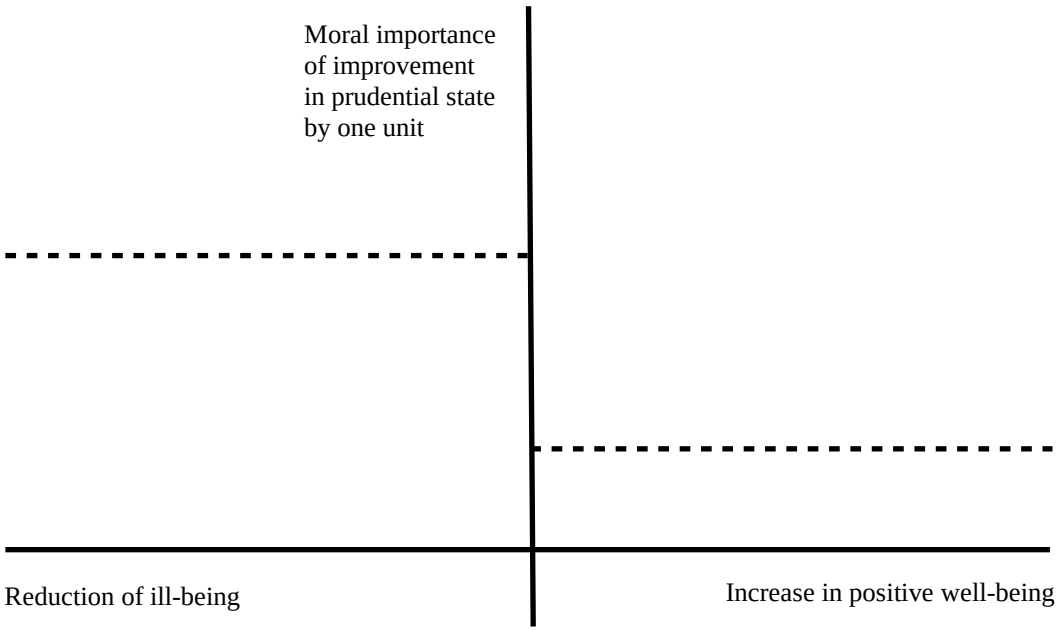



Figure 3: Constant asymmetry between ill-being and positive well-being

In this illustration, the *x*-axis represents changes in the prudential state of the subject. Changes in quantities of ill-being are shown to the left of the *y*-axis, while changes in quantities of positive well-being are shown to the right. The y-axis represents the moral importance of a change in the subject's prudential state. The two dotted lines represent the different contributions to moral value made by reductions of ill-being and increases in positive well-being. They illustrate the idea that each reduction of ill-being by one unit makes a greater contribution than each increase in positive well-being by one unit. But both dotted lines are horizontal—which represents the idea that a reduction of ill-being by one unit always makes the same difference, whatever the subject's level of ill-being; and similarly for increases in positive well-being. We can call this a "constant asymmetry" view.

Compare this picture with a representation of the idea that there is no asymmetry, as shown in Figure 4.

