

What is a Good Life?

When does someone's life go well? When does it go badly? Derek Parfit discusses three sorts answers to these questions:

1. Preference Hedonism: This is the view that the only thing that makes life good is happiness. So, the happier you are, the better your life is going; and the more unhappy you are, the worse your life is going.

Note 1: 'Happiness' is not being used as a synonym for 'pleasure' here. For instance, consider the masochist who sometimes enjoys pain, and sometimes prefers for others to give them pain. For the masochist, the painful state is the preferred internal, subjective state. I'll paraphrase this by saying that being in pain makes them *happy*.

Parfit's own example is that of Sigmund Freud who refused painkillers at the end of his life, preferring to be in intense pain (but able to think straight) rather than be in a state of euphoria (but with a dulled mind). On preference hedonism, being in pain with a clear mind was *better* for him, because it was his *preferred* internal state.

Note 2: For the hedonist, to be made happy or unhappy is always an internally DISCERNIBLE state. In other words, you can't be made happier without noticing it. So, your life can't go better or worse without any noticeable changes occurring from your point of view. In effect, "What you don't know can't hurt you!"

Objection: The Experience Machine & The Happy Life of Deception: As we have seen, if "What you don't know can't hurt you," then it is possible for you to be internally, subjectively happy without realizing that the source of all of your happiness is fabricated, or a deception. To most of us, this doesn't seem like a very good life. [*What do you think? Is it possible to be living a bad life without even realizing it?*]

2. Desire-Satisfaction: A competing view is that, the more of your desires that are fulfilled, the better your life is—and the more that go unfulfilled, the worse your life is.

Avoids the Objection: On this account, The Happy Life of Deception would NOT be very good. This is because, one of your desires is (presumably) NOT to be deceived by others. If this desire is very strong, then a happy but deceived life would actually be quite bad on this view, where "What you don't know CAN hurt you"!

Unfortunately, this feature gets the Desire Satisfaction view into other sorts of trouble:

(a) **Being Made Worse Off Without Knowing It:** Consider the following case:

Stranger on a Train: You meet a stranger on a train. He tells you of his battle with a terminal illness, and that he is on his way to seek treatment. You form the desire that he survive. You part ways and never see him again. The stranger dies, though you never find out about this. As a result, your life is a little bit worse than it would have been.

Parfit: It is absurd to say that the stranger's death make your life worse. [*Do you agree?*]

Reply: Perhaps the proposal could be modified. Rather than the "unrestricted" version stated above, perhaps one's life only goes better (or worse) when **desires about one's SELF** are fulfilled (or unfulfilled)? (Parfit calls this modification "Success Theory".)

[Now, you *might* try to be sneaky and say, "Well, what if I form the desire about myself that I hope to be someone who lives in a world where the stranger on the train survives his illness. So, the stranger's death has still made me worse off." But, as Parfit points out, the stranger's death hasn't really brought about a change in YOU, or any YOUR actual properties. (In short, the modification is meant to exclude what are called mere "Cambridge changes".)]

(b) **Being Made Worse Off Without Knowing It, Take Two:** But even with the above modification, we can still devise similar cases that give rise to the same worry. Consider:

Bad Stranded Parent: You have the following strong desire about yourself: You desire to be a good parent. You have children, and do your best to instill in them the sorts of values that will help them to become good people, but are stranded on a remote island shortly after they move out of the house. Unbeknownst to you, your children become sadistic criminals, and they blame your parenting for their own bad choices. Though you will never find out about this, it makes your life much worse.

It is absurd to say that your children's failures make your life worse. [*Do you agree?*]

(c) **Posthumous Harms:** It gets even worse. Consider:

Bad Dead Parent: Same as above, but rather than being stranded, you die shortly after your children move out of the house. Once again, they become sadistic criminals, and they blame your parenting for their own bad choices. Though you are dead, this makes your life much worse.

