

# DISSERTATION SUMMARY

## Well-Being and Christian Theism

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Contemporary well-being theorists are divided between objective and subjective views of well-being. Christian philosophers tend to opt for objective theories. I aim to break this trend. My dissertation advances a subjective theory of well-being that will be palatable not only to the philosophical community as a whole, but also to Christian philosophers and theologians.

A theory of well-being is a theory of what is good *for* individuals, in other words, a theory of self-interest. Well-being is worth studying in its own right, but it also plays a pivotal role in normative ethics, theories of the good life, and philosophical discussions of the meaning of life. The goal of my dissertation is twofold: first, to advance a theory of well-being of interest to the entire philosophical community; second, to do so in dialogue with the concerns of contemporary Christian philosophers. This makes my task part philosophy of well-being and part philosophical theology.

The theory I develop identifies well-being with self-fulfillment and pleasure. This alone has no special connection to Christian theism. If, to Anselm's dismay, there are possible worlds with human persons but no God, then my theory will apply to those worlds, too. Still, the theory I develop is consistent with Christian theism, and I defend its consistency with Christian doctrinal claims—most notably, that human persons are best off in union with God. As George MacDonald notes in his sermon on Revelation 2:17: “Not only ... has each man his individual relation to God, but each man has his peculiar relation to God. He is to God a peculiar being, made after his own fashion, and that of no one else.” I agree. When applied to a Christian picture of reality, my theory of well-being says that you and I fare best when we both flourish as the peculiar beings we are and enjoy union with God.

**Chapter 1** sets up my project with a discussion of contemporary theories of well-being, my preferred framing for the subjective-objective divide, and my reasons for preferring a subjective theory. Given that most

Christian philosophers are hesitant to adopt a subjective theory of well-being, I close the chapter by considering potential sources for this hesitation, such as a general preference for objective standards and concerns related to corruption of human nature by the Fall and eventual restoration of human nature in the afterlife. I argue that my theory, which identifies well-being with self-fulfillment and pleasure, is congenial to Christian theism.

**Chapter 2** develops the self-fulfillment aspect of my theory. One popular theory of well-being is eudaimonism. Eudaimonists identify well-being with fulfilling one's nature. Most eudaimonists are objectivists about well-being. They understand fulfilling one's nature in terms of species-level norms, flourishing as a member of one's *kind*. I argue that this appeal to species norms alienates a welfare subject from their well-being. Instead, I advance a subjective version of eudaimonism: *self-fulfillment eudaimonism*. According to self-fulfillment eudaimonism, what ultimately benefits a person is the flourishing of their *individual* nature. I close the chapter by reflecting on the relationship between this emphasis on the self, or individual nature, and the Christian doctrine that human persons are created in the image of God.

**Chapter 3** develops the hedonic aspect of my theory. I argue that no version of eudaimonism, even the self-fulfillment eudaimonism I developed in Chapter 2, can give us a satisfactory account of the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain. A satisfactory theory of well-being must account for what I call *the phenomenological value thesis*: pleasure is good for us and pain is bad for us *because of what they feel like*. I show that the theory best equipped to handle the phenomenological value thesis is phenomenological hedonism.

**Chapter 4** is devoted to my eudaimonic-hedonic hybrid. I begin by comparing my hybrid to other hybrids. Most hybrid theories are subjective-objective hybrids. The theory I propose is not. Instead, I combine two subjective theories: self-fulfillment eudaimonism and phenomenological hedonism. My hybrid theory makes sense of our roles as both agents and patients. The eudaimonic aspect of my theory gives an account of what it means for a person to fare well as the agent they are, and the hedonic aspect of my theory gives an account of what it means for a person to do well as the patient they are.

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My dissertation is supervised by [Dan Haybron](#), [Eleonore Stump](#), [Anna Marmodoro](#), and [Kevin Kinghorn](#) serve on my committee. A draft of [Chapter 1](#) is also available.