Does the Same Theory of Welfare Apply to All Welfare Subjects?[1]

Michal Masny
mmasny@mit.edu

Forthcoming in Ethics

Abstract: Does the same theory of welfare apply to all welfare subjects? In a recent article, Eden Lin argues that it does. Here, I present a set of objections to Lin's arguments and defend the opposing view. Along the way, I discuss what counts as a basic good for a welfare subject and how to assess the generality and simplicity of an axiological theory.

1. Introduction

Does the same theory of welfare apply to all welfare subjects? According to *Invariabilism*, it does. According to *Variabilism*, it doesn't.

In a recent article, Eden Lin makes an insightful case for Invariabilism.[2] He offers two arguments. The first is that unlike Invariabilism, Variabilism has no plausible explanation or justification (*the Inexplicability Argument)*. The second is that

[1] For helpful discussions and comments, I am grateful to Johann Frick, Caspar Hare, Todd Karhu, Kacper Kowalczyk, Russell McIntosh, Brad Skow, and two anonymous reviewers.
[2] Eden Lin, "Welfare Invariabilism", *Ethics* 128 (2018): 320–345.

Invariabilism is simpler than Variabilism, and thus favoured by meta-theoretical considerations (*the Simplicity Argument).*

Lin's arguments are of considerable philosophical interest. For one, Invariabilism and Variabilism are meta-axiological theories (that is, theories *about* the theory of welfare), and such theories have received comparatively little attention in the philosophical literature. Moreover, the debate between Variabilism and Invariabilism has important downstream implications. For example, Variabilism allows us to conduct our axiological inquiry in stages: we could first fix a theory of welfare for humans, and only later turn to non-human animals. In addition, Invariabilism potentially constrains which theories of welfare are admissible: since dogs are almost certainly capable of having welfare, welfare cannot consist *entirely* in the exercise of some sophisticated capacity that dogs lack, as some theories of human welfare proposed in the literature maintain.[3]

[3] For such 'sophisticated' theories of welfare, see, for example, Dale Dorsey. "Subjectivism without Desire", *The Philosophical Review* 121 (2012): 407–42; Donald W. Bruckner, "Quirky Desires and Well-Being", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 10 (2016): 1–34; and Valerie Tiberius, *Well-Being as Value Fulfillment: How We Can Help Each Other to Live Well* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

In this paper, I contend that neither of Lin's arguments for Invariabilism succeeds: there is a plausible explanation for Variabilism and considerations of theoretical simplicity do not favour Invariabilism.[4]

2. The Inexplicability Argument

A central function of a theory of welfare is to enumerate *basic goods* (and bads—henceforth omitted), i.e. the kinds of things that are non-instrumentally good for a welfare subject, where a *welfare subject* is defined as any entity that is capable of having positive or negative welfare. For example, a hedonistic theory might say that pleasure is the sole basic good for humans, a desire satisfaction theory might say that the satisfaction of one of the subject's desires is the sole basic good for humans, whereas an objective list theory might say that pleasure, loving relationships, knowledge, aesthetic experience, self-determination, and theoretical contemplation are all basic goods for humans.[5]

[4] Since its publication, Lin's paper has been widely cited, but his arguments remain largely unchallenged. For exceptions, see Donald W. Bruckner, "Human and Animal Well-Being", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 102 (2021): 393–412; and Christopher Frugé, "Structuring Wellbeing", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 105 (2022): 564–80. They briefly critique different aspects of Lin's discussion from the ones I consider here.

[5] Another key function of a theory of welfare is to explain why the particulars that are basically good have that status. For discussions of the distinction between enumeration and explanation, see Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Guy Fletcher, "A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being", *Utilitas* 25 (2013): 206–20; Christopher Woodard, "Classifying Theories of Welfare", *Philosophical Studies* 165 (2013): 787–803; and Eden Lin, "Enumeration and Explanation in Theories of Welfare", *Analysis* 77 (2017): 65–73. I share Lin's view that all major theories of welfare are both enumerative and explanatory.