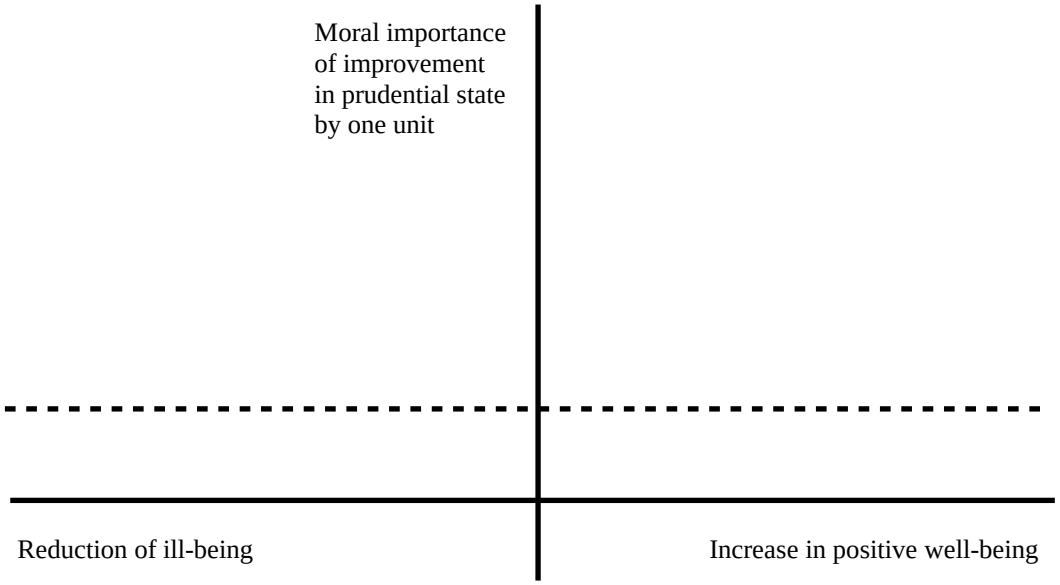



Figure 4: Symmetry between ill-being and positive well-being

This is the view adopted by Classical Utilitarians, though again one does not need to be a utilitarian to accept it. It represents the idea that the contribution to moral value made by a decrease in ill-being by one unit is constant and equal to the contribution made by an increase in positive well-being by one unit.

The idea that there is a constant asymmetry, as represented in Figure 3, conforms to the idea that reducing ill-being has a greater moral urgency than increasing positive well-being. In this respect it may be more plausible than the view represented in Figure 4. On the other hand, it has a feature that some may find hard to accept. It claims that the moral importance of a unit increase in prudential value depends on whether the change is an increase in positive well-being or a decrease in ill-being, but that it does not depend on any other fact—such as facts about how much ill-being someone has. This gives the graph a single-stepped profile, which we might find puzzling.

This stepped profile is similar to some forms of Sufficiency view. According to these Sufficiency views, there are one or more thresholds in levels of prudential value, such that it

is morally more important that people reach the (next) threshold than that they rise above it. As Liam Shields characterises them, these views claim that "once a person has secured enough the relationship between our reasons to benefit her and how well-off she is changes".[22] One way of accounting for that change is to claim that additional benefits make a reduced contribution to moral value once the threshold is passed—their moral value steps down at the point of the threshold. So, we could interpret the constant asymmetry view as a Sufficiency view of this kind, according to which there is a threshold at the boundary between ill-being and positive well-being. This is, I think, one way to interpret the stepped profile shown in Figure 3. However, this interpretation involves treating the "zero point" as a sufficiency threshold. Intuitively, it might be hard to accept this, since we do not normally regard that point as a plausible interpretation of what it means for someone to have "enough", and this is one of the motivating ideas for Sufficiency views.[23]

We could instead consider instead a different asymmetry view. Compare the "variable asymmetry" view shown in Figure 5.

[22] Shields 2012: 108.

[23] In making this comparison with Sufficiency views I am glossing over the difference between changes in prudential value, and overall prudential state (that is, between concepts at Level 2 and concepts at Level 3 in Figure 1). The constant asymmetry view is about the moral importance of different changes in prudential value (decreases in ill-being vs. increases in positive well-being), not strictly about the moral importance of benefiting people in different prudential states. See also footnote 24 below.

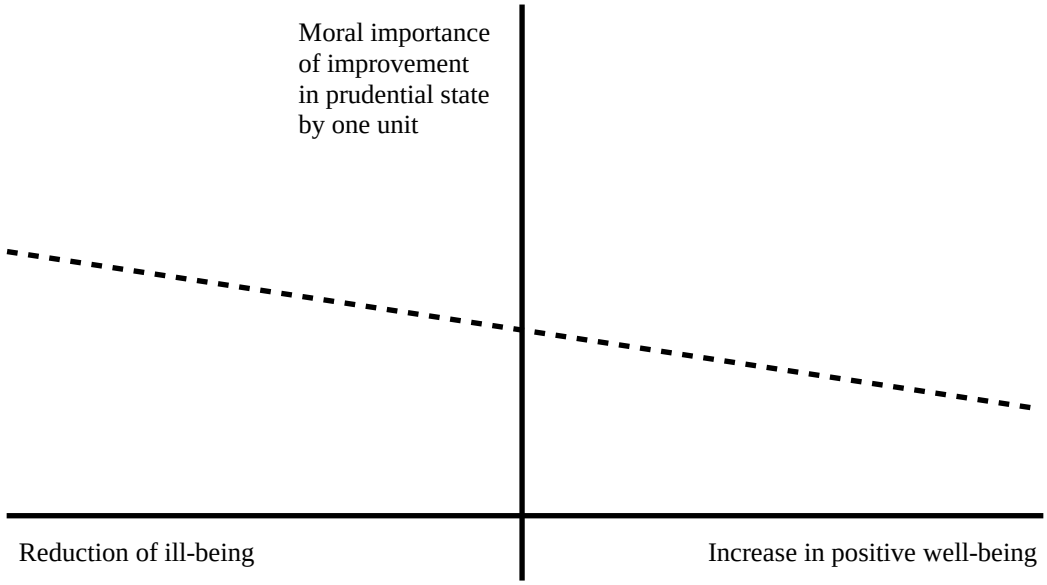



Figure 5: Variable asymmetry between ill-being and positive well-being

According to this view, every decrease in ill-being by one unit makes a greater difference to moral value than every increase in positive well-being by one unit, but the contribution of each change depends on the level of ill-being or positive well-being of the subject. A reduction in ill-being matters more when the subject has more ill-being, and an increase in positive well-being matters less when the subject has more positive well-being. In contrast to the constant asymmetry view, the variable asymmetry view claims that the moral importance of a unit increase in prudential value changes continuously with the changing prudential state of the subject. Perhaps this is more plausible than the stepped profile of the constant asymmetry view.[24]

