

An Opinionated Guide to “What Makes Someone’s Life Go Best”

for Andrea Sauchelli (ed.), *Derek Parfit’s Reasons and Persons: An Introduction and Critical Inquiry* (Routledge)

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1. Introduction

In the opening pages of *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit lays out the basic normative and evaluative concepts that he will take for granted and in terms of which he will formulate many of his doctrines and arguments. These are the concepts of *having a reason* to do some act, of an act’s being what one *ought* to do, of an act’s being *morally wrong*, of an outcome’s being *good* or *bad*, and, finally, “of what is in someone’s *self-interest*, or what would be *best for this person*” (ix-x).¹ Parfit calls special attention to this last concept, thinking it necessary to say more about it. He does so in an appendix, “What Makes Someone’s Life Go Best,” a ten-page mini-essay that has taken on a life of its own quite apart from the body to which it is appended (493-502).

In that appendix – Appendix I – Parfit, among other things, introduces a tripartite taxonomy of theories of well-being that has since become the orthodox taxonomy in the field (493-494); argues that hedonist theories should take a certain distinctive form (493-494); identifies a problem for desire-fulfillment theories that still has no received solution (494); gives arguments for the theses that desire-fulfillment theorists should accept the possibility of posthumous benefit and harm (495) and that they should count only our global desires as being relevant to how well our lives go (496-99); and discusses, perhaps for the first time in the contemporary literature, the advantages of a so-called hybrid theory of well-being (501-502).

Appendix I appears to be the most influential and important of the appendices to *Reasons and Persons* (it also happens to be the longest).² The present essay serves as a critical guide to it. I will explain, elaborate, and evaluate most of its main theses and arguments. For those interested in studying an issue further, I will provide references to some relevant

¹ Bare page references are to the “Reprinted with further corrections 1987” edition of *Reasons and Persons*.

² It has been reprinted as a standalone essay (e.g., in Shafer-Landau 2012) and has its own Google Scholar entry.

literature. I hope to convey to readers the interest, importance, and richness of “What Makes Someone’s Life Go Best.”

Appendix I also deserves the label ‘seminal’. When *Reasons and Persons* appeared, the topic of what makes someone’s life go best, which is now usually referred to in contemporary ethics as the topic of *well-being*, was written on and studied by anglophone philosophers as a self-standing area of inquiry far less than it is today, when there are entire journals devoted to the topic.³ Parfit deserves some of the credit for the present robustness of this subfield of moral philosophy.

Theories of well-being, or of self-interest, answer the question of “What would be best for someone, or would be most in this person’s interests, or would make this person’s life go, for him, as well as possible” (493). This question, the philosophical question of well-being, can be clarified in several ways. In asking it, we are asking about a distinctive kind of evaluation, different from *moral* assessments, as when we wonder what kind of life is the morally best kind of life for someone to lead; and different from, for example, assessments of how *meaningful* some person’s life is. We are instead asking about self-interest, about benefit and harm, about personal welfare. It is a matter of continued controversy, however, just what we are asking when we ask the philosophical question of well-being. Though the appearance of Appendix I is motivated by the wish to shed light on the topic of self-interest, Parfit does not address this issue head-on. Like most philosophers of well-being, he relies on the particular ways he puts the issue in ordinary language. We can also use as a guide the claims about self-interest that Parfit finds intuitive, which help to reveal just what concept he is using.⁴

When Parfit wonders what makes someone’s life go best, the making relation that he is talking about here is not a causal relation. The purely philosophical question of well-being is not the partly empirical question of what *causes* people to be better or worse off. *House fires* generally cause people to be worse off; *access to clean water* generally causes people to be better off. They do this by causing other, distinct events that “make” – in a more direct way – people better or worse off. This more direct kind of making is what happens when the event in question is *intrinsically* good or bad for a person, or good or bad in itself. Access to clean water and house fires are of mere instrumental value and disvalue for people. So what

³ Such as the *International Journal of Wellbeing*.

