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Group well-being and the consciousness requirement

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We often talk as if things can benefit or harm groups, such as states and corporations. But do groups have well-being? Despite its potential importance to many areas of practical philosophy, this question has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. I will try to make progress on this underexplored question by offering a defense of group well-being. After setting out the wide significance of this topic, I defend the idea against the objection from the consciousness requirement. It is widely accepted that the capacity for phenomenal consciousness is necessary for having well-being. In response, I argue that we should not accept the consciousness requirement as it is currently formulated, because the requirement is undermotivated and faces a counterexample. I then propose that we should weaken the consciousness requirement that allows groups to have well-being while maintaining the appealing idea that there is some intimate connection between well-being and consciousness.

Keywords: group well-being; well-being; consciousness; group intentionality; group agency; and perdurantism.

I. Introduction

Do groups have well-being? Despite its importance to many areas of practical philosophy, this question has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. Rather, philosophers have been focused almost exclusively on the well-being of individuals.[1] Though I will not offer a complete answer

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[1]Here are some exceptions to this trend. Eric Wiland (2022) recently discusses the relation between group well-being and individual members' well-being. He rightly points out that "philosophers who work extensively on well-being have been largely silent about the well-being

to the question, I will try to make progress by defending the idea of group well-being against one serious objection.

The objection comes from a widely accepted view that phenomenal consciousness is necessary for having well-being. Some then argued that groups have no well-being because they have no capacity for phenomenal consciousness. In response, I argue that the argument will not threaten group well-being, for we should not accept the consciousness requirement as it is normally formulated.

Let me quickly clarify my assumptions. First, I take it for granted that some groups exist. My discussion of group well-being further assumes some unity in the groups. When I say "groups" in what follows, I have in mind organized groups with a certain level of internal structure and some formal or informal mechanism for decision-making. They include but are not limited to artificially formed social groups such as a firm, a non-profit organization, a state, and so forth. While I explore whether these paradigmatic groups that are organized in the most robust sense have well-being, I will remain neutral about non-organized groups.

In general, the question of which entities have well-being is independent of the question of what constitutes that well-being, such as pleasure, desire satisfaction, or something else. Likewise, I take the question of whether groups have well-being to be independent of the question of whether group well-being is constituted by the well-being of individual members, and here I focus on the former. One objection to this approach is that, unless one assumes a non-reductionist account of group well-being, the claim that groups have well-being is trivial or uninteresting. I offer two replies. First, although I do not commit myself to this view in the present paper, one argument for group well-being developed in Section IV may plausibly support a non-reductive view. If the reader accepts this implication, my arguments directly addresses the concern.

Second, even if one rejects this implication and insist that group well-being is merely an aggregation of individual member's well-being, the claim that groups have well-being remains a substantive and important claim. As I just said, the kind of groups at issue here are not mere aggregates of individuals, but groups with organizational structures. Such organized groups plausibly

of groups" (Wiland 2022: 2). Fred Feldman offers an account of groups' prudential obligations to enhance their own welfare (1986: 162–3). But neither of them discusses whether we should accept the idea of group well-being in the first place. Wayne Sumner (1996: 15) points out that we speak of group's good or interest in a non-metaphorical way. But, in the end, he claims that only individuals can be welfare subjects (Sumner 1996: 215–6). Ben Bradley (2015: ch. 6) explores how we can aggregate well-being across lives to figure out how things are going in a population. Briggs (2012) explores under which theories of well-being groups can have well-being. Lee (2025: 12) denies that corporations have well-being. Alexander Dietz (2016: 967–8) and Lin (2022: 3) mention the theoretical possibility of group well-being in passing to discuss other topics.

exhibit a certain degree of unity and autonomy as groups. If a group with this unity can be said to possess well-being in the same sense as individuals do, then there exists an additional kind of welfare subjects distinct from individuals. These further subjects now have the property of having well-being in addition to individuals. The well-being of groups is therefore distinct from that of individual members, even if the two coincide in content. This is an underdeveloped and highly controversial claim, and the normative implications discussed in the next section should be of clear interest on this view.

II. Why group well-being matters

Given the little attention to the question—do groups have well-being?—in the literature, it would be instructive to discuss the significance of this question before I start to answer it. I believe the question is significant because, among others, the idea of group well-being would have significant normative implications.

First, the topic of group well-being should be of first-order moral significance, for if groups have well-being, moral beneficence will seem to require us to take them into moral consideration, thus promoting their well-being along with other individuals' well-being.

Second, group well-being could reveal another source of group-level normativity, if it's also true that some groups have agency. The idea of group agency has many proponents nowadays.[2] And many theorists claim that morality applies to those group agents as well. They argue that groups like corporations and states have moral reasons, duties, responsibility, and so on, just as we do.[3] However, if some of those groups to which we ascribe moral agency have well-being, it is natural to think that those group agents have prudential or self-interested reasons to perform actions that promote their own well-being just as we do. So understood, group well-being offers another normative dimension to consider when thinking about what group agents all-things-considered ought to do.

Furthermore, this idea may have an important application in political philosophy. The prudential reason that group well-being may provide could justify the state-relative character of political decision-making. That is, assuming that the well-being level of a state is directly or indirectly enhanced by promoting its citizens' well-being, it could explain the common view that states are permitted and sometimes even required to prioritize answering the needs

[2] Most notably, List & Pettit (2011), Epstein (2015), and Tollefsen (2015).

[3] See, for instance, French (1984) for group responsibility and Collins (2019) for duties of groups.

of their citizens over cosmopolitan concerns. I believe this is a promising view that merits further investigation in political philosophy.

