

# What makes a good life?

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Parfit begins with this question:

‘What would be best for someone, or would be most in this persons interests, or would make this persons life go, for him, as well as possible?’

Parfit considers three main answers to this question.

## 1 Hedonist theories

One kind of answer is one we have already discussed: the hedonist view that one’s life goes better if it is more pleasurable (and less painful).

Parfit distinguishes between two different kinds of hedonist theory.

According to *narrow hedonism*, pleasure and pain are distinctive kinds of sensations, and one’s life goes better if it contains more of the first and less of the second. Parfit dismisses this view:

‘Compare the pleasures of satisfying an intense thirst or lust, listening to music, solving an intellectual problem, reading a tragedy, and knowing that ones child is happy. These various experiences do not contain any distinctive common quality.’

In its place he suggests *preference hedonism*. On this view, one’s life goes better if it contains more experiences of the kind that one desires. The greatness of a pleasure, on this view, is proportional to the strength of one’s desire to have that experience.

## 2 Desire fulfillment theories

A second kind of approach says that one's life goes well to the extent that one's desires are fulfilled.

This might seem like it is just the same as preference hedonism. But it isn't:

'The Success Theory appeals to all of our preferences about our own lives. A Preference-Hedonist appeals only to preferences about those features of our lives that are introspectively discernible. Suppose that I strongly want not to be deceived by other people. On Preference-Hedonism it will be better for me if I believe that I am not being deceived. It will be irrelevant if my belief is false, since this makes no difference to my state of mind. On the Success Theory, it will be worse for me if my belief is false.'

A natural question is: which desires? The simplest answer is: any of them. Parfit rejects this unrestricted theory:

'Suppose that I meet a stranger who has what is believed to be a fatal disease. My sympathy is aroused, and I strongly want this stranger to be cured. We never meet again. Later, unknown to me, this stranger is cured. On the Unrestricted Desire-Fulfillment Theory, this event is good for me, and makes my life go better. This is not plausible. We should reject this theory.'

Instead, Parfit suggests that we consider only desires about one's own life. This is what he calls the *success theory*.

It is worth noting that the success theory can count as relevant desires which are about one's life but which are not narrowly self-interested. Parfit discusses the example of desiring to be a good parent:

'Suppose that I try to give my children a good start in life. I try to give them the right education, good habits, and psychological strength. Once again, I am now an exile, and I shall never be able to learn what happens to my children. Suppose that, unknown to me, my childrens lives go badly. One finds that the education that I gave him makes him unemployable, another has a mental breakdown, another becomes a petty thief. If my childrens lives fail in these ways, and these failures are in part the result of mistakes I made as their parent, these failures in my childrens lives would be judged on the Success Theory to be bad for me. One of my strongest desires was to be a successful parent. What is now happening to my children, though it is unknown to me, shows that this desire is not fulfilled.'

For similar reasons, on the success theory, one's life can go better or worse depending on what happens after one is dead. Using the example of one's children, Parfit says that it makes little difference whether the results of one's parenting happen before or after one is dead.

### 3 Questions about subjective theories

Both of the kinds of theories we have discussed so far are *subjective*, in the sense that they explain the goodness of one's life in terms of mental states of the individual in question — pleasures in the first case, and desire fulfillment in the second. Parfit raises two kinds of questions about theories of this kind.

#### 3.1 *Actual vs. local desires*

Both preference hedonism and success theories give desires a big role to play in explaining well-being. So far we have just been appealing the desires that people actually have. but Parfit argues that this is a mistake:

‘Return to my choice between going to a party or staying at home to read King Lear. Suppose that, knowing what both alternatives would be like, I choose to stay at home. And suppose that I never later regret this choice. On one theory, this shows that staying at home to read King Lear gave me a better evening. This is a mistake. It might be true that, if I had chosen to go to the party, I would never have regretted that choice. According to this theory, this would have shown that going to the party gave me a better evening. This theory thus implies that each alternative would have been better than the other. Since this theory implies such contradictions, it must be revised.