⁴ For overviews of the controversies surrounding the issue of just what the philosophical question of well-being is, see Campbell 2016 and Lin forthcoming b.

things are *intrinsically* good or bad for people? That is precisely Parfit's question.⁵

Appendix I is divided into five unlabeled sections, the divisions being indicated simply with skipped lines. The first section (493-495) begins by introducing Parfit's now orthodox taxonomy of theories of well-being, on which there are three main kinds of theory: Hedonistic, Desire-Fulfillment, and Objective List.⁶ The section goes on primarily (i) to argue that hedonism should take a certain form, (ii) to explore the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, (iii) to argue that a certain breed of it – the Success Theory – is superior to an unadorned version of it, and (iv) to compare the Success Theory to a certain distinctive form of Hedonism, Preference-Hedonism.

The second and third sections address questions that arise for Preference-Hedonism and the Success Theory – and in fact for any kind of Desire-Fulfillment Theory. Should the preferences or desires that a person *actually* has be used to determine how well things go for them in counterfactual scenarios? The brief second section (495-496) argues 'No'. The third section (496-499) considers in some depth whether these theories should take a Summative or Global form, arguing in favor of the latter.

Section four (499-501) introduces the Objective List Theory and compares it with the Success Theory and, to a lesser extent, Preference-Hedonism. Parfit is here essentially exploring the debate, familiar to philosophers of well-being and among the most central debates in the field, over whether well-being is objective or subjective.

⁵ Just how we should understand and describe the evaluative notion that is the proper object of investigation in the philosophy of well-being (and axiology more generally), including even what vocabulary to use to characterize it, is a matter of continuing controversy in value theory. I here use 'intrinsic value' neutrally, as a placeholder for whatever notion is the proper object of study in axiology (cf. Hurka 2014: 69). For a recent overview of the relevant controversies, see Rønnow-Rasmussen 2015.

⁶ So long as each category is understood broadly, so that, for example, a Happiness Theory counts as Hedonistic, an Aim-Achievement Theory counts as a version of the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, and a Perfectionist Theory counts as a version of the Objective List Theory, this taxonomy seems close to exhaustive. It may exclude Value-Realization Theories, on which what would be best for someone is what would best realize their values; proponents of these views are often at pains to emphasize that one's values are not merely one's desires. For Happiness Theories, see Sumner 1996, ch. 6 (Sumner would not classify his own view as Hedonistic) and Feldman 2010, Pt. II (Feldman would classify his Happiness Theory as Hedonistic). For a theory that includes aim achievement, see Scanlon 1998. For a Perfectionist Theory, see Kraut 2009. For Value-Realization Theories, see Raibley 2010 and Dorsey 2012. Finally, for recent defenses of a Hedonistic Theory, see Crisp 2006; a Desire-Fulfillment Theory, see Heathwood 2005; and an Objective List Theory, see Rice 2013.

The fifth and final section (501-502) introduces a new category of theory of well-being, one that combines subjective and objective elements. This “composite” account is nowadays standardly referred to as the *Hybrid Theory* of well-being. Although Parfit refrains from committing to any particular theory of well-being, one suspects that he finds the Hybrid Theory most attractive.

Let’s now examine some of these issues more deeply. Since there is not space to give a thorough treatment of all of them, I will focus on what I take to be the most interesting issues and the topics that are less well trodden in the well-being literature.

2. Preference-Hedonism and the Theory of Pleasure and Pain

The first argument Parfit makes in the Appendix is an argument against a theory of well-being he calls *Narrow Hedonism*. Parfit objects not to this theory’s central evaluative claim – that what is most in a person’s interest is for their balance of pleasure over pain to be maximized, a claim made by any hedonist⁷ – but to its central metaphysical claim: its account of the nature of pleasure and pain. As Parfit unhelpfully formulates it, this is the view “that pleasure and pain are two distinctive kinds of experience” (493). Parfit appears to be talking about a theory of the nature of pleasure and pain that is sometimes called the *Distinctive Feeling Theory*. It was assumed by G.E. Moore (1903: §12) and has been defended recently by Ben Bramble (2013). According to it, pleasure and pain are single, uniform feelings or sensations, in the same category as the taste of cilantro, the feeling of nausea, or the smell of lilac. Parfit’s brief argument against this view, due initially to Sidgwick (1907: 127) and usually referred to now as the heterogeneity problem, is an argument from introspection: attending to one’s own phenomenology reveals that there simply is no single, distinctive feeling common in cases of, for example,

satisfying an intense thirst or lust, listening to music, solving an intellectual problem, reading a tragedy, and knowing that one’s child is happy. (493)⁸