Lastly, group well-being offers a straightforward way of making sense of states' rights under the interest theory of a right, the view that the principal function of rights is to further the right holder's interest.[4] The idea of group well-being offers the prospect of developing another, perhaps more robust, theory of group rights. Furthermore, assuming that one's duty corresponds to another's right, it may also help to explain why we owe our states directed duties. Though these are just provisional ideas, group well-being seems to raise important research questions in the philosophy of meta-normativity, first-order moral philosophy, political philosophy, and philosophy of law.

I have offered motivations to explore the idea that groups have well-being. Nevertheless, as I said, explicit reflection on group well-being is a young enterprise. With that in mind, I want to stress that much more has to be said to establish those claims. Some of the implications I raised may seem implausible or at least revisionary, especially the suggestion that morality requires us to take group well-being or group rights into our consideration. Whether such moral implications really follow from the claim partly depends on whether groups have full moral status on a par with ordinary human beings. Although I am inclined to attribute only partial moral status to groups, this is an independent issue and should be discussed as an objection from the moral implications of group well-being. Moreover, some of the prudential implications grounded in group well-being strike me as quite plausible, and if so, they would offer further support for the view. In any case, these issues should not concern us here, since I am not claiming that these observations provide a reason to believe in group well-being. My claim is rather minimal: they give us a reason to take my question—do groups have well-being?—seriously, and that is enough for my current purpose.

III. Objection from the consciousness requirement

Many well-being theorists hold that for some entity to have well-being, it must have the capacity for phenomenal consciousness.[5] To put it formally, many accept the *consciousness requirement* defined below:

[4] One of the most prominent contemporary proponents of the interest theory is Joseph Raz. Raz explicitly mentions "well-being" in his formulation of the interest theory (Raz 1984: 195). Hedahl (2017) explores whether groups can be entities to which duties can be owed if the interest theory is correct.

[5] Proponents of the consciousness requirement or similar sentience requirement include Sumner (1996: 215), Rosati (2009: 225), Bradley (2015: 9), van der Deijl (2021: section 3.1), Lovett and Riedener (2021), and Chalmers (2022: ch. 18). Even Gwen Bradford who argues that arguments for the requirement are unsuccessful still admits that it is a near-commonplace among philosophers (Bradford 2022: 2).

> *The Consciousness Requirement*: x has well-being only if x has the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness.

Throughout this paper, one's capacity for something should be understood as physiological or psychological capacities in the actual world. So, the mere possibility of an entity acquiring the relevant capacity does not suffice.

The consciousness requirement captures the appealing pre-theoretic idea that well-being and consciousness have some intimate connections. However, the requirement creates strong pressure to think there is no such thing as group well-being. Lovett & Riedener (2021: 228) propose a brief argument against group well-being on this ground, claiming "first, organizations are not phenomenally conscious" and "second, phenomenal consciousness is necessary to welfare."

There has been some debate on whether groups can be phenomenally conscious.[6] If it turns out that some groups indeed have the capacity, so much the better for the prospects of group well-being. However, I do not want to hold my defense of group well-being hostage to this controversy. Thus, for the sake of argument, I accept the premise that no group has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness. Instead, I propose to reject the consciousness requirement by undercutting two grounds that seem to support the requirement and offering a counterexample to it.

IV. First case for the consciousness requirement

How can the consciousness requirement be supported? One obvious way to argue for the consciousness requirement is to say that plausible theories of well-being entail that only conscious beings can have well-being. Just after the passage I cited above, Lovett and Riedener claim that the consciousness requirement for welfare is true on several theories of well-being. They say:

> The most well-known such theory is hedonism. Hedonism says that pleasures and pains are the only states that contribute to welfare. These are phenomenal states. Thus, only phenomenally conscious beings have welfare. But it's also true on other, more attractive, theories of welfare. For example, suppose one thinks that personal relationships, knowledge, and projects all enhance welfare, but only when you endorse having them. And suppose one thinks that endorsement is a phenomenal state. … So, again, only phenomenally conscious things have welfare.[7]

Similarly, Josh Mund (2022) recently argued that no genuine source of well-being is available to non-conscious entities. According to him, plausible sources of well-being include phenomenally *conscious* experiences, the

[6] See Weaver (1998), Schwitzgebel (2015), and List (2018).
[7] Lovett & Riedener (2021: 228–229).

satisfaction of *consciously* held desires, participation in projects that one *consciously* chooses, etc. He argues that none of the things on this allegedly exhaustive list is available to non-conscious entities.

However, note first that, as Gwen Bradford points out, *experientialism*, the view that only what affects a subject's conscious experience can matter for well-being, is highly controversial, and the dominant view is against this position.[8] In other words, the majority of theorists do not accept the theories of well-being that require phenomenal consciousness. Of course, even if we do not actually accept such a view, it may still be the case that we should. Then, they might argue that we have a reason to accept their argument's conclusion (the consciousness requirement) as we have a reason to accept the premise (experientialism). However, Lovett and Riedener offer no argument for their accounts of well-being and endorsement. Nor does Mund, whose discussion is explicitly limited to the rejection of only one type of well-being theory, one that holds the development and exercise of natural capacities can be sources of well-being of non-conscious entities.[9] Thus, we are yet not given a reason to accept the premise of the proposed argument.

I will now add two further points to rebut their argument for the consciousness requirement. First, I will argue that the strategy they employ to support the consciousness requirement rather shows that groups *do* have well-being. Thus, their strategy is in this sense self-defeating. I argue that groups have well-being on most theories of well-being discussed in the literature. Second, I will argue that even if we grant the assumption that only phenomenal conscious experiences affect how well-off one is, non-conscious entities can still have well-being. I will begin with the first argument.