Invariabilism is the view that the same theory of welfare applies to all welfare subjects. In particular, it holds that the same list of basic of goods applies to all welfare subjects. For example, pleasure is the sole basic good for humans just in case it is the sole basic good for dogs and all other welfare subjects. Pragmatically, if Invariabilism is true, we can simply talk about 'basic goods' instead of 'basic goods for humans' or 'basic goods for dogs'.

Variabilism denies that the same theory of welfare applies to all welfare subjects. This is true if different lists of basic goods apply to different welfare subjects.[6] For example, if Variabilism is correct, it could be that pleasure is the sole basic good for dogs, whereas both pleasure and theoretical contemplation are basic goods for humans. Alternatively, it could be that pleasure is the sole basic good for dogs, whereas theoretical contemplation or desire satisfaction is the sole basic good for humans. In the first case, the lists overlap, whereas in the second case, they do not. But, in either case, different lists apply to different welfare subjects.[7]

---

[6] As Lin ("Welfare Invariabilism", 323) notes, Variabilism could be true even if the same list of basic goods applies to all welfare subjects. For example, it could be that the same basic goods have different *prudential values* for different welfare subjects: say, qualitatively identical pleasant experiences contribute absolutely more to the welfare of dogs than to the welfare of humans. However, like Lin, I focus here on the 'different lists' version of Variabilism.

[7] For a different use of the terms 'Invariabilism' and 'Variabilism' in the context of welfare, see Guy Fletcher, "Rejecting Well-Being Invariabilism", *Philosophical Papers* 38 (2009): 21–34, and "Brown and Moore's Value Invariabilism vs. Dancy's Variabilism", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 162–68.

Lin's Inexplicability Argument for Invariabilism has a negative character. He considers two candidate lines of thought that might support Variabilism (one having to do with *accessibility*, and another with *suitability*), argues that neither is compelling, and infers that there is no plausible explanation for Variabilism. Contra Lin, I will argue that considerations of accessibility do provide support for Variabilism.

Lin's critique is aimed at the following argument. Among the things that plausibly are basic goods for humans, there are some that are inaccessible to other welfare subjects, in the sense that these welfare subjects lack the requisite physiological or psychological capacities, and something inaccessible cannot be a basic good for a welfare subject, so different lists of basic goods must apply to different welfare subjects.

The second premise is key here, and it amounts to the following, partial account of (or, effectively, a constraint on) what counts as a basic good. Lin calls this premise 'Inaccessibility Excludes Goodness', but I'm going to use a shorter name: 'Good Implies Can'.

> *Good Implies Can* (Lin's formulation): If a subject S lacks the physiological or psychological capacities to possess tokens of a kind K, then K is not a basic good for S.[8]

To illustrate, suppose that theoretical contemplation is a basic good for humans. Dogs seem to lack the physiological or psychological capacities necessary to engage in theoretical contemplation. So, theoretical contemplation cannot be a basic good for dogs. But dogs are almost certainly welfare subjects. Thus, different lists of basic goods must apply to humans and dogs.

Lin claims that Good Implies Can is false. He offers the following counterexample.

> Consider Anhedonic Annie, a human being who lacks the physiological and psychological capacities that are required for pleasure. In spite of this unfortunate fact about her, pleasure could still be a basic good for her. The claim that pleasure is a basic good for her does not imply that she ever actually feels any pleasure. Nor does it imply that she feels any pleasure at any nearby possible worlds. It merely implies that for any pleasures, if she were to experience them, each of them would be basically good for her. And

[8] Lin, "Welfare Invariabilism", 325.

> this counterfactual could be true even though Annie is incapable of feeling pleasure.[9]

At the heart of Lin's reasoning is the following, alternative account of basic goods.

> *The Unrestricted Account*: A kind K is a basic good for a subject S if and only if for any tokens of K, if S were to possess them, each of them would be non-instrumentally good for S.[10]

This account is incompatible with the argument for Variabilism presented above. According to the Unrestricted Account, even if theoretical contemplation is not accessible to some creature, it could still be a basic good for that creature. Indeed, Lin thinks that in any possible world in which a dog engages in theoretical contemplation, doing so is non-instrumentally good for that dog in that world. Since analogous considerations seem to apply to any candidate basic good and welfare subject, accepting the Unrestricted Account makes Invariabilism difficult to deny.