Parfit believes that a more plausible theory of pleasure and pain appeals not to sensory feelings but attitudes, in particular desire:

⁷ The “adjusted” hedonistic theories put forward in Feldman 2004 violate this claim, but it is controversial whether these theories are genuine forms of hedonism.

⁸ Many philosophers endorse the heterogeneity objection (for references, see Heathwood 2007: 26, note 8). For recent replies to the heterogeneity objection, see Bramble (2013: 209-11) and Lin (forthcoming a). The Distinctive Feeling Theory should be distinguished from a similar view, the *Hedonic Tone Theory* (Broad 1930: 229-231, Kagan 1992: 172), which Parfit would also reject.

On the use of 'pain' which has rational and moral significance, all pains are when experienced unwanted, and a pain is worse or greater the more it is unwanted. (494)

Parfit is here advancing the view that *what makes* an experience a pain, or a painful experience, is nothing about its intrinsic nature but about the stance the subject takes towards the experience (and similarly for pleasure). This view avoids the implication that the "various experiences [listed above] contain any distinctive common quality" (494).⁹

But aren't some experiences *inherently* painful? Consider what it is like to step barefoot on a tack. Doesn't it seem to be part of the intrinsic nature of that experience that it hurts, or is painful? Parfit's theory of the nature of pleasure and pain must deny this. But some remarks later in the appendix, made for a different purpose, address this concern. There Parfit notes that

After taking certain kinds of drug, people claim that the quality of their sensations has not altered, but they no longer dislike these sensations. We would regard such drugs as effective analgesics. (501)

"This," he says,

suggests that the badness of a pain consists in its being disliked, and that it is not disliked because it is bad. (501)

If it suggests this, then, since a sensation's being painful seems sufficient for its being bad, it also suggests that the *painfulness* of a sensation consists in its being disliked – or unwanted while it is happening.¹⁰ Thus, if it appears to subjects that the painfulness of the sensation of stepping barefoot on a tack is intrinsic to this sensation, then this appearance may be an illusion. Perhaps it results from a kind of mental projection of one's intense dislike of the sensation onto a sensation that is, considered in itself, hedonically neutral.

Parfit uses his desire-based theory of pleasure and pain to introduce a version of hedonism that he sees as preferable to Narrow Hedonism; this is *Preference-Hedonism*. Preference-Hedonists agree that pleasurable

⁹ The view also helps Parfit later on in the Appendix. He relies on it without comment in arguing against a certain proposal for saving Summative Desire-Fulfillment Theories from his drug-addiction objection (see pp. 497-498). I explain Summative Theories and that objection in section 5 below.

¹⁰ Parfit does not here fuss over any possible differences between *disliked* sensations and *unwanted-when-experienced* sensations, but he does fuss over this in later work (Parfit 2011: ch. 2, §6). There he prefers a liking-based theory over a desire-based theory.

experiences, and these alone, are intrinsically good for us and painful experiences, and these alone, are intrinsically bad. But it replaces the Distinctive Feeling Theory of pleasure and pain with Parfit's preferred desire-based account. Narrow Hedonists presumably have to say that the sensations that are experienced under the influence of the drug Parfit describes above – sensations that their subjects don't at all mind or care to avoid – are nonetheless painful and bad, and make their lives worse. Preference-Hedonism, by contrast, avoids this counterintuitive implication.

3. The Unrestricted Desire-Fulfillment Theory and the Problem of Remote Desires

One of the most important arguments put forth in Appendix I takes only a few lines to present. It concerns the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, according to which "what would be best for someone is what, throughout his life, would best fulfil his desires" (493). The most straightforward Desire-Fulfillment Theory holds that *all* desires count – that the satisfaction of any desire is good in itself for a person and makes their life go better. This Parfit calls the *Unrestricted Desire-Fulfillment Theory*. Parfit finds this theory unacceptable on the basis of the case of "the stranger on the train."