The argument that appeals to substantive well-being theories to vindicate the consciousness requirement is problematic because this strategy rather supports the view that groups *do* have well-being. Suppose first that the simple desire-satisfaction theory is true for individuals' well-being. As I define it, the simple desire-satisfaction theory holds that one's level of well-being increases to the extent that the subject's desires are satisfied and decreases to the extent they are frustrated. Satisfaction here simply consists in what one desires being the case, and frustration in not being the case. Thus, if an individual has a desire, it is either satisfied or frustrated.

Now, if the desire-satisfaction theory is correct, satisfaction of groups' desires should, if they have any, increase their well-being levels, and frustration of groups' desires decrease them.[10] The crucial question, then, is whether groups have desires. I quickly offer two reasons to believe that some do. First,

[8] Bradford (2022: 3). See Lin (2020) for a related discussion.

[9] Mund (2022: section 2).

[10] I am assuming a view called *welfare invariabilism* here. According to this view, the same theory is true of every *welfare subject* (Lin 2018). Some may object that we cannot apply Lin's welfare invariabilism in this context as there may be an independent reason to think that groups

it is clear that groups with a sophisticated internal structure and some formal or informal mechanism for decision-making can have goals, aims, plans, projects, and so forth. For instance, typical business firms have the goal of maximizing their profits. Charity organizations aim to do moral good in certain ways and set projects to achieve them, say, fighting poverty by investing in agriculture. Importantly, those states are intuitively held by the groups and not (only) by the individual members.[11] If we accept that those groups have goals, aims, and projects, it is hard to see what prevents them from having desires or desire-like states that are close enough to desires in a relevant way while keeping their goals, aims, and projects intact. It may even be that the goals and aims are just special instances of desires.

The second reason is more theoretical. Functionalist accounts of desires, or more broadly intentionality, would support the idea of group desires.[12] According to this popular approach to intentional states, what makes something a desire depends on its functions or the role it plays in the system of which it is a part. Thus these accounts can allow entities to have desires that lack the internal constitution characteristic of individual desires. Though I will not further examine this issue, this suggests that well-established theoretical resources that back up the idea of group desires are available.

And as I said, if a group has a desire, on the assumption that the simple desire-satisfaction view is correct, the desire contributes either to increasing or decreasing the well-being of that group. This establishes that some groups have well-being under the simple desire-satisfaction view.

Crucially, the same argument can be applied to other types of well-being theories. It can be generalized to more sophisticated types of desire satisfaction theories that descriptively or normatively idealize the relevant desires. And if the list an objective list theorist offers contains satisfaction of desires, the same argument applies. More importantly, in the items mentioned in the most objective list theories, there are some that are available to groups. For instance, groups can surely attain achievement, and some groups may, though perhaps less clearly, have knowledge and exercise their virtue.[13] If one of those typical objective list theories is true, these goods should enhance the groups' well-being. Thus, most objective list theories would vindicate group well-being.

are not welfare subject. My discussion of the consciousness requirement in the next section should mitigate this worry. In any case, I am happy to presuppose here a stronger claim that the same theory of well-being is true of every *subject*.

[11] See Hess (2014) for a theoretical defense of this claim if you doubt this intuition.

[12] See Clark (1994) and Weaver (1998) for a broadly functionalist defense of groups' desires. See also Smith (1987) for a defense of a dispositional account of desire against a phenomenological account. Hess (2014: section 4) further argues that groups can have desires on many accounts of desires.

[13] Hurka (2011) includes achievement, knowledge, and virtue in his list, and so does Fletcher (2013: 214).

Hedonism is a bit trickier because we are assuming that groups cannot experience phenomenal pleasure or pain. Note, however, that some would allow for attitudinal pleasure, understood as propositional attitudes, is what ultimately matters to one's well-being.[14] And the same reasons to believe that groups can have desires seem to support the idea of groups' attitudinal pleasure. Thus, if this type of attitudinal hedonism is correct, groups would have well-being. It follows that most desire-satisfaction theories, objective list theories, and attitudinal hedonism will establish that groups have well-being.

This shows that the strategy that appeals to substantive well-being theories to argue for the consciousness requirement fails. Moreover, it is even self-defeating as denial of their conclusion follows from their premises. Notice that we now have a positive argument for group well-being, which I was originally defending in this paper. Importantly, the force of this argument is independent of our addressing the objection from the consciousness requirement. That is, my argument gives us a reason to believe that groups have well-being even before reflecting on the consciousness requirement. Thus, interestingly, the plausibility of my independent argument should put further pressure on the consciousness requirement since the conclusion of this independent argument contradicts the consciousness requirement.

Not only is this argument dialectically wide-reaching, but it may also deliver a pleasing result. It provides a theory of group well-being that can underwrite our ordinary talk about groups in one important way; if we ever talk about group well-being in ordinary conversations, our talk seems to suggest that it cannot be reduced to an aggregation of members' well-being. For instance, consider a situation where a company raises salaries and dividends on stocks for no good reason. The boost in salaries and dividends would make all the stockholders and employees better off than before, but the increases themselves do not necessarily seem to contribute to the company's interests. Filling in some details, we may even think it accurate to describe this event as bad for the company, as it is losing assets. Then, assuming we talk about the company's well-being in this case, it seems group well-being cannot be reduced to a monotonically increasing function of individual members' well-being.

My argument above squares with this aspect of our talk. For it is hard to think that group-level desires, achievement, knowledge, or anything that is ultimately relevant to well-being would all be reduced to those of the individual members. In the case of desires, to pick perhaps the clearest case, it is reasonable to think what desires an organized group has depends not (only) on members' desires but on what happens through its formal or informal

[14] For details about attitudinal hedonism, see Feldman (2002).

decision-making procedure.[15] Then, assuming the desire satisfactionism is correct, group well-being would likewise be irreducible to individual members' well-being. A similar line of thought would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other sources of well-being.

