

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*.