Actually, no train is mentioned in the version of the case that appears in Appendix I. But Parfit is here reprising a case introduced earlier in *Reasons and Persons*, in Part Two. He used it first to give an example of a desire that is not conditional on its own persistence (151), and next to illustrate how changes in one's concerns do not require changes in what one believes worthy of concern (157). The original case begins, "Suppose that I meet some stranger on a train . . ." (151).¹¹ In the version in our appendix, the stranger

has what is believed to be a fatal disease. My sympathy is aroused, and I strongly want this stranger to be cured. 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. (494)

This simple counterexample illustrates a feature of desire-fulfillment theories not yet emphasized: that desire fulfillment requires no feelings of fulfillment. All that is required is that the object of the desire obtains.

¹¹ Parfit actually applies the case to issues of well-being before we reach Appendix I, in Appendix C (468).

In a book whose manuscript Parfit had seen while writing *Reasons and Persons*,¹² James Griffin put more abstractly what may be the same concern:

The breadth of the [desire] account, which is its attraction, is also its great flaw. . . . It allows my utility to be determined . . . by things that do not affect my life in any way at all. The trouble is that one's desires spread themselves so widely over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one's own well-being. (Griffin 1986: 16-17)

This, which I call "the problem of remote desires," has been explored in some depth since *Reasons and Persons*,¹³ but has, as yet, no received solution.

Parfit's own solution restricts the theory to count only desires that are about one's own life. Somewhat cryptically, Parfit calls the theory so-restricted the *Success Theory*. Since the desire that the stranger be cured is not a desire about Parfit's own life, the Success Theory delivers the desired result that the stranger's being cured is no benefit to Parfit. Incidentally, Preference-Hedonism delivers this result, too, since the stranger's being cured has no effect on Parfit's experiences.

Parfit admits that when the Success Theory "appeals only to desires that are about our own lives, it may be unclear what this excludes" (494). But some discussion, including several examples, help shed some light on how Parfit understands what it is for a desire to be about one's own life (494-95). Interestingly, Parfit maintains that desires whose fulfillment or frustration turns on what happens after one is dead can nonetheless count as desires about one's own life. This contrasts Parfit's Success Theory with a similar theory proposed in 1980 by Mark Carl Overvold. Like Parfit, Overvold offers a restricted version of the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, though in response to a different but related problem: the problem of self-sacrifice.¹⁴ Overvold's view counts only desires with this feature: they are for states of affairs that can obtain at some time only if the subject of the desire exists at that time (Overvold 1980: 10n). Though Overvold didn't craft the theory with this in mind, it delivers the desired result about the stranger on the train. And it does so without countenancing posthumous benefit and harm – as Overvold desired (Overvold 1980: 108).

¹² See footnote 25 on p. 532 in the first edition of *Reasons and Persons*. Griffin's then-forthcoming book was at that point entitled *Welfare* rather than *Well-Being*.

¹³ See, for example, Scanlon 1998 (113-123), Lukas 2010, Fletcher 2016 (§§ 2.3, 2.6), and Heathwood 2016 (141-42).

¹⁴ On the problem of self-sacrifice, see Overvold 1980, Rosati 2009, and Heathwood 2011.

Whether we understand the restriction in the Parfitian or the Overvoldian way, the resulting theory seems to suffer from convincing counterexamples. Consider, for instance, the desire that the team one roots for win. For many people, this desire is as strong as, and as important a part of their identity, as many desires that are about their own lives. When your team wins and this desire is fulfilled, this seems like a good thing in your life. But the Success Theory implies otherwise. Note that no Hedonistic Theory would exclude the pleasure taken in the victory of one's team; nor, it seems, should the Desire-Fulfillment Theory be restricted to exclude the corresponding desire fulfillments.¹⁵

4. Actual Preferences and Counterfactual Well-Being

In the brief second section of the appendix, Parfit raises an interesting and not-often-discussed question: "Should we appeal only to the desires and preferences that someone actually has?" (495). If we endorse some kind of desire-based theory of well-being, such as the Unrestricted Desire-Fulfillment Theory, the Success Theory, or Preference-Hedonism, and we are trying to decide how well off some actual person would be in an imagined counterfactual scenario, should we look to the desires the person *actually* has, or to the desires that they have in the counterfactual scenario?