Though I have suggested non-reductionism about group well-being as one natural implication of my argument, this is not the place to defend non-reductionism. It is also worth emphasizing here that the claim that group well-being is irreducible to the well-being of their members does not entail that facts about group well-being is irreducible to facts about individuals. The view suggested here is fully compatible with the plausible views that collective-level facts are entirely explained by, grounded in, or supervene on facts at the individual or otherwise more micro-level. The claim is simply that facts about a group well-being are not reducible to facts about *its members' well-being*.

What if phenomenal hedonism or some other theory that requires phenomenal consciousness is true? I will now turn to my second argument and argue that even if this kind of experientialist theory of well-being is true, we can still resist the conclusion that the capacity for phenomenal consciousness is necessary for well-being.

There is an implicit assumption behind the thought that experientialist well-being theories support the consciousness requirement. This becomes clear once the thought is formulated as a logically valid argument.

The Experientialist Argument:
(P1) x has the capacity for being positive or negative in its well-being only if x has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness (Experientialist theory).
(P2) x has well-being only if x has the capacity for being positive or negative in its well-being (Implicit assumption).
(C) Therefore, x has well-being only if x has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness (The consciousness requirement).

I do not repeat my claim that the first premise (P1) is highly controversial and that we are given no compelling reason to accept it. What matters to us here is that the experientialist argument for the consciousness requirement implicitly assumes that the capacity for having a positive or negative well-being level is necessary for having well-being. However, this assumption (P2) is at least doubtful.

To see this, first consider whether the incapacity of an entity to have a positive or negative well-being level entails that it has no level of well-being. The answer is no, for the entity can have a neutral or zero level of well-being. Consider the following example to illustrate this:

[15] See Hess (2014: section 1) and List and Pettit (2011: Chapters 2 and 3) for more on the irreducibility of groups' intentional states.

> *Depressed daisy*. Daisy used to live a happy life. But ever since she experienced a traumatic car accident, she has never had a desire nor phenomenal pleasure/pain; she lacks the physiological and psychological capacities required for having desires and pleasure/pain (whatever these capacities are). However, despite this unfortunate fact about her, she is conscious in the sense that she is not in a permanently asleep or vegetative state. Daisy can speak and understand others just as we do.[16]

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that phenomenal hedonism is the correct theory of well-being. Given that phenomenal hedonism is correct, Daisy is incapable of being positive or negative in well-being because she cannot have phenomenal pleasure. However, this does not yet show that she lacks a well-being level.[17] Rather, we should say that Depressed Daisy has a well-being level of zero. There are at least two reasons to think this way.

First, it is clear that Daisy or anyone else can correctly describe her as being worse off than she used to be before the accident. She now experiences no pleasure, whereas she used to experience much pleasure that contributed to her welfare before the accident. Daisy herself may even evaluate her life in this way. But this comparative judgment of well-being makes sense only if Daisy now has a level of well-being.[18] If a level of well-being does not apply to Daisy, there is no fact of the matter about how well off she is now. Hence, we cannot compare her level of well-being before the accident with her current level of well-being for the simple reason that we cannot compare a number with nothing at all.

Though some may see this as a reason to reject phenomenal hedonism, it should still be conceptually possible that the comparative judgment makes sense while phenomenal hedonism is correct. But the rejoinder, construed as a conceptual or definitional claim, would render the very intelligibility of this possibility incoherent. Besides, we can generalize the argument to any experientialist theories of well-being if we further assume that Daisy cannot have the relevant state that matters to her well-being after the accident. Even on this assumption, it seems that we can correctly say that her life is worse than it used to be before the accident. Our judgment that Daisy has a well-being level seems robust in that it does not depend on whether she has the relevant capacity for having positive or negative well-being.

[16] This example is based on a similar case in Lin (2018: 325). Regarding the well-being level of subjects with no relevant capacity, Bradley (2009: 103–4) uses an essentially same example in a slightly different context. Recently, Lee (2025: 17) also uses essentially the same example—the example of "Zero"—to make the same point.

[17] An account of well-being level that Ekendahl & Johansson (2022: 158–9) defend would render Depressed Daisy with no level of well-being. I believe this is problematic, as I explain below.

[18] One might object that the frustration of phenomenal desires that Daisy had before the accident but lacks now can make her worse off. However, it is still the case that Daisy needs to have a well-being level now if we were to say that she is *now* worse off than at some other time.

Second, it is implausible to say that Daisy would have the same status as other inanimate objects in terms of well-being. That is, there is seemingly an important difference between Depressed Daisy and inanimate objects like a chair. In my view, what best explains the apparent difference between the two entities lies in the fact that while it does not make sense to talk about the well-being level of a chair, we can correctly talk about the well-being level of Daisy, namely the zero level of her well-being. This shows that a straightforward way to distinguish between Depressed Daisy and inanimate entities in the relevant way is to say that we can ascribe a level of well-being to her. Then, we have a case where an entity has a level of well-being while it lacks the capacity for being positive or negative in well-being.

Premise (P2) starts to seem doubtful now. It implies that Depressed Daisy does not have well-being despite having a well-being level of zero. This seems an implausible implication of the assumption. Consider Noah, who has the normal capacity for having pleasures but whose level of well-being and the balance of lifetime well-being happens always to be zero because his pleasure (or whatever positively matters for well-being) is always perfectly counterbalanced by the pain (or whatever negatively matters for well-being) that he experiences simultaneously. Daisy is then just like Noah in terms of level of well-being, that is, zero. Surely, we can correctly say that Daisy is as well off as Noah is. Furthermore, as I said, Daisy is worse off than she used to be before the accident. Then, it should be clear that Daisy has, as with Noah, well-being in the relevant sense. We now have a counterexample to the premise (P2). Thus, even if phenomenal hedonism is correct, groups may still have well-being.