But why accept the Unrestricted Account? As I see it, Lin's discussion features two arguments.

---

[9] Ibid., 325.
[10] Ibid., 326.

The first argument is implicit. Lin seems to think that we need to accept the Unrestricted Account to make sense of the intuition that pleasure would be non-instrumentally good for Anhedonic Annie if she were to experience it. In other words, how could pleasure not count as a basic good for Anhedonic Annie if it is non-instrumentally good for her in every possible world in which she experiences it?

Lin's second argument is explicit and rooted in meta-theoretical considerations. He writes:

> We should think about basic goods in this way because ethical theory should be fully general. A theory of right action should be able to tell us which actions are right in any situation, not just in nearby possible worlds. Likewise, a theory of subject S's welfare should be able to tell us how well off S is in any situation—even ones in which S possesses tokens of a kind that is inaccessible to it.[11]

[11] Ibid., 326.

In other words, Lin thinks that unless we accept the Unrestricted Account, our theory of welfare will not be able to tell us how well off many subjects, including Anhedonic Annie and dogs, would be in certain situations.

I believe that neither of these arguments supports the Unrestricted Account over Good Implies Can.

The problem with the first argument is that Variabilism is equally well-equipped to explain our intuitions about Anhedonic Annie. In a nutshell, this view allows for the possibility that different theories of welfare apply to beings with different physiological and psychological capacities, and what's distinctive about Lin's example is that Anhedonic Annie has highly divergent capacities in the actual world and the possible world in which she experiences pleasures. Consequently, Variabilism allows for the possibility that one theory of welfare applies to Anhedonic Annie in the actual world, and another theory of welfare applies to her in the possible world in which she experiences pleasure. So, accepting the intuition that pleasure is a basic good for Anhedonic Annie in the latter scenario does not commit the variabilist to the claim that pleasure is a basic good for her *period*.

Allow me to elaborate. Implicit in Lin's discussion appears to be a conception of welfare that the same things must be basic goods for an individual at all times and

in all possible worlds. But I think that this conception is dubious even if we set aside cases involving distant possible worlds like the one featuring Anhedonic Annie. To see that, consider the following common intuitions about welfare and change over the course of an individual's life. For example, it appears that an individual who is not a welfare subject at all could become one in virtue of acquiring certain physiological and psychological capacities, as humans arguably do at some stage of fetal development. Moreover, some philosophers believe that different things might be basic goods for an individual in childhood and adulthood.[12] Similarly, it seems that if a chimpanzee named Chad acquired the physiological and psychological capacities of a typical human adult, perhaps through a surgical intervention or gradual gene therapy, what is non-instrumentally good for Chad would change.[13]

---

[12] See, for example, Samantha Brennan, "The Goods of Childhood and Children's Rights", in *Family-Making:*

Contemporary Ethical Challenges, ed. Françoise Baylis and Carolyn McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 29–48; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values the Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 2014); Anca Gheaus, "The 'Intrinsic Goods of Childhood' and the Just Society", in *The Nature of Children's Well-Being*, ed. Alexander Bagattini and Colin Macleod (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2015), 35–52; Anca Gheaus, "Unfinished Adults and Defective Children: On the Nature and Value of Childhood", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 9 (2015): 1–22; Colin M. MacLeod, "Primary Goods, Capabilities, and Children", in *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities*, ed. Harry Brighouse and Ingrid Robeyns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174–92; Patrick Tomlin, "Saplings or Caterpillars? Trying to Understand Children's Wellbeing", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2018): 29–46; Patrick Tomlin, "The Value of Childhood", in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Childhood and Children*, ed. Gideon Calder, Anca Gheaus, and Jurgen De Wispelaere (London: Routledge, 2018), 79–89. For the opposite view, see Andrée-Anne Cormier and Mauro Rossi, "Is Children's Wellbeing Different from Adults' Wellbeing?", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (2019): 1146–68.

