

Well-Being & Time

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Theories of Well-Being

What makes a life go best? What does *well-being* consist in?

THEORIES OF WELL-BEING

1. *Hedonism*: Well-being solely consists in the presence of pleasure.
2. *Desire Satisfaction*: Well-being solely consists having your (intrinsic) desires satisfied.
3. *Objective List*: Well-being consists in having various things that are objectively good for you to have.

Problems with Hedonism. (1) What is pleasure, exactly? What do all pleasant experiences have in common? (2) The Experience Machine.

Both problems suggest moving to a *Desire Satisfaction Theory*. What unifies all pleasant experiences is that you desire to have them; what's missing in the Experience Machine is that your desires aren't actually satisfied.

Problems with (Actual) Desire Satisfaction. You can have *defective* desires (ill-informed desires, irrational desires, artificially aroused desires, poorly cultivated desires, base desires, pointless desires, etc.). Satisfying a defective desire doesn't enhance your well-being. Therefore, Actual Desire Satisfaction isn't right.

This problem suggest moving to a more nuanced version of the theory: *Ideal Desire Satisfaction*. Well-being solely consists in the satisfaction of the desires you would have if you were fully-informed, perfectly rational, and free of prejudice and bias.

Problems with Ideal Desire Satisfaction. (1) The problem of "*remote*" desires. (2) What's so special about the things I would want were I fully-informed, perfectly rational, etc. such that having those things contribute to my well-being?

These problems suggest moving to an *Objective List Theory*. My ideal desires track what's objectively valuable, and well-being consists in having those objectively valuable goods.

Problems with Objective List Theories. (1) What kinds of things are included on the list? And what unifies the things on the list? (2) Suppose *X* is on the list. On these views, having *X* would enhance my well-being even if I don't care about *X* (and even if I positively dislike it).

These problems suggest moving back to a more subjective view.

The Experience Machine. Suppose there's a machine that can simulate any experience — in fact, it can simulate an entire life. Let $L_{@}$ be your actual life as lived *outside the machine*; and let L_E be the Experience Machine simulation of your actual life. "From the inside," $L_{@}$ and L_E are entirely indistinguishable.

Premise 1: If *Hedonism* is true, then if two life-histories are identical in terms of their subjective experiences, you'd be exactly as well-off living the one as you would living the other.

Premise 2: In terms of subjective experience, $L_{@}$ and L_E are identical.

Premise 3: You wouldn't be exactly as well-off living life L_E as you would living life $L_{@}$ ($L_{@}$ is a better life for you than L_E).

Therefore, *Hedonism* is false.

Problem of "remote" desires: "Suppose I meet a stranger on a train. He tells me his story, and I form the desire that he succeed in his projects. We then part, and I never hear from him again. If he does in fact succeed, then my desire has been satisfied." [Kagan, p. 171] (The example is originally from Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*.)

Well-Being & Time

What's the relation between how well-off you are *at a moment* and how well-off you are *over time*.

Additivism. Your well-being over a period of time is the *sum* of your well-being at the moments that make up that period.

$$W(\langle t_1, \dots, t_n \rangle) = \sum_i w(t_i)$$

Consider two possible lives: the Up-Hill Life and the Down-Hill Life. Doesn't it seem like the former is better than the later?

TWO POLITICAL CAREERS. A given man may achieve political power and, once in power, do things of great value, after having been in the political wilderness throughout his earlier career. . . . By contrast, another man may have a meteoric success in youth, attaining the same office as the first man and also achieving much good; but then lose power, while still young, never to regain it.

Perhaps this is because your well-being at some moments contribute more to the total than others.

Weighted Additivism. Your well-being over a period of time is a *weighted sum* of your well-being at the moments that make up that period.

$$W(\langle t_1, \dots, t_n \rangle) = \sum_i \alpha_i \cdot w(t_i)$$

Velleman disagrees. Consider two lives, both of which start out bad and end up good. However, in the first life, the earlier misfortunes are what explain the later successes; whereas, in the second life, the later successes result from a lucky break.

Velleman's Claim: The value of an extended period of time depends on the overall order or structure of events — on what might be called their *narrative* or *dramatic* relations.

If this is right, then your well-being over a period of time *is not a function* of your well-being at the moments that constitute that period.

Questions:

1. Are there objective facts about the narrative structure of lives?
2. What if I don't care about my narrative? What if I have no beliefs about my life story?

"Is a good day just a day during which one is frequently well off? Is a good week just a week in which the good days outweigh the bad? Is a good life just a string of good years?" [Velleman, p. 48]

In particular, perhaps what happens to you later in life matters more than what happens earlier in life?

For Velleman, the value of a life is a *strongly irreducible second-order good*.