[24] Mayerfeld 1999: 145 endorses this view. As he discusses (154–58), there are similarities between it and Prioritarianism—the view that benefits matter more, the worse off the recipient (Parfit 2000: 101). An important difference is that the variable asymmetry view gives priority to ill-being, while Prioritarianism is usually understood as giving priority to overall prudential state. They diverge when someone suffers some ill-being but has a good life overall (at that moment, or across any period). Of course, the line describing the decreasing moral importance of increases in positive well-being could be a curve, so that increases always have some positive moral value.

Toby Ord has presented an objection that applies to both the constant and variable asymmetry views.[25] He points out that these views imply that one outcome may be better than another in terms of prudential value while being worse in terms of moral value, even if there is no other morally relevant difference between them. This is because these asymmetry views claim that a decrease in ill-being by one unit makes a bigger moral difference than an increase in positive well-being by *more* than one unit (exactly how much more depends on the degree of asymmetry claimed by the view in question—the height of the step in Figure 3, or the slope of the line in Figure 5). So, a change that is net positive in terms of prudential value can be net negative in terms of moral value. This means that, if we rank outcomes according to moral value, and either the constant or variable asymmetry claims is correct, we will sometimes rank an outcome that is prudentially better lower than one that is prudentially worse.

It might not seem so surprising to claim that a world in which people are better off could be morally worse than one in which they are worse off. After all, we are used to the idea that the total amount of prudential value might not be all that matters morally. But it is important to note that, in the cases Ord is highlighting, the only morally relevant difference between the worlds is in the prudential value they contain. The prudential improvement itself is what makes things morally worse, according to the asymmetry views. This is not a case in which we might say that something other than prudential value matters morally, but instead a case in which a prudential improvement is claimed to have the opposite moral valence than the one we would usually expect.

[25] Ord 2013. In the text I discuss his "worse for everyone" argument, which is addressed to all forms of Negative Utilitarianism including some not discussed here. Ord is discussing versions of Negative Utilitarianism—theories about what agents ought to do—rather than just claims about value. But his "worse for everyone" argument can be applied to the claims about value that we have been considering.

Ord points out that people make trade-offs between their own ill-being and positive well-being routinely. He writes:

> For example, in some cases [Negative Utilitarianism] will say that it is immoral to watch the end of the film while you are really hungry, even if this tradeoff increases your wellbeing, because the suffering counts more morally . . . I find this to be an absurd consequence.[26]

In this example we are supposed to imagine that watching the film to the end, as compared with stopping early to eat something, gives you a quantity of extra positive well-being that is greater than the quantity of ill-being (due to hunger) it entails. So, watching the film to the end is prudentially better for you than stopping early to eat something. But the smaller quantity of ill-being matters more morally, according to the asymmetry views, and so watching to the end is morally worse than stopping early to eat something. The very same facts that explain why watching to the end is better for you explain why it is morally worse to watch to the end, according to the asymmetry views.

The relationship between the prudential value contained in an outcome and that outcome's moral value is, of course, a highly controversial matter. There are many divergent views about these questions, and debates about the aggregation of value across and within lives involve deep issues. But one fairly uncontroversial idea is that we do not make an outcome morally worse merely by adding prudential value to it (that is, while keeping constant everything else that is morally relevant). One expression of this idea is the Pareto principle, according to which one outcome cannot be worse than another if it is better for

[26] Ord 2013.

some and worse for none.[27] Ord objects to the asymmetry views, in effect, because they conflict with this principle. As he points out, it is possible to imagine a multi-person case with the same structure as the film example above, in which a change that makes *everyone* better off prudentially makes the outcome morally worse according to the asymmetry views. This is why he claims that these views are "worse for everyone".

This is a powerful objection. Defenders of the asymmetry claims should accept that their view conflicts with the Pareto principle, for the reasons Ord gives. As he recognises, that is not a knock-down argument against the asymmetry views. Other ethical claims also conflict with the Pareto principle, but still receive support.[28] But Ord's objection identifies a significant theoretical cost of adopting the asymmetry views. As he claims, this should make those who are attracted to them consider whether there is some other way of explaining the sense that relieving ill-being has greater significance or urgency than increasing positive well-being.