Some may wonder if there is any point in speaking of the welfare subjectivity of groups when groups have no capacity for being positive or negative in well-being. I have four replies. First, as I showed, on most well-being theories, some groups *do* have the capacity. Second, even if no group has the capacity, that groups have zero level of well-being is, if true, itself an axiologically interesting fact about our world. Third, this fact would have other important axiological implications. For instance, the lack of the relevant capacity of groups itself might be instrumentally bad for those groups as it prevents them from having positive levels of well-being. Also, it may even follow that if groups have a well-being level of zero, the welfare gaps between groups and individuals instantiate the badness of inequality.

Finally, the welfare subjectivity of groups could have important normative implications. Those who doubt the practical significance of group well-being when groups can have only a zero level of well-being mistakenly assume that reasons grounded in well-being only concern promoting positive well-being or avoiding negative well-being. This assumption is unwarranted. Assume, plausibly, that welfare subjectivity is sufficient for at least some aspect of moral status. Then, it may follow that we have obligations toward groups that neither demand neither promoting their positive well-being nor avoiding

inflicting negative well-being, for example, obligations not to break a promise and not to lie to them. For instance, it is not unreasonable to think that one has an obligation not to break the contract one made with the University of Oxford.[19] Also, if groups have well-being, we and the groups themselves may have moral or prudential reasons to transform them (if it is possible) so that they gain the capacity to be positive in their well-being. Even if it is impossible to transform them this way, it may still be possible to make this transformation technology possible. Then, we and the groups would have instrumental reasons to invent and develop this kind of technology. In sum, even if no group has the relevant capacity, the welfare subjectivity of groups can have axiological and normative significance in many ways.[20]

One might push the objection further by claiming that an entity cannot have well-being unless it is capable of positive or negative well-being. Since this objection appeals to a necessary condition for well-being that is independent of the consciousness requirement addressed in this paper, a full response must be left for another study. However, as I have suggested, there are plausible axiological and normative implications that follow from the welfare subjectivity of entities that necessarily have only zero-level well-being. Crucially, the ways in which we may take such entities into evaluative and normative consideration do not seem substantively different from how we typically regard standard welfare subjects. Whether a being can have positive or negative well-being or only a zero level does not fundamentally alter how it should be considered from these evaluative or normative perspectives. Given this, the hypothesis that entities capable only of zero-level well-being can nonetheless count as welfare subjects appears reasonably plausible.

We have seen that one main argument for the consciousness requirement fails. It relies on implausible assumptions about substantive well-being theories and about the relation between having well-being and having the capacity for being positive or negative in one's well-being level. I have also offered an independent positive argument for group well-being.

V. Second case for the consciousness requirement

Are there any other considerations that support the consciousness requirement? The second possible argument for the consciousness requirement comes from its ability to exclude entities that seem clearly not to be welfare

[19] I borrowed this example from Lovett & Riedener (2021: 222).

[20] I should also note that the distinction between entities with a well-being level of zero and those with no well-being level often becomes important when we discuss the morality of an action in terms of harm or benefit. For instance, it can be relevant in abortion ethics, non-existent people in population ethics, and dead people in the philosophy of death. See, for example, Ekendahl & Johansson (2022) for abortion ethics, Herstein (2013) for population ethics, and Bradley (2009: 98–111) for the philosophy of death.

subjects. For instance, it is widely accepted that apples, chairs, and bottle of milk are not welfare subjects. If we accept the consciousness requirement, we have a unified explanation of why they are not: it is because they lack the capacity for consciousness.[21]

However, this motivation underdetermines which requirement for welfare subjectivity we should accept, for there are several ways to cash out the requirement while satisfying this motivation. For instance, we can accept the weakened version of the requirement:

The Weakened Consciousness Requirement:
x has well-being only if *either* x has the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness *or* a part of x has well-being.

I changed the consequent of the conditional thesis and made it in the disjunctive form. The weakened version of the consciousness requirement allows two forms of eligibility for being a welfare subject. To be a welfare subject, one must either have the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness *or* have an entity with well-being as a part of it. Thus, the capacity for phenomenal consciousness itself is not necessary for well-being on this view.

Notice that the weakened requirement still accounts for the alleged original motivation. Though the requirement is weakened, it faces no difficulty in excluding the obvious cases. It can exclude inanimate objects such as an apple, stone, and chair and explain why they do not have well-being. Thus, the weaker requirement perfectly accommodates the motivation.

Importantly, the weakened requirement poses no obstacle to group well-being, for most groups I am concerned with in this paper are at least partly constituted by people who have well-being. Even if a group has no individual as its member, the requirement can be met if they are constituted by groups that, in turn, have people as members. The weakened consciousness requirement thus allows many groups that lack phenomenal consciousness to have well-being.[22]

We have seen that the suggested argument fails uniquely to support the original consciousness requirement. One worry might be that the disjunctive form seems unjustifiably *ad hoc*.[23] Andrew Lee (2025: 13) claims that a

[21] For instance, van der Deijl (2021: section 3.1) argues for the thesis that sentience is necessary for well-being on the ground that it explains our judgment that inanimate objects like stones and non-sentient robots are not welfare subjects.