... Whether we appeal to Preference-Hedonism or the Success Theory, we should not appeal only to the desires or preferences that I actually have. We should also appeal to the desires and preferences that I would have had, in the various alternatives that were, at different times, open to me. One of these alternatives would be best for me if it is the one in which I would have the strongest desires and preferences fulfilled. This allows us to claim that some alternative life would have been better for me, even if throughout my actual life I am glad that I chose this life rather than this alternative.’

#### 3.2 *Summative vs. global theories*

A summative subjective theory decides how well a life goes by looking at all of someone's actual or hypothetical desires, taking account of their strength, and then adding them up.

A different kind of approach appeals only to what Parfit calls *global* preferences: preferences ‘about some part of ones life considered as a whole, or ... about ones whole life.’

Parfit argues against summative theories:

‘Consider this example. Knowing that you accept a Summative theory, I tell you that I am about to make your life go better. I shall inject you with an addictive drug. From now on, you will wake each morning with an extremely strong desire to have another injection of this drug. Having this desire will be in itself neither pleasant nor painful, but if the desire is not fulfilled within an hour it will then become very painful. This is no cause for concern, since I shall give you ample supplies of this drug. Every morning, you will be able at once to fulfill this desire. The injection, and its after-effects, would also be neither pleasant nor painful. You will spend the rest of your days as you do now.

What would the Summative Theories imply about this case? We can plausibly suppose that you would not welcome my proposal. You would prefer not to become addicted to this drug, even though I assure you that you will never lack supplies. We can also plausibly suppose that, if I go ahead, you will always regret that you became addicted to this drug. But it is likely that your initial desire not to become addicted, and your later regrets that you did, would not be as strong as the desires you have each morning for another injection. Given the facts as I described them, your reason to prefer not to become addicted would not be very strong. You might dislike the thought of being addicted to anything; and you would regret the minor inconvenience that would be involved in remembering always to carry with you sufficient supplies. But these desires might be far weaker than the desires you would have each morning for a fresh injection.’

How should the summative theorist respond? One option: discount desires you desire not to have. Reply: when I desire not to be in pain, this is a desire that I desire not to have. But it is still better for me if the desire is fulfilled.

A second problem for summative theories: an excellent life which lasts X years, and a much longer life which, at each moment, is barely worth living. Summative theories seem forced to say that the second life is better.

#### 4 Objective list theories

Both of these kinds of subjective theories are opposed by a third view of what makes someone’s life go best:

‘According to this theory, certain things are good or bad for people, whether or not these people would want to have the good things, or

to avoid the bad things. The good things might include moral goodness, rational activity, the development of ones 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.’

On this view, there just are certain goods — an ‘objective list’ of such goods — and one’s life is better if it contains the goods on the list.

Why might one prefer such a theory to one of the subjective theories? Parfit considers two examples:

‘Consider the man that Rawls imagined who wants to spend his life counting the numbers of blades of grass in different lawns. Suppose that this man knows that he could achieve great progress if instead he worked in some especially useful part of Applied Mathematics. Though he could achieve such significant results, he prefers to go on counting blades of grass. On the Success Theory, if we allow this theory to cover all imaginable cases, it could be better for this person if he counted his blades of grass rather than achieving great and useful mathematical results.

The counter-example might be more offensive. Suppose that what someone would most prefer, knowing the alternatives, is a life in which, without being detected, he causes as much pain as he can to other people. On the Success Theory, such a life would be what is best for this person.’

It does not seem that either of these people’s lives has gone especially well.

One might object to objective list theories as follows: no matter what things one puts on the objective list of goods, those do not make someone’s life go better unless that person enjoys (prefers) those things. Suppose, for example, that I have a great deal of knowledge, but that knowledge brings me no pleasure, and I do not desire to have it. Does it really make my life go best?

Parfit’s reply:

‘We might then claim that what is best for people is a composite. It is not just their being in the conscious states that they want to be in. Nor is it just their having knowledge, engaging in rational activity, being aware of true beauty, and the like. What is good for someone is neither just what Hedonists claim, nor just what is claimed by Objective List Theorists. We might believe that if we had either of these, without the other, what we had would have little or no value. We might claim, for example, that what is good or bad 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.’

Note that this can be seen as a development of the object list view, rather than as a hybrid view — it is just that enjoyment of what one does is one of the things on the objective list.

If we do go for a theory of this sort, this leaves us with the obvious question: which things are on the objective list?