[13] For discussions of similar thought-experiments, see Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 37–65; Jeff McMahan, "Cognitive

And finally, an individual that is a welfare subject at one point could arguably cease to be one, perhaps as a result of a severe brain injury, while remaining alive.[14]

A more plausible conception of basic goods, one that makes room for the intuitive judgments outlined above, is that different theories of welfare could apply to the same individual at different times or in different possible worlds. This latter conception allows for the aforementioned possibility that one theory of welfare applies to Anhedonic Annie in the actual world, and another theory applies to her in the possible world in which she has the capacity to experience pleasure.

It is worth emphasising that this line of response to Lin does not simply take for granted that different theories apply to welfare subjects with different physiological and psychological capacities. Instead, my aim is to demonstrate that there is a *plausible* variabilist story about our intuitions concerning Anhedonic Annie, which is

---

Disability, Misfortune, and Justice", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 3–35; and Shelly Kagan, "What's Wrong with Speciesism?", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33 (2016): 1–21. Note that all of these authors assume, as I do here, that such changes to one's capacities could in principle be identity-preserving. Another possible response to Lin's argument, which I do not pursue here, is that 'Anhedonic Annie in the actual world' and 'Anhedonic Annie in the possible world in which she has the capacity to experience pleasure' cannot be regarded as the same individual. If that were true, then even Lin's preferred Unrestricted Account would not imply that pleasure is a basic good for Anhedonic Annie in the actual world.

[14] On an alternative view, there is no continuous thing that ceases to be a welfare subject in this case. For example, see Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). McMahan argues that because you are an embodied mind, when your organism enters a persistent vegetative state, *you* have now ceased to exist and all that remains is the organism.

something that Lin denies. And this variabilist story has the added virtue of aligning with some common sentiments about welfare and change over the course of an individual's life.

This variabilist story appeals to a conception of basic goods that is very much in the spirit of the Good Implies Can principle, as formulated by Lin. However, to emphasise the possibility that what is a basic good for an individual might vary across time and possible worlds, it's best to amend the original formulation in the following way.

> *Good Implies Can:* If a subject S lacks the physiological or psychological capacities to possess tokens of a kind K *in a world W at a time T*, then K is not a basic good for S *in W at T*.

Turn now to Lin's second argument for the Unrestricted Account. Lin's thought is that unless we accept this account, "a theory of subject S's welfare" will not be sufficiently general.[15] In particular, such a theory will not be able to tell us how well off certain subjects, such as Anhedonic Annie, would be in various conceivable scenarios.

[15] Lin, "Welfare Invariabilism", 326.

This argument might seem appealing, but I think that this appeal derives from an ambiguity. While it's true that our *overarching* theory of welfare (i.e. the collective of all true theories of welfare) must tell us how well off any given subject is in any given situation, there is no need for any particular *partial* theory of welfare to do that. (We may refer to the former as 'the Theory of Welfare', and to instances of the latter simply as 'theories of welfare'.) If there are multiple true theories of welfare that apply to different welfare subjects, all that matters is that they collectively cover all welfare subjects and scenarios.

How would this work in practice on the variabilist picture? Take the case of Anhedonic Annie again. To determine how well off she is in any given scenario, we need to do two things. First, we need to figure out what capacities she has in that scenario, and then we can assess how well off she is in that scenario according to the particular theory of welfare that applies to welfare subjects with such capacities. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that pleasure is the only basic good for subjects capable of experiencing it, whereas theoretical contemplation is the only good for those incapable of experiencing pleasure. The first partial theory does not tell us how well off Anhedonic Annie is in the actual world. But that's not a problem because there is another partial theory that does. Collectively, these two theories of welfare comprise the Theory of Welfare and cover all subjects and scenarios.

