What is a Good Life?

When does someone’s life go well? When does it go badly? Derek Parfit discusses three sorts of theories that suggest the answers to these questions:

1. **Desire-Satisfaction**: One proposal 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.

But, this proposal has some counter-intuitive implications:

(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 thinks that this is clearly absurd. Clearly this person’s death does not make your life go 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 (Again)?** The modification doesn’t seem to solve the problem. For, we can devise similar cases that still give rise to it. 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. Unknown 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.

Again, Parfit thinks it is absurd to say that your life is made worse by your children’s failures.

(c) **Posthumous Harms**: Even worse, the Desire-Satisfaction views do not say WHEN the desire-fulfillment can or cannot affect your welfare. So, cases like the following could be a problem.
**Bad Dead 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 die shortly after your children move out of the house. Your children become sadistic criminals, and they blame your parenting for their own bad choices. Though you are dead, this makes your life much worse.

Again, Parfit thinks that it would be absurd to say that one’s life could be made better or worse after they are dead.

(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, even though you’d died a hero. Is it plausible that these events after your death retroactively make your life have been a worse life?)

(d) **Bad or Unwanted Desires:** Sometimes a desire-fulfilled life seems positively BAD! Consider:

**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: Perhaps the best life is not merely the one where the greatest quantity of desires are fulfilled. For, there are many other lives that I could have led instead of this one—and in some of those, I might have just as much desire-fulfillment as I do in Addiction, but WITHOUT being addicted to any drug.

Proposal: So, perhaps the BEST life is the one that I would desire to live, were I able to survey all of the various possible lives that I could lead. (Parfit calls this the “Global” version of the Desire-Fulfillment view.) For instance, even if addicting me to the drug in Addiction causes me to have MORE desires fulfilled—nevertheless, if I could COMPARE the life where I am addicted (and a greater quantity of desires are fulfilled in total) with the life where I am NOT addicted (and a fewer total quantity of desires are fulfilled), I’d desire the second life to the first. Therefore, addicting me to the drug in the case above does NOT actually make my life go better.

Conclusion: So, maybe the proposal can avoid objections (a) and (d). But, they’re still left with problems (b) and (c). The problem there seems to be that people’s lives can be made better or worse off without them knowing it—indeed, without them even being ALIVE! But perhaps you prefer to say that “What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” In that case, you might like Hedonism.
2. Preference Hedonism: This is the view that the only thing that is intrinsically 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. We might say that they are happier being in pain. (The preference hedonist would say that it is at least sometimes BETTER for this sort of person to be in pain because they PREFER it.) 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 be able to think straight) rather than be in a state of euphoria (but with a dulled mind). On the present view, this was better for him.

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. Therefore, hedonism doesn’t allow for problems (a), (b), or (c). “What you don’t know can’t hurt you!”

(e) A Version of the Repugnant Conclusion: Still, hedonism is open to an objection very much like (d), the case of Addiction. Compare the following two lives:

**Short But Happy Life:** You live to be 80 years old, but spend it incredibly happy, feeling always completely fulfilled. (Say 80 x 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 x 0.1 hedons/year = 10,000 hedons)

According to Hedonism, the long but barely good life is BETTER than the short but happy life, because it has more happiness in it. But, Parfit says, this seems clearly false. \[\text{Do you agree?}\]

[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 view.]

Reply: A global version of Hedonism could avoid this worry. If you were able to compare the two lives above, and you preferred the Short But Happy Life, then that is the one that is better.

(f) Happiness Derived From the Wrong Things: Still, Hedonism seems to have some other counter-intuitive implications. Consider this case:
**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.]

Even a global version of Hedonism still says that this person is living their BEST life. Parfit thinks that this is absurd. [Do you agree?] It might help to consider another example:

**Sadist:** The Sadist 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 chooses the one where he hurts people as often as possible.

Again, according to Hedonism, the Sadist is living his BEST life. But, surely this is mistaken?

**3. Objective List:** Intuitively, the Sadist is made happy by the WRONG SORTS OF THINGS! Of the Grass Counter, it seems intuitively correct to say that he simply doesn’t seem to know what’s best for him! If that seems correct, then the implication is that there ARE some things that it WOULD be appropriate to prefer, or be made happy by.

Enter the Objective List view of well-being. On this view, there are a host of things that automatically 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.

For instance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good-Making</th>
<th>Bad-Making</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being morally good</td>
<td>Being morally bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring knowledge</td>
<td>Being betrayed or deceived</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing beauty</td>
<td>Being deprived of liberty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td>Etc.</td>
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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 don’t have good lives because they lack all of the good-making features of a life! [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.]
Objection: But, then, in theory, someone could lead the “best” life, but be miserable the whole time. Like, 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?

According to the Objective List view, his life is nevertheless BETTER now. (Even if unhappiness is an objectively bad-making feature of a life, assume that he has so many other objectively good things, that his life is still on the whole better than if he had remained counting grass.)

That seems counter-intuitive.

4. Parfit’s Hybrid Proposal: The Grass Counter in the original version seems 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 seems to have the correct views about what things are good, but he’s missing happiness.

Parfit therefore proposes that the BEST life is one where one has the things that are objectively good AND one is made happy by exactly those things!

He says, “We might claim ... that 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.”

So, ultimately, to live the best possible life, the Grass Counter (and the Sadist) ought to seek out the truly good things, while ALSO working to modify his own preferences to be directed TOWARD those things. [Do you agree?]