## 5. The significance of ill-being

Critics of Negative Utilitarianism have been quick to suggest alternative explanations of the significance of ill-being. For example, R. N. Smart suggested that, as a practical matter, it is sensible to focus on relieving ill-being because "people more readily agree on evils than on goods".[29] Similarly, his brother J. J. C. Smart suggested that "in most cases we can do most for our fellow men by trying to remove their miseries. Moreover people will be less ready to

[27] Note that I have defined the Pareto principle in terms of prudential value and not, as economists would define it, in terms of individuals' preferences.
[28] Sen 1970 shows that one kind of respect for liberty conflicts with the Pareto principle. Temkin 2000 defends a form of egalitarianism against the levelling-down objection, which presupposes a principle he claims underlies the Pareto principle.
[29] Smart 1958: 543.

agree on what goods they would like to see promoted than they will be to agree on what miseries should be avoided. Mill and Bentham might disagree on whether poetry should be preferred to pushpin, but they would agree that an occasional visit to the dentist is preferable to chronic toothache".[30]

Why exactly should this greater similarity between people in regard to the constituents of ill-being than the constituents of positive well-being, if it exists, support a policy of prioritising efforts to reduce ill-being over efforts to increase positive well-being? The thought seems to be that, if people are more similar with respect to bads than with respect to goods, efforts to relieve bads are likely to be more successful than efforts to produce bads, all else equal. That is not bound to be the case—it could be that, despite this diversity, we know enough about what would be good for each person to be able to reliably generate goods for them if we try. But the thought may well often be true in practice. Whether something is good or bad for someone is likely to depend on their reaction to it, in some way, and reactions are sometimes surprising. This is true even when it comes to first-person predictions, as psychological studies of "affective forecasting" have shown. Although people are quite good at predicting whether they will have a positive or negative reaction to something in the future, they are much less good at predicting the intensity and duration of this reaction—both for negative and for positive reactions.[31] However, if we are more alike when it comes to negative reactions than to positive reactions, perhaps we can be more sure of our predictions that something will be badly-received than we can be of our predictions that something will be well-received, and perhaps this makes attempts to relieve ill-being more likely to succeed than attempts to promote positive well-being.

[30] Smart 1973: 30. In a similar vein, Tranöy claimed that "the injunction to minimize pain and suffering appears more sensible than the command to maximise pleasures and happiness. The former injunction appears better grounded because we know so much more about pain" 1967: 359. Walker 1974 also offers a number of possible explanations of the idea that relieving suffering is more practically important than increasing pleasure.
[31] Wilson and Gilbert 2003.

It is not clear whether these claims about greater similarity in "evils" than "goods", and related claims about greater knowledge of how to relieve bads than to promote goods, are correct. The authors who make these claims when discussing Negative Utilitarianism do not cite any evidence for them. There is also some evidence that people are often less aware of their negative affect than of their positive affect.[32] So it is not altogether clear what to make of the suggestion that, for epistemic reasons, we are more likely to succeed at relieving bads than at promoting goods.[33]

However, there is at least one more way in which ill-being may have a special significance—in this case, theoretical significance. Consider what effect the relative neglect of ill-being by philosophers may have had on our background assumptions about what is involved in promoting prudential value in practice. Asking what social conditions are likely to promote prudential value is likely to generate different answers if we are thinking about promoting positive well-being than if we are thinking about reducing ill-being. In particular, it is much more plausible to emphasise respect for liberty when thinking about promoting positive well-being than it is when thinking about ill-being. When people are doing pretty well, respect for their liberty may be just what is needed for them to reach greater heights. But when people are suffering it may be that they need attention, intervention, and care. Whereas respect for liberty may be among the most important social conditions for flourishing for the reasons that have been emphasised in the liberal utilitarian tradition, it seems less likely that it plays such a prominent role in the social conditions for relief of ill-being.

[32] This is discussed in Haybron 2008: 214–21.

[33] We might think that there is a practical asymmetry here because of the diminishing marginal utility of resources. But this implies that it is harder (in the sense that it requires more resources) to produce benefits when people are better off—not that there is any particular significance in the boundary between goods and bads.