As noted earlier, to motivate the theoretical virtue of generality, Lin also makes a comparison between theories of welfare and theories of right action. He writes that "a theory of right action should be able to tell us which actions are right in any situation, not just in nearby possible worlds".[16] But the appeal of this claim also trades on an ambiguity. It's not true that any partial normative principle must apply to all possible actions. For example, we do not expect a theory of promising to determine what forms of conduct in war are morally permissible. Only the collective of all true normative principles must have universal scope in that sense.

To be sure, if it turns out that Invariabilism is true and, say, hedonism applies to all welfare subjects, then hedonism will tell us how well off any given subject is in any given scenario. But my point is that, short of begging the question against Variabilism, we cannot simply assume that every partial theory of welfare must cover all subjects and circumstances. Only the collective of all partial theories of welfare, the Theory of Welfare, must be fully general in its scope. This means that meta-theoretical considerations having to do with generality do not support the Unrestricted Account over Good Implies Can either.

[16] Ibid., 326.

Where does that leave us? Although, by itself, Good Implies Can does not imply that Variabilism is true, it goes a long way in that regard. To see this, suppose that theoretical contemplation is a basic good for some human, Jane, in the actual world. While there might be a possible world in which a dog named Fido is capable of theoretical contemplation, in the actual world Fido seems to lack the requisite capacities. But Fido is almost certainly capable of welfare. So, if Good Implies Can is true, different lists must apply to Fido and Jane.

3. The Simplicity Argument

Lin's second argument for Invariabilism is very brief.

> According to variabilism, at least one theory is true of some subjects but false of others, and there could even turn out to be a large plurality of true theories, each of them true of different subjects. By contrast, according to invariabilism, welfare is "one size fits all." This is a simpler picture than the one available on variabilism, and the greater simplicity of a view is a reason to favor it.[17]

To assess this argument, we need to first get a better grip on the notion of simplicity as it applies to theory choice. It is generally useful to distinguish two basic kinds of

[17] Ibid., 324.

theoretical simplicity. The first kind, *ontological simplicity*, is concerned with the number and complexity of entities postulated by a theory. The second kind, *syntactic simplicity*, refers to the number and complexity of the theory's principles and auxiliary assumptions.

In the passage cited above, Lin points out that if Variabilism is true, there could turn out to be a large plurality of theories of welfare that are true of different subjects. Thus, he appears to be concerned with ontological simplicity rather than syntactic simplicity.

However, Lin does not make the further distinction between two kinds of ontological simplicity: *qualitative ontological simplicity*, which is concerned with types of entities invoked in a theory, and *quantitative ontological simplicity*, which deals with token instantiations of entities featured in a theory. These two can diverge. For example, a theory can be quantitatively complex but qualitatively simple if it postulates many entities that are, in relevant respects, qualitatively identical. Conversely, a theory can be quantitatively simple but (comparatively) qualitatively

complex if it features relatively few entities that are, in relevant respects, all different from one another.[18]

I think that not discussing these different kinds of theoretical simplicity (and the philosophical literature on this topic more broadly) is an important oversight on Lin's part. I have three specific concerns. First, it's not at all obvious that ontological simplicity is relevant to theory choice in meta-axiology. Second, Invariabilism is arguably only quantitatively simpler than Variabilism. And third, these two theories are on a par in terms of syntactic simplicity. Let me unpack each of these concerns.

To start, it's important to acknowledge that several philosophers have argued that, although ontological simplicity is relevant in empirical sciences, it should not be regarded as a theoretical virtue in philosophy. For example, Michael Huemer reviews a range of accounts of the virtue of simplicity in scientific theory choice (such as the empiricist view that scientific methodology incorporating Ockham's razor has a robust track record of identifying truths, one that is arguably lacking in philosophy), and concludes that "in typical philosophical contexts, ontological simplicity has no

[18] For an informative review of varieties of simplicity invoked in the literature on theory choice, see Alan Baker, "Simplicity", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022).

evidential value".[19] Huemer's arguments may not be decisive, but they should certainly give us a pause. If Huemer is right, Invariabilism's alleged greater ontological simplicity would give us no reason whatsoever to prefer it over Variabilism.[20]

My primary concern, however, is that Invariabilism may fail to be ontologically simpler than Variabilism in the relevant way. While Invariabilism is certainly *quantitatively* simpler than Variabilism, it need not be *qualitatively* simpler. To my mind, only the latter kind of ontological simplicity matters for meta-axiological theory choice.