[22] It may be thought that the requirement is too weak in that it may allow an ecosystem to pass the test if it has sentient organisms as its part. This does not imply that ecosystems have well-being since the requirement is supposed to be a necessary rather than sufficient condition. In any case, given the controversy regarding the issue, I do not consider this a problematic implication of my account, as it is supposed to rule out only obvious cases. More problematically, however, if mereological universalism is correct, my account may allow too many entities. If this is the case, a further restriction on the relevant part-whole relation must be imposed. Assuming that some such compositional requirement can be found, I can safely set aside this issue.

[23] I thank David Enoch for pressing me this objection and for discussion.

disjunctive theory of welfare subjectivity is unsatisfying if there is no unifying story that explains what each disjunct has in common that makes them all grounds of welfare subjecthood.[24] Is there any deep, unified story behind this disjunctive requirement?

Although, here again, I cannot provide a complete defense, I suggest the following as a plausible unified explanation of this disjunctive requirement. What really matters to whether one can have well-being or not is whether one intrinsically possesses the capacity for phenomenal consciousness. Recall that on the weakened requirement, to have well-being, an entity must either have the capacity or parts that have the capacity. In both cases, the entity intrinsically possesses the capacity for phenomenal consciousness, which I suggest here as a source of well-being. And, importantly, there is nothing suspiciously disjunctive about this line of metaphysical account. If this story is correct, the disjunctive requirement follows from this unified and non-disjunctive theory. It also reflects the motivation behind the original consciousness requirement: the thought that phenomenal consciousness has some intimate connection with well-being. Though there may be a better account, I will not pursue this point further here. Note also that if the parthood relation is reflexive, I can simply omit the first disjunct of the requirement and offer the equivalent requirement that does not have the disjunctive appearance.

Another related worry is about the seemingly non-straightforward formulation regarding a part of the subject. Why is having welfare subjects *as parts* relevant to whether the entity itself is a welfare subject? Though I have no complete story to offer, I think the idea of "derivative instantiation" would help explain this. For instance, an apple seems to instantiate redness in virtue of having many outer parts that instantiate redness. This idea should be a familiar one to many. Although, of course, much more needs to be said to develop this account, if it is roughly on the right track, we could explain the weakened consciousness requirement as an instance of this wide phenomenon.

I now further argue that the original consciousness requirement is problematic as it faces a counterexample. Imagine this case:

> *Intermittent Life*: Ian's conscious life is intermittent. When he was five years old, he experienced a car accident that caused severe brain damage to him. Because of this, he lost the physiological and psychological capacities for phenomenal consciousness (whatever those capacities are). After thirty years of vegetative states, however, Ian recovered from the vegetative state and regained the capacity for phenomenal consciousness. However, five years after the recovery, he faced another accident and ended up in a vegetative state for another thirty years. Ian has recovered again after thirty years of vegetative states. After spending five years of a healthy life, Ian passed away.

[24] However, unlike Lee, I am not discussing the consciousness requirement as a metaphysical analysis or account of what it is for something to be a welfare subject. Since it is just a necessary condition for being a welfare subject, there is nothing obviously problematic about accepting a disjunctive requirement.

In this case, Ian experiences fifteen years of healthy life and sixty years of unconscious life in total.

As I will show, the *Intermittent Life* case suggests that the original consciousness requirement is too strong. First, note that many contemporary well-being theorists distinguish between *lifetime well-being* and *temporal well-being*. Lifetime well-being concerns how well off one's life is for her, considered as a whole. Temporal well-being concerns how well off one's life is during a particular period of time or at a particular moment.

Given this distinction, we should be able correctly to ascribe lifetime well-being to Ian. We should be able to talk about how good his life is for him by saying, for example, "it was an unfortunate life for him," and I see no reason to deny this. However, the problem is that while we can ascribe lifetime well-being to Ian as a whole that persists for 75 years, it is unclear whether Ian, as a person that persists for 75 years, meets the original consciousness requirement. For Ian does not have the capacity for phenomenal consciousness throughout his life. Rather, he lacks the capacity for most of his life, specifically four-fifths of his total life. It is not clear then on what ground we can ascribe the capacity for phenomenal consciousness to Ian. It rather seems sensible to say that Ian lacks the capacity, or at best, it is indeterminate whether he has it.

If this case description is correct, Ian's case is a counterexample to the original consciousness requirement. The consciousness requirement is then false, and thus, the objection from the consciousness requirement is avoided.

Some may object that Ian *does* have the capacity for phenomenal consciousness because Ian does not continue to exist after losing phenomenal consciousness. If he does not, Ian as a whole would include no period where he is in a vegetative state, and thus, we would be able to ascribe the capacity for consciousness for his 15 years of life. Here are my replies. First, it is implausible to say that he ceases to exist when he loses the capacity and then re-exists once he recovers. It seems rather close to cases where one sleeps for hours and awakes in the morning. Second, if Ian does not exist during those periods and lives only those happy periods, it is hard to see how we can correctly evaluate his entire life negatively by saying, for instance, "it was an unfortunate life for him."

Some might claim that Ian does not violate the consciousness requirement, provided that the requirement is construed in the right way. They might claim that the plausible form of the requirement should be construed in a time-relative manner as follows:

> *The Temporal Consciousness Requirement*: x has well-being at t only if x has the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness at t.

They can then reject the original consciousness requirement and allow that Ian has lifetime well-being. However, they still need to explain why we can correctly ascribe lifetime well-being to Ian but not to groups. Naturally, they

would then say that we can correctly ascribe lifetime well-being to entities that have temporal well-being at some time during their existence. However, it is unclear how the mere temporal property of welfare subjectivity at time *t* justifies attributing to Ian the atemporal property of being a welfare subject over his lifetime. Explaining how this can be justified is the first challenge they must address.