If this point is correct, its relevance extends beyond political philosophy in the utilitarian tradition. For it is not only utilitarians who take the putative connection between liberty and living a good life to be important. That connection plays a role in many non-utilitarian defences of liberalism. For any such defence, the degree to which the connection is emphasised may reflect the relative lack of attention given to ill-being. This neglect may have tilted political philosophers' imaginations towards an emphasis on liberty and away from an emphasis on care.[34]

## 6. Conclusion

Kagan's observation that ill-being has received less attention from philosophers than has been paid to positive well-being should prompt us to consider the importance of ill-being in a number of different dimensions. One of these is the now-flourishing discussion of the constituents of ill-being—of how to extend, or supplement, philosophical theories of the nature of positive well-being to include theories of the nature of ill-being. In this paper I have considered the importance of ill-being in some other respects, focusing in particular on some hypotheses about asymmetries in value. The discussion has identified several difficulties in assessing those hypotheses. Whatever view we reach about them, it is clear that there are other respects in which ill-being may have a different significance than positive well-being. As the philosophical discussion of ill-being matures, we may hope to make further progress on some of these other questions as well.

[34] Of course, there are philosophers who emphasise the importance of care, including feminist philosophers writing in the ethics of care tradition. For example, see Held ed. 1995. For an interesting discussion of the features of caring social institutions see Tronto 2010.

**Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to Sam Wren-Lewis, Liam Shields, and Dennis Pirdzuns for helpful discussion and suggestions. I also benefited from discussing theories of ill-being with Alessandro Barbieri and Debbie Roberts. I am most grateful to Gwen Bradford for inviting me to contribute to this volume and for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

**References**

Bartoshuk, L. 2014. “The Measurement of Pleasure and Pain”. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 9: 91–93.

Bradford, G. 2015. *Achievement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bradford, G. 2020. “Perfectionist Bads”. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71: 586–604.

Foot, P. 1985. “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”. *Mind* 94: 196–209.

Haybron, D. M. 2008. *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Held, V. (ed.) 1995. *Justice and Care. Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Kagan, S. 2012. *The Geometry of Desert*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kagan, S. 2014. “An Introduction to Ill-Being”. In Timmons, M. (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Volume 4*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 261–288.

Kagan, S. 2021. “What is the Opposite of Well-Being?” In McMahan, J., Campbell, T., Goodrich, J., and Ramakrishnan, K. (eds.) *Principles and Persons. The Legacy of Derek Parfit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 115–150.

Knutsson, S. 2021. “The world destruction argument”. *Inquiry* 64: 1004–1023.

Mayerfeld, J. 1999. *Suffering and Moral Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Narens, L. and Skyrms, B. 2020. *The Pursuit of Happiness: Philosophical and Psychological Foundations of Utility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ord, T. 2013. “Why I’m Not a Negative Utilitarian”. http://www.amirrorclear.net/academic/ideas/negative-utilitarianism/

Östlund, S. 2021. “Distinguishing Disadvantage from Ill-Being in the Capability Approach”. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 24: 933–947.

Pallies, D. 2022. “Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires”. *Ethics* 132: 598–620.

Parfit, D. 2000. “Equality or Priority?” In Clayton, M. and Williams, A. (eds.) *The Ideal of Equality*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 81–125.

Popper, K. 1943. *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Volume 1: The Spell of Plato*. London: George Routledge and Sons.

Sen, A. 1970. “The Impossibility of a Paretian Liberal”. *The Journal of Political Economy* 78: 152–157.

Shields, L. 2012. “The Prospects for Sufficientarianism”. *Utilitas* 24: 101–117.

Sidgwick, H. 1907. *The Methods of Ethics*, seventh edition. London: Macmillan.

Smart, J. J. C. 1973. "An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics". In Smart, J. J. C. and Williams, B. A. O. *Utilitarianism: for and against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–74.

Smart, R. N. 1958. "Negative Utilitarianism". *Mind* 67: 542–543.

Stevens, S. S. 1959. "Cross-Modality Validation of Subjective Scales for Loudness, Vibration, and Electric Shock". *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 57: 201–209.

Sumner, L. W. 1996. *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sumner, W. 2020. "The Worst Things in Life". *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 97: 419–432.

Temkin, L. 2000. "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling-Down Objection". In Clayton, M. and Williams, A. (eds.) *The Ideal of Equality*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 126–161.

Tranöy, K. E. 1967. "Asymmetries in Ethics: On the Structure of a General Theory of Ethics". *Inquiry* 10: 351–372.

Tronto, J. C. 2010. "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose". *Ethics and Social Welfare* 4: 158–171.

Tully, I. 2017. “Depression and the Problem of Absent Desires”. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 11: 1–15.

Walker, A. D. M. 1974. “Negative Utilitarianism”. *Mind* 83: 424–428.

Wilson, T. D. and Gilbert, D. T. 2003. “Affective Forecasting”. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 35: 345–411.