To see that, note first that although Variabilism implies that there are multiple *tokens* of true theories of welfare, it does not imply that there are multiple *types* of true theories of welfare. For instance, Variabilism is compatible with the view that all true theories of welfare are monistic and objectivist, but just enumerate different

---

[19] Michael Huemer, "When Is Parsimony a Virtue?", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (2009): 216–36, 216.

[20] See also Elliott Sober, *Ockham's Razors: A User's Manual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Thomas Nagel makes an even stronger (if unsupported) claim: "Simplicity and elegance are never reasons to think that a philosophical theory is true: on the contrary, they are usually grounds for thinking it is false". See Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), x. For responses to Huemer and Sober, see Darren Bradley, "Philosophers Should Prefer Simpler Theories", *Philosophical Studies* 175 (2018): 3049–67; and Marc Lange, "How Simplicity Can Be a Virtue in Philosophical Theory-Choice", *Erkenntnis* 89 (2024): 1217–34.

basic goods that fit these criteria for different types of welfare subjects (say, pleasure for non-human animals and theoretical contemplation for humans).

This is important because a theory can be qualitatively simple even if it postulates many tokens of entities that are not perfectly identical. Instead, what matters is whether these entities are alike in all relevant respects. To illustrate this, compare a cosmological theory that predicts that there are 100 million stars in the Milky Way with an alternative that predicts the existence of 150 million stars. The 150 million stars postulated by the latter theory would almost inevitably differ from each other and from the 100 million postulated by the first theory in terms of properties such as mass, size, temperature, or luminosity. And yet, the former theory need not be regarded as qualitatively simpler because, at least within certain bounds, differences in terms of mass, size, temperature, or luminosity might be reasonably considered as irrelevant for cosmological theory choice. Indeed, on the intuitive level, the former cosmological theory seems only quantitatively simpler.

By analogy, I think that when we are assessing the qualitative simplicity of a meta-axiological theory like Variabilism, it doesn't matter how many tokens of theories of welfare are being recognised. What matters is whether these theories differ substantially in terms of some fundamental or structural properties, such as whether

they are monistic or pluralistic, subjectivist or objectivist, and so on. We want to know how many types of true theories of welfare there are.

To be sure, Variabilism does not rule out the possibility that there are multiple types of true theories of welfare. For example, it could be that the theory of welfare that applies to non-human animals is subjectivist, whereas the theory of welfare that applies to humans is objectivist. But the key issue is that Variabilism does not imply that either. Invariabilism is not inherently qualitatively simpler than Variabilism.

At this point, one might raise the following concern. Doesn't Variabilism entail more types of basic goods (say, both subjective and objective rather than just subjective) or at least more basic goods (say, both pleasure and theoretical contemplation rather than just pleasure) compared to Invariabilism? Either entailment, the thought goes, would render Invariabilism qualitatively simpler than Variabilism, regardless of how many types of true theories of welfare the latter view postulates. But this concern is not warranted. Variabilism does not entail more types of basic goods or more basic goods than Invariabilism. To illustrate, consider again the variabilist view that pleasure is the sole basic good for non-human animals and theoretical contemplation is the sole basic good for humans, and compare it to the invariabilist view that both pleasure and theoretical contemplation are basic goods

for all welfare subjects. The overall number of basic goods and their types is the same in either case.