A common way of thinking seems committed to holding that only one's actual preferences matter, but Parfit shows the mistake in this. Suppose you decide to stay home and read *King Lear* rather than go to a party; and suppose that, throughout your evening, you continue to be glad that, or to prefer that, you stayed home to read *King Lear* rather than go to the party (495-6). It is tempting to infer from this that you made the right choice – that staying home to read *King Lear* gave you the better evening. But this inference is fallacious, for it could still be that if you had gone to the party, you would have, throughout your evening, been glad that you went to the party rather than stayed home to read *King Lear*. The common way of thinking would then imply not only that staying home to read *King Lear* gave you the better evening but also the contradictory thought that going to the party would have given you a better evening.

Parfit thus claims that we should "appeal not only to my actual preferences, in the alternative I choose, but also to the preferences that I would have had if I had chosen otherwise" (496). In doing so, he makes it sound as if his answer to the question that animates this section is "both." But that appearance is misleading. For he is there saying that only in

¹⁵ I discuss this sort of counterexample in Heathwood 2016: 141.

making a *comparative* judgment between the actual course of events and some counterfactual course of events should the theory take into account both actual and counterfactual preferences. That is consistent with (and indeed explained by) the idea that to know how *absolutely* good one of these scenarios would be for the person, we look only at the preferences the person has within that scenario.

Though for a different purpose, Eden Lin (2019) helpfully distinguishes the two main options here for desire-based and other subjectivist theories: *Same World Subjectivism* (the approach Parfit favors), on which scenarios are evaluated according to the desires (or other favoring attitudes) that one has in that scenario, and *Actual World Subjectivism*, which evaluates all counterfactual scenarios using one's actual desires.¹⁶

The considerations Parfit discusses – concerning the choice to stay home and read *King Lear* or go out to a party – do indeed tell in favor of a Same-World rather than an Actual-World approach. But there are considerations that Parfit does not discuss that might attract one to an Actual-World approach. Consider

The Brand-New Life. An eccentric billionaire with an interesting drug offers you a Brand-New Life. You will be relocated to a new city – one that does not now appeal to you at all. You will be immersed in a new circle of friends – people with whom you now have no wish to associate. You will be given a new career – one you now have absolutely no interest in. You will never be allowed to return to your current home, to see your current friends or family again, or to pursue your current career and other projects. But you will be given a drug – a complacency pill¹⁷ – that will gradually cause you to want to be in your new city once you are there, to want to be associating with your new friends, and to want to be engaged in your new career. The drug will also cause your longings for your old life to diminish and eventually cease altogether. As it happens, the life you will lead if you decline the offer – your old life – has its ups and downs, and, although it is a fine life by any reasonable standard, has its share of unfulfilled desire. But owing to the effectiveness of the complacency pill, the

¹⁶ I defend a Same-World Subjectivist theory in Heathwood 2005, though, to distinguish it from idealized desire theories, I describe it as an “actualist” theory. A somewhat different Same-World approach – Global rather than Summative – is defended in Bykvist (2006).

¹⁷ As in Bricker (1980, pp. 398-400).

Brand-New Life on offer will fulfill far more of the desires you will come to have if you lead that life.¹⁸

Would it be in your best interest to accept the offer? Would you be foolish to decline this Brand-New Life?

I suspect that very few of us who think our lives at least minimally decent and feel at all attached to our friends, family, projects, and careers would even contemplate such an offer – even though we recognize that we would be turning down a life that would deliver far more of what we would want if we were to choose that life.

Though I wouldn't contemplate doing this either, I believe that the Same-World approach, which Parfit endorses, has the correct implication here: that I would benefit more, or would get a life that is more in my interest to get, if I were to choose the Brand-New Life. The Actual-World approach can give us the alternative answer that you will be better off remaining in your current life. That is because the Brand-New Life rates poorly when judged by the standards of your actual desires.