Furthermore, any credible theory of well-being holds that temporary well-being and lifetime well-being are closely connected and share significant qualitative features. For instance, persons who enjoy high temporary well-being at many points in their lives also enjoy high lifetime well-being, and vice versa. Although debates about the shape-of-a-life phenomenon persist, it is generally not thought that distinct theories of well-being—for example, hedonism and desire-satisfaction views—can be simultaneously and coherently adopted for lifetime and temporary well-being. Given this close connection, if having the relevant capacity for consciousness at time *t* is required for having temporary well-being at *t*, we must likewise hold that having lifetime well-being requires possessing that capacity over the course of one's life (however this is best understood). To deny this parity, one would need to claim that temporary and lifetime well-being differ in some respect beyond mere temporal extent that justifies imposing the consciousness requirement on the former but not the latter. It is unclear what such a difference could plausibly be, and opponents face a serious explanatory challenge.

This challenge is most vivid on a metaphysical view known as perdurantism. On a perdurantist reading, the claim above is typically understood as saying that Ian's temporal part that exists at *t* has well-being only if it has the capacity for consciousness. But if the consciousness requirement governs the well-being of temporal parts, then it should likewise govern lifetime well-being. For on perdurantist metaphysics, there is no significant difference between a temporal part that spans an entire lifetime and one that is shorter. And once one accepts the original consciousness requirement on lifetime well-being, Ian's case re-emerges as a counterexample.

If my discussion above is plausible, then the original consciousness requirement faces a counterexample and thus is false. Importantly, the *Intermittent Life* case further suggests that we should replace the consciousness requirement with the weakened version of the consciousness requirement. The case shows that in some cases, even if an entity itself does not have the capacity for phenomenal consciousness, we should allow the well-being of subjects if they have some *temporal parts* that have well-being. Thus, it pushes us toward a slightly weaker version of the consciousness requirement: for any entity x, x is a welfare subject only if either x has the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness *or a temporal part* of x has well-being. And, by generalization using a time-space analogy, it also seems natural to say that an entity without phenomenal consciousness can have well-being if (temporal *or spatial*) parts of

it have well-being. And this is exactly what the weakened version of the consciousness requirement I proposed says. This line of thought thus provides not only a counterexample to the original requirement but also a positive support for the weakened version of the consciousness requirement.

I will now defend the weakened requirement from one important objection. But notice that I do not have to commit myself to the weakened requirement for the purpose of this paper. All I need to avoid the objection from the consciousness requirement is to reject the original requirement and show there will be no similarly problematic requirement in the vicinity. I will return to this point at the end of this section.

Some may now object that I am presupposing an odd metaphysics that treats Ian's temporal parts and Ian as a whole as distinct entities. They may claim that those are all the same Ian after all, and it is unclear why these temporal parts of Ian should be seen as distinct welfare subjects. And this mistaken metaphysics, so the thought goes, licenses the unacceptable use of the time-space analogy that follows.

Here is my reply. On perdurantism, a highly established account of metaphysics about persistence, objects and people have temporal parts. For instance, *the first five-years-Ian* is a temporal part of Ian that comes into existence when Ian is born and ceases to exist when Ian turns five. Assuming this type of metaphysical theory, there should be no in-principle barrier to one's temporal parts being distinct welfare subjects. Now imagine this case:

> *Monozygotic Twin*: Ivan, a monozygotic twin of Ian, has qualitatively identical intrinsic bodily and psychological features as Ian does. Ivan spent five years of happy days just as Ian did, and he was in the same car when the car accident occurred. However, unlike Ian, Ivan could not survive the fatal brain damage caused by the accident, and he passed away at the age of five.

Now, we can clearly talk about how well-off Ivan was during the 5 years of his life. That is, we can ascribe well-being to Ivan as a person that persists for 5 years. However, if we accept this, we should also be able to ascribe well-being to *the first-five-years-Ian*, the temporal part of Ian that persists during the first 5 years of his life. This is because *the first-five-years-Ian* is intrinsically just like Ivan; they share all intrinsic properties throughout their existence. They also occupy the same time region throughout their existence. The only difference is that the temporal part of Ian has a successive temporal part that comes into existence at the age of five, while this is not the case for Ivan. However, it is implausible to think the temporal part of Ian is not a well-being subject only because of what happened after it ceased to exist.[25] This extrinsic fact about a

[25] I am following here the similar strategy taken by Johnston (2017: 618–23) and Dietz (2020: 366–7) in slightly different contexts.

subject should be irrelevant to whether it is a welfare subject. Thus, we should say that *the first-five-years-Ian* is a distinct welfare subject.

Note that if you do not find my argument for welfare-subjectivity of *the first-five-years-Ian* convincing, I can offer several other ways to show the same thing. First, under the plausible assumption that having the capacity for phenomenal consciousness is sufficient for having well-being,[26] *the first-five-years-Ian* has well-being because he clearly has the capacity.

Second, given the distinction between lifetime and temporary well-being, we can ascribe temporal well-being to the first 5-year period of Ian's life. Then, t*he first-five-years-Ian* clearly has the same well-being because it is essentially the same as the first 5 years periods of Ian's life, which we just ascribed temporal well-being. Thus, *the first-five-years-Ian* has well-being.

Third, I can reformulate the weakened requirement as follows:

> *The Weakened Consciousness Requirement Reformulated*: x is a welfare subject only if either x has the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness or parts of x *have the capacity for having phenomenal consciousness*.