That Invariabilism is, in itself, only quantitively simpler than Variabilism poses a problem for Lin's argument. Huemer's claim that ontological simplicity in general does not matter for philosophical theory choice may be fringe, but the view that quantitative ontological simplicity in particular doesn't matter is popular among philosophers. David Lewis is perhaps the most well-known example, and he attributes the same view to many of his peers:

> I subscribe to the general view that qualitative parsimony is good in a philosophical or empirical hypothesis, but I recognize no presumption whatever in favour of quantitative parsimony.[21]

In this respect, philosophical and empirical perspectives seem to be aligned. As David Wallace observes:

> Generally in physics, we try to keep our number of postulates, and the complexity of our theories, as low as possible. But we're not bothered about

[21] David K. Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1973), 87.

> *how much* there is in the Universe of any given entity we postulate. For instance, we don't tend to assume that cosmological theories are a priori more or less likely to be true according to how many galaxies they postulate.[22]

Taken together, these considerations lead me to believe that ontological simplicity does not favour Invariabilism over Variabilism.

Turn now to the other kind of simplicity, syntactic simplicity, which refers to the number and complexity of the theory's basic principles and auxiliary assumptions. One rough method to gauge the syntactic simplicity of a particular theory is to consider what it would take to express it. Other things equal, one of two theories is syntactically simpler if it can be stated or described in plainer terms, has fewer clauses, caveats, or assumptions, and is thus easier to grasp and operationalise.

---

[22] David Wallace, *The Emergent Multiverse: Quantum Theory According to the Everett Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105. However, see also Daniel Nolan, 'Quantitative Parsimony', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 48 (1997): 329-43; Elliott Sober, 'Parsimony Arguments in Science and Philosophy–a Test Case for Naturalism P', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83 (2009): 117–55; and Lina Jansson and Jonathan Tallant, 'Quantitative Parsimony: Probably for the Better', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 68 (2017): 781–803, who all argue that quantitative ontological simplicity has played and should continue to play an important role in at least some instances of scientific theory choice.

At first blush, Lin's Invariabilism might appear to be syntactically very simple. Baldly stated, it holds that the same list of basic goods applies to all welfare subjects. However, to make sense of this view, one also needs to grasp the assumptions that Lin is making about the concept of basic goods and what it means for a list of basic goods to apply to a welfare subject.

These assumptions, I believe, introduce a significant degree of syntactic complexity. To see that, consider the following question.

(1) Is pleasure a basic good for Anhedonic Annie in the actual world?

When we ask this question, we are typically interested in two further issues:

(2) When assessing Anhedonic Annie's well-being in the actual world, should we pay attention to the amount of pleasure she has experienced?
(3) Can we benefit Anhedonic Annie in the actual world through ordinary actions that tend to confer pleasure on individuals?

On Lin's account, we have to say 'yes' to the first question, and 'no' to the latter two. Pleasure is a basic good for Anhedonic Annie *period*, so it's good for her in the actual world as well. However, because she does not have the requisite capacities in

the actual world, trying to attend to how much pleasure she has experienced when assessing her well-being or trying to benefit her through actions that tend to confer pleasure on individuals would be pointless. Thus, Lin's Invariabilism *decouples* the notion of basic goods from our ordinary moral talk and practice.[23]

Lin acknowledges the awkwardness of his account, but goes on to downplay the significance of this issue. He writes:

> Admittedly, the claim that theoretical contemplation is a basic good for Fido sounds odd. But this is because it would be misleading to enumerate it when asked for a list of his basic goods. Although a theory of Fido's welfare should be fully general, a request for such a list is naturally interpreted as concerning the basic goods that fix how well off he is at nearby possible worlds. …

[23] That is not to say that there aren't *other* evaluative or normative contexts in which it makes sense to pay attention to the amount of pleasure experienced by Anhedonic Annie. For example, Jeff McMahan, Peter Vallentyne, and Michal Masny all discuss variants of the idea that we should distinguish the assessment of an individual's well-being and the assessment of how 'fortunate' their life is, where the latter might be cashed out in terms of closeness to the species-typical level of well-being or their maximum possible well-being. See McMahan, "Cognitive Disability"; Peter Vallentyne, "Of Mice and Men: Equality and Animals", *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 403–33; and Michal Masny, "Wasted Potential: The Value of a Life and the Significance of What Could Have Been", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 51 (2023): 6–32. On Lin's view, the fact that Anhedonic Annie has not experienced any pleasure, but perhaps could have, might still be relevant to the latter kind assessment. Likewise, perhaps knowing that Anhedonic Annie would lack the capacities needed to experience pleasure could bear on the permissibility of the decision to cause her to exist. My argument concerns only well-being and our ordinary moral talk and practice surrounding it.