But the Actual-World approach is problematic, and not only for what it implies about the decision whether to stay home and read *King Lear* or go to the party. Suppose that I currently have no desire to try a certain sort of unfamiliar cuisine; I prefer to stick with my usual type of food, though it barely excites me. Suppose it's also true that if I were to try the unfamiliar cuisine, I would love it, devour it with gusto, and be very glad that I decided to try it. In other words, I would enjoy more desire fulfillment – because my newly acquired desires would be much more intense than my desires for my usual meal – than I would get by eating my usual meal. The Actual-World approach nevertheless implies, implausibly, that opting for my usual meal would be better for me.

The Actual-World approach also has the following bizarre – perhaps even incoherent – implication about the Brand-New Life: that if you don't in fact choose the Brand-New Life, we can say, correctly, that it would have been a worse life for you, but that if you do choose it, then we must say that it is better than the life you would have gotten (your old life) had you not chosen it. That is because, on the Same-World approach, if you do not choose the Brand-New Life, we judge it by the standards of your actual desires, but if you do choose the Brand-New Life, *it becomes your actual life*, and so we judge it by the standards of the desires that you have

¹⁸ The drug changes you gradually rather than abruptly to ensure that you will survive the changes, in case a psychological theory of personal identity is true (see Andrea Sauchelli's chapter in this volume).

in the Brand-New Life. This is similar to Parfit's objection, concerning *King Lear* and the party, that "This theory thus implies that each alternative would have been better than the other" (496).

I therefore agree with the Parfitian Same-World approach that I would be better off in the Brand-New Life, no matter what I end up choosing. I did say, however, that I wouldn't in fact choose this better life. Is this irrational?

Theories of self-interest have, on their own, no direct implications about rationality or reasons for action. But a theory of self-interest such as a Same-World version of the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, together with certain auxiliary principles of rationality, will imply that it would be irrational for me to decline the Brand-New Life. One such auxiliary principle is the central claim of what Parfit calls the Self-Interest Theory of rationality, one of the centerpieces of *Reasons and Persons*:

- (S1) For each person, there is one supremely rational ultimate aim: that his life go, for him, as well as possible. (4)

Parfit, however, spends Part II and some of Part III of *Reasons and Persons* explaining why he thinks that the Self-Interest Theory of rationality is false.¹⁹ This is welcome news to those of us who are prepared to say that the Brand-New Life is a better life. That's because, despite this, it does not seem that a refusal to choose the Brand-New Life is irrational. Just what might make this refusal rational is a question that will have to be left for another time.

5. Summative vs. Global Desire-Fulfillment Theories

The third section of Appendix I (496-499) concerns again an intramural dispute among desire-based theories of self-interest. Parfit argues that such theories should take a "Global" rather than a "Summative" form. *Summative* versions of the Success Theory count all of one's desires about one's own life; similarly, Summative versions of Preference-Hedonism count all of one's desires about one's present experiences. Each theory assigns, in proportion to the desire's strength, a positive value to the fulfillment of its favored kind of desire and a negative value to its frustration. Then, to determine how well a life goes overall, the theory simply sums the values of the fulfillments and frustrations that occur in the life (496). An Unrestricted Desire-Fulfillment Theory can also take this Summative form. On any Summative view, the intrinsic welfare value of

¹⁹ See the essays by Hedden and Sauchelli in this volume.

a person's life is derived from the values of all of the fulfillments and frustrations contained within it.²⁰

A *Global Desire-Fulfillment Theory*, by contrast,

appeals only to *global* rather than *local* desires and preferences. A preference is global if it is about some part of one's life considered as a whole, or is about one's whole life. (497)

Before we consider Parfit's arguments in favor of Global theories, we should be sure that we understand those theories. Unfortunately, Parfit's definition of 'global desire' is not very helpful. The first disjunct, on which a desire is global "if it is about some part of one's life considered as a whole," is especially obscure. Is Parfit saying that it is about some part of one's life-considered-as-a-whole (whatever that might mean), or is he saying that the *part* needs to be considered as a whole? The latter may seem the more natural interpretation, but, as we'll see below, it may conflict with some of the work to which Parfit wants to put the concept.