Then, all I need to show here is that *the first-five-years-Ian* has the capacity for phenomenal consciousness, which is clearly true. The only reasons I favored the initial version of the weakened requirement are that it seemed to fit well with the idea of derivative instantiation and that I wanted to leave open the possibility that some groups have well-being even if they only contain groups and no individuals as their members. But as for the second motivation, under the reasonable assumption that parthood is a transitive relation, the reformulated requirement proposed here can give the same verdicts as the initial requirement regarding those groups. Thus, there should be no serious problem in accepting this version of the weakened requirement.

Another important worry is that, even granting perdurantist metaphysics, it is unclear whether we may legitimately generalize from a requirement involving temporal parts to one involving spatial parts by appealing to a time–space analogy. Admittedly, there are many properties for which time and space are not analogous. For example, when a house is robust, its robustness plausibly depends on its being robust at some points during its lifespan; if there is no time at which it is robust, then it is not robust. Yet, this does not imply that a house with a single robust spatial part is robust as a whole.[27]

To address this worry, we must first clarify the precise role of the spatiotemporal analogy in my argument. It is used to replace (i) x has well-being only if x has the capacity for consciousness or has a temporal part that has well-being with (ii) x has well-being only if x has the capacity for consciousness or has a

[26] For instance, van der Deijl (2021: section 3.1) argues that sentience is a sufficient condition for having well-being.

[27] I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this example.

temporal or spatial part that has well-being. Crucially, the analogy is applied to a claim of a very specific form: it serves only to weaken a necessary condition for being a welfare subject. The target is not a sufficient condition, nor a claim about what well-being depends on. Since this move is merely a weakening, if (i) is true, then (ii) must also be true. For example, shifting from "this house is robust only if it has a temporal part that is robust" to "this house is robust only if it has a temporal or spatial part that is robust" does not alter the truth value of the claim.

Of course, even if the weaker requirement is true, one might worry that it is too weak to exclude the entities it is meant to rule out. For example, the requirement "x has well-being only if x has the capacity for consciousness or is a desk" would be true if the original consciousness requirement is true, yet it is obviously problematic because it fails to exclude desks from welfare subjects. However, the weakening at issue here is unlikely to generate counterexamples of this sort. To produce such a counterexample—something that fails to satisfy (i) but does satisfy (ii)—one would need to identify an entity that (1) lacks the capacity for consciousness, (2) has no temporal part that has well-being, yet (3) has some spatial part that has well-being. The only plausible candidates for such entities would be collective entities of some kind, regarding which I suppose we have no settled pre-theoretical intuitions. In any case, adding this further condition cannot, in the present context, be deemed problematic without begging the question. For this reason, although the space–time analogy itself does not constitute a robust argument, the transition made here is entirely modest. The shift represents a mild and unproblematic weakening that does not invite the kinds of counterexamples that undermine similar inferences elsewhere.

Some may now think that my use of perdurantism in the previous argument invites us to think of group well-being in terms of its spatial parts and thereby supports a reductive or aggregative view of group well-being. However, the argument requires only the perdurantist claim that x has well-being only if its temporal part has well-being. Applied to groups, this amounts merely to requiring a part–whole relation between groups that have well-being and parts that have well-being. This should not be conflated with the claim that a part–whole relation holds between group well-being and individual members' well-being, a claim that may or may not support the reductive view. Nor does the former entail the latter. I have my upper and lower body as parts, yet it does not follow that my well-being is the aggregate of the well-being of those parts. Once this distinction is drawn, it becomes clear that my use of perdurantism is fully compatible with non-reductionism about group well-being.

Some may worry that normative and moral issues of this importance should not rest on a contentious metaphysical view such as perdurantism. However, I have introduced perdurantism only as a regimentation device for

one inferential step in the argument for the weakened consciousness requirement, not for an argument for group well-being. Even if my argument succeeds, this does not imply that group well-being depends on perdurantism in any substantive way. Nor does it require treating perdurantism as a metaphysical ground of group well-being. In general, we should expect several sound considerations in favor of a true philosophical view. And I believe I have given the most straightforward and illuminating argument for group well-being in Section IV, the argument from substantive theories of well-being.

Now, if you accept the perdurantist metaphysics and the time–space analogy, the cases of Ian and Ivan would give us a compelling reason to think we should replace the original consciousness requirement with the weaker version. But notice that even if you do not accept the perdurantist metaphysics, perhaps because you are not a perdurantist, remain unconvinced by the time–space analogy, or still have suspicion about the disjunctivity, *Intermittent Life* remains to be a counterexample to the original requirement. Thus, if you agree with my case description, the case of Ian is enough to falsify the original requirement and to dispel the objection from the consciousness requirement. And this is enough for my purpose.

Of course, if you accept neither version of the weakened requirement, you would still want a different necessary condition that excludes some entities from having well-being (if you feel no need for that, the objection from the requirement for being a welfare subject disappears). And this might pose another objection to group well-being. But to construct a persuasive objection to group well-being on this line, one will need to show at least the following: (1) the requirement excludes the obvious cases without being too strong, (2) the requirement does not exclude Ian, (3) the requirement excludes all groups, and (4) the requirement is more plausible than both versions of the weakened consciousness requirement. The fourth task seems especially challenging, as the idea that consciousness (or sentience) matters for welfare subjectivity in some important way is hard to discard. The weakened requirements that I offered gain plausibility on this issue. In any case, it is hard to see how all the tasks can be completed.

VI. Conclusion

The question of group well-being is underexplored. To make progress, I have offered a defense of group well-being against the objection from the consciousness requirement.

I first argued that the two prominent motivations to support the consciousness requirement are problematic. I then offered one counterexample and proposed a better version of the requirement that avoids the counterexample while preserving the motivation. I conclude that we should reject the original

consciousness requirement. I also posed an independent positive argument for group well-being, which should be of interest independently of the objection from the consciousness requirement.

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