> None of this disproves the claim that for any instances of theoretical contemplation, if Fido were to engage in them, each of them would be basically good for him. A kind can be a basic good for a subject even though its inaccessibility to him means that we can ignore it for practical purposes (e.g., when trying to increase his welfare).[24]

This response is not fully satisfying. The above considerations show that to express Lin's Invariabilism, we need to distinguish between *accessible basic goods* and *inaccessible basic goods*, and only the former sub-category of basic goods is aligned with our ordinary moral talk and practice. This introduces a significant degree of syntactic complexity.

By contrast, while Variabilism holds that there are multiple true theories of welfare, it does not decouple the notion of basic goods from our ordinary moral talk and practice. In the actual world, Anhedonic Annie does not have the capacities needed to experience pleasure, so pleasure is not a basic good for her, and it does not make sense to pay attention to the amount of pleasure she has experienced or try to confer pleasure on her through ordinary means either. So there is no need to distinguish accessible and non-accessible basic goods. Thus, other things being equal,

[24] Lin, "Welfare Invariabilism", 326-7.

Variabilism seems syntactically at least as simple as Invariabilism. And if that's right, then, on the whole, considerations of simplicity do not favour Invariabilism over Variabilism.

4. Conclusion

Lin's arguments against Variabilism have put an important and neglected axiological issue in the spotlight. However, these arguments are not successful. There is a plausible explanation for Variabilism which appeals to the Good Implies Can principle, and Invariabilism is not simpler than Variabilism in a way that is significant for theory choice. Meta-theoretical considerations invoked by Lin do not favour either Invariabilism or Variabilism.

Lin suggests that his discussion has important downstream implications for first-order axiological debates. In particular, he claims that if Invariabilism is true, then "the correct theory of welfare posits at least one basic good whose tokens are possessed by the simplest welfare subjects".[25] As noted earlier, this rules out a large swath of theories that take human welfare to consist *solely* in the exercise of certain 'sophisticated' psychological capacities, such as the capacity to value something.[26]

[25] Ibid., 345.

[26] According to Lin (ibid., fn. 27), such theories include those defended by Dorsey ("Subjectivism without Desire"), Bruckner ("Quirky Desires"), and Tiberius (*Well-Being as Value Fulfillment*), among others, but not 'idealised' desire satisfaction theories.

That's because dogs and some other non-human animals are almost certainly capable of having welfare in the actual world despite not having those capacities. But if my rebuttal to Lin's arguments for Invariabilism succeeds, these 'sophisticated' theories of human welfare remain viable.

Lin also suggests that, if Invariabilism is true, then hedonism and desire satisfaction theories are among the candidates for the true theory of welfare, but the most promising candidate is "an objective list theory on which there are a variety of basic goods requiring varying degrees of psychological sophistication".[27] However, one curious upshot of my discussion is that the case for Invariabilism would be stronger if it could be independently shown that every true theory of welfare must be monistic rather than pluralistic. For one thing, Variabilism would then postulate more basic goods and potentially more types of basic goods than Invariabilism, which would, on one kind of view, render it more qualitatively complex. Moreover, Invariabilism would then be less vulnerable to the decoupling problem, which introduced a significant amount of syntactic complexity. But a decisive case in favour of welfare monism is yet to be made.

[27] Lin, ibid., 327.

The picture that emerges from these considerations is one on which axiological and meta-axiological issues are, to some extent, intertwined. Invariabilism is at odds with 'sophisticated' theories of human welfare, whereas Variabilism does not mesh well with the view that every true theory of welfare must be monistic. However, these constraints notwithstanding, there is still substantial room for theorising about axiology and meta-axiology independently.