Again, says Parfit, it is absurd to say that one's life could be made better or worse after they are dead. (Assume that you cease to exist when you die.) [*Do you agree?*]

[Brainstorm: Is Parfit correct? Consider someone like Thomas Jefferson, whose legacy is being slowly marred and eroded as people come to think of him more and more as a slave-owner and (very likely) a rapist, rather than a founder of modern democracy. Or, imagine that you yourself came to be universally despised by society after your death—perhaps even unjustly so—though at death, you were a beloved hero. Is it plausible that these events after your death retroactively make your life have been a worse life?]

(d) **Absurd Scenarios:** Consider this case:

Addiction: Imagine that I inject you with an incredibly addictive substance at a very early age. The substance is not even pleasurable. It merely causes you to have a very strong desire every day to inject more of this substance. But I also give you a lifetime supply of the substance, so that you are able to keep fulfilling this desire all your life.

According to the Desire-Satisfaction Theory, I have made your life WAY better by doing this to you. But, Parfit says, this is clearly false. [*Do you agree?*]

Reply: Global vs. Local Desires: But, if I were to somehow step outside of my situation of addiction, and survey my life from a bird's eye perspective, and compare it to all of my other possible lives, from THAT position I would have a strong desire to live some other life where I was not addicted. So, in a sense, the Addiction scenario does NOT fulfill my desires, and is therefore I am NOT living my best life. Call this the "**Global**" version of the Desire Satisfaction view.

Objections to BOTH Views:

(e) **A Variant Of The Repugnant Conclusion:** Compare the following two lives:

Short But Happy Life: You live for 80 incredibly happy years, feeling always completely fulfilled. (Say, 100 hedons per year, for a total of 8,000 hedons)

Long But Barely Good Life: You live for 100,000 years, just barely happy—one thousandth as happy as in the case above. The most pleasurable food is mashed potatoes with no toppings (not even salt). The most pleasurable music is elevator music. And so on. At any given time, you just BARELY find life to be preferable to non-existence. (In the end, we get: $100,000 \times 0.1 \text{ hedons/year} = 10,000 \text{ hedons}$)

Most would say that the first life is better. But, note that the second life contains more happiness. Let us also stipulate that more desires are fulfilled. It follows that, on both Hedonism AND Desire Satisfaction, the second life is better (which seems false).

[Note: This is a variant of what is known as '**The Repugnant Conclusion**', or the conclusion that, according to Hedonism, a world with trillions of people with lives barely worth living is better than a world with billions of very happy people—a supposedly absurd implication of the hedonist's view.]

Reply: Note that a **global** version of either Hedonism or Desire Satisfaction could avoid this objection. If you were able to compare the two lives above, and you more strongly preferred or desired the Short But Happy Life, then that is the one that is better.

(f) **Misplaced Subjective Preferences/Desires:** Both Hedonism and Desire Satisfaction are SUBJECTIVE views of well-being. That is, whether or not your life is going well is determined by what YOU prefer, or what YOU desire. But, to many of us, it seems like we can prefer or desire things that do NOT actually make our lives better. Consider:

Grass Counter: The Grass Counter loves counting blades of grass. This is what makes him happiest. When presented with all of the various lives he could possibly lead, he STILL chooses the one where he sits in his lawn all day, counting grass blades.

[Or consider Susan Wolf's "**The Blob**" who is happiest just sitting on the couch all day, drinking beer, eating potato chips, and watching sitcoms. Or **Sisyphus**, condemned to roll a boulder up and down a hill for eternity, but imagine that he loves it and there's nothing else he'd rather be doing.]

Is the Grass Counter (or The Blob, or Happy Sisyphus) living his best life? To many of us, it will seem like the answer is "No". Their lives are pointless. Though he might BELIEVE that their lives are very good, we might say, "He doesn't know what's good for him." And yet, both Hedonism and Desire Satisfaction entail that he is living his best life.

If you're still not convinced, then consider that sometimes people desire things (or are made happy by things) that seems positively BAD!

Sadist: The Sadist loves causing as much pain as possible to others around him. He abducts people, tortures them, and so on. When presented with all of the various lives he could possibly lead, he STILL most strongly prefers or desires the one where he hurts people as often as possible.

