

The challenge from changing attitudes

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Overview

The fact that our attitudes change, both across time and across worlds, poses well-known challenges for subjective well-being theories. Take Kierkegaard's famous conundrum, for example: If you were to get married, you would prefer being unmarried; if you were to remain being unmarried, you would prefer being married. Which life is better for you? Or take Nagel's temporal analogue: in the past you favoured your adventurous youthful life more than the quiet and unassuming life you expected to live as an old person; now when you look back you favour your current life more than your youthful past life. Which period of your life is better for you?

As Laurie Paul has reminded us, sometimes we are not even able to fully grasp an alternative life because it involves transformative experiences. For example, it might not be possible to fully grasp what it means to be a parent, go to war, or become paralyzed, if one has not had the relevant transformative experiences. This means that we cannot form a determinate preference between a life with the relevant experiences and one without them, if we have not already had those experiences.

The challenge from changing attitudes is to find a stable standard of well-being when the standard is at least in part defined in terms of changing attitudes. This master class tackles this challenge head-on. The first session introduces subjective wellbeing theories, the second deals with change across worlds, and the third deals with change across times. Along the way, I will present an 'attitudinal matrix' framework that will help us see exactly what is at stake, which principles that can or cannot be combined, and what might be the best solution.

In the colloquium, I will apply some of the theories discussed in the class to transformative health states and medical interventions. These are states and interventions that will radically change the patient's attitudes. Here too we face the challenge from changing attitudes, since we want to know the value of the health state or intervention for someone who enters the state or undergoes the intervention.

Session 1: Subjective wellbeing

Friday, May 22, 13:00-15:00

Readings:

Bykvist, Krister. (2016) 'Preference-based views of wellbeing'. *The Oxford handbook of well-being and public policy*. Matthew D. Adler, Marc Fleurbaey, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 321-346.

Lin, Eden. (2022) 'Two Kinds of Desire Theory of Well-Being'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 46: 55-86.

Sobel, David & Wall, Steven. (2025) 'The Subjective/Objective Distinction in Well-Being'. *Ethics* (3): 519-544.

Colloquium: Transformative health states and interventions

Friday, May 22, 15:30-17:30

Optional reading:

Bykvist, Krister (2024). 'Can we compare health states when our standards change?' *Philosophical Studies* 181 (12): 3303-3319.

Session 2: Change across worlds

Saturday, May 23, 10:00-12:00

Readings:

Bricker, Philip. (1980) 'Prudence'. *Journal of Philosophy* 77: 381-401.

Bykvist, Krister. (2010) 'Can unstable preferences provide a stable standard of well-being?' *Economics and Philosophy* 26 (1):1-26.

Pettigrew, Richard (2019) Ch. 15 in *Choosing for Changing Selves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paul, Laurie (2014). Chs. 1 and 3 in *Transformative Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Session 3: Change across time

Saturday, May 23, 13:00-15:00

Readings:

Adler, Matthew D. (2025) Ch. 2 (especially 2.2 and 2.3) in *Risk, Death, and Well-Being: The Ethical Foundations of Fatality Risk Regulation*, Population-Level Bioethics (New York, NY).

Bykvist, Krister (2024). 'Wellbeing and Changing Attitudes Across Time'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 27 (3): 429-443.

Dorsey, Dale (2021). Ch. 8 in *A Theory of Prudence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Velleman, David. (1993). 'Well-Being and Time'. In *The Metaphysics of Death*, edited by Martin Fischer, 327-357.