Is the Sadist living his best life? Both Hedonism and Desire Satisfaction say “Yes”. But, surely the answer is “No”! [*Do you agree?*]

Why is the answer “No”? Well, it seems like the Sadist’s desires (and the Grass Counter’s) are *mis-placed*, or *inappropriate*. It seems like, what the Sadist OUGHT to desire is *helping* others rather than *hurting* them. It would be BETTER for him if his desires weren’t so sick and twisted. (And if the Grass Counter’s weren’t so pointless.) As Parfit writes (summarizing Sidgwick’s view), “what is ultimately good for someone is what this person would desire **if his desires were in harmony with reason.**”

But, once we’ve admitted that people’s preferences or desires do NOT determine how well their lives are going, we’ve abandoned a subjective view for an objective one.

3. Objective List: On this view, there are things that are good, and therefore make life better when we have them (and a list of things that make life worse), INDEPENDENT of whether or not we prefer them, or desire them, or are made happy by them. E.g.,

Good-Making

Being morally good
Acquiring knowledge
Recognizing beauty
Etc.

Bad-Making

Being morally bad
Being betrayed or deceived
Being deprived of liberty
Etc.

In Parfit’s words,

“The good things might include moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one’s abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty. The bad things might include being betrayed, manipulated, slandered, deceived, being deprived of liberty or dignity, and enjoying either sadistic pleasure, or aesthetic pleasure in what is in fact ugly.”

The Grass Counter and the Sadist lack good lives because they lack all of the features that make life good! [*Note: It’s true that they’re both happy, and happiness might turn out to be ONE of the good-making features of a life—but not the ONLY good feature of it.*]

[*Maybe you’re thinking: But on a Global Desire Satisfaction view, maybe the Grass Counter WOULD choose to live a life where he desires other more meaningful things besides counting blades of grass – if only he could step outside himself and view the possibilities from a bird’s eye view. And so, we can achieve the conclusion that the Grass Counter is NOT living his best life, WITHOUT adopting this objective view. But note: Even if that were true, the REASON that a life pursuing knowledge, helping others, achieving*

virtue, appreciating beauty, etc., would be better would merely be because he personally would DESIRE this sort of life from the global perspective. That life would be good BECAUSE he desires it. Parfit says, No, it's the other way around: He would desire it BECAUSE it is good. And this is only the case on the objective view.]

Objection: What if we took the Grass Counter and convinced him to acquire knowledge, cultivate moral virtue, and recognize beauty, and so on—and he hated every moment of it? What if he spent the whole time wishing he'd have stayed in his yard, counting grass? Is he living his “best” life now—or at least a *better* one? (Even if unhappiness is an objectively bad-making feature of a life, assume that the Grass Counter has so many other objectively good things, that the Objective List view entails that his life is still on the whole better than if he had remained counting grass.) That seems implausible.

(Note that this is how the Hedonist often objects to proposals for other intrinsic goods besides happiness. They might say, “You think love is an intrinsic good? And life? And knowledge? But, what if you had love, or life, or knowledge, but they gave you no joy or happiness whatsoever? Would it still be good to have those things??? No! The only reason you THINK those things are good is because they're often accompanied by happiness.” Here, we're asking whether the Grass Counter would actually be living a good life if he had all of the things on the Objective List, but wasn't happy. And, again, the answer seems to be “No”.)

4. Parfit's Hybrid Proposal: The original Grass Counter is happy, but mistaken about what sorts of things are good. In the variant where we convince him to seek out the truly good things, he's correct about what things are good, but he's unhappy.

Both views seemed to have only one piece of the puzzle. What would be best for the Grass Counter is if his life was filled with the objective goods, AND those things made him very happy. For this reason, Parfit recommends a hybrid account of well-being, writing, “what is good ... for someone is to have knowledge, to be engaged in rational activity, to experience mutual love, and to be aware of beauty, *while strongly wanting just these things.*” (emphasis mine)

[Note that Nozick essentially said the same thing, when writing about the Experience Machine. He says, “What we want, in short, is a life and a self *that happiness is a fitting response to*—and then to give it that response.” (emphasis mine)]

So, ultimately, to live his best possible life, the Grass Counter (and the Sadist) ought to work to try to modify his preferences to be directed toward the objective goods, while also pursuing those goods. [*Do you agree?*]