Nor is the second disjunct, on which a desire is global "if it is about one's whole life," unproblematic. The first paragraph in the front matter to *Reasons and Persons* begins, "SIXTEEN years ago, I travelled to Madrid with Gareth Evans. I hoped to become a philosopher." Is this hope a global desire? Few desires seem "bigger" than the desire to have a certain career, but not even this desire fits Parfit's second disjunct. The desire to become a philosopher isn't a desire about one's *whole* life.

But we can see by means of his examples the work Parfit wants the concept to do, and this may assist us in discerning its contours.

a. *The Drug Addiction Case*

One such example is the drug addiction case, put forth as a counterexample to Summative Theories.

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 fulfil this desire. The injection, and its after-effects,

²⁰ Summative Desire-Fulfillment Theories are defended in Heathwood 2005 and Heathwood 2006.

would also be neither pleasant nor painful. You will spend the rest of your days as you do now. (497)

Even if we had no concerns about side-effects or about the logistics of administering to the addiction, probably most of us would decline Parfit's offer. And if he injected us anyway, perhaps most of us would wish we didn't have this addiction, benign as it is. But advocates of Summative Desire-Fulfillment Theories cannot take refuge in these facts about our desires, because, Parfit notes, the negative value of these desire frustrations would be swamped by the positive values of the repeated daily desire fulfillments (497). Summative desire theories thus appear to imply that it would be in one's self-interest to accept Parfit's offer, and that, despite one's wish not to be addicted, it would be in one's self-interest to remain an addict.

But "Global Theories," Parfit claims, "give us the right answer in the case where I make you an addict," and thus save the Desire-Fulfillment approach. Global Theories

appeal only to someone's desires about some part of his life, considered as a whole, or about his whole life. . . . You would prefer not to become addicted, and you would later prefer to cease to be addicted. These are the only preferences to which the Global Theories appeal. They ignore your particular desires each morning for a fresh injection, since you have already considered these desires in forming your global preference.

This application of the concept of global desire shows that Parfit means that the relevant *part* of one's life is what should be considered as a whole. Parfit must here have in mind something like this. *Your being addicted to this drug* is a part of your life, and it is one that you can consider either piecemeal – as you might if you were to think of yesterday's desire for the drug, then today's, then tomorrow's, and so on – or as a whole – as you do when you consider the more general fact that you are addicted to this drug, and realize that you don't want to be addicted to it. Fair enough, but each morning, when you are desiring a fresh injection, would you not be considering that *injection* as a whole? Normally, you would be; you wouldn't be considering its elements piecemeal. Your injecting the drug on some morning would thus be a part of your life that you would be (and in any case certainly could be) considering as a whole. A Global Theory would consequently include such desires, and Parfit's solution would be undermined.

In the last sentence of the passage quoted above, Parfit suggests what seems to be a new and different definition of 'global desire': something along the lines of a desire that is not the object of a conflicting higher order desire. Depending on how this definition is clarified, it may be subject to

an objection that Parfit himself raises, an objection to the view that a desire can be ignored if it is a desire you prefer not to have (497-8). Rather than delve further into just how to understand 'global desire', let's allow Parfit to apply the concept as he wishes, in the ways that suit his needs. Even giving him that, his arguments in this section face interesting challenges.²¹

One problem is that the drug-addiction thought experiment itself may not bear scrutiny. It is, if you think about it, hard to imagine the case as described, and the case may in fact be metaphysically impossible. In particular, it is hard to imagine that a person might (i) have a very strong desire for a certain thing, (ii) be aware that the thing is occurring once it starts occurring, (iii) continue to want it to be occurring as it is occurring, yet (iv) experience no pleasure when it is occurring. But Parfit's case requires that this be possible. For each morning you (i) will have a very strong desire to be injected, (ii) will be aware that the injection is occurring once it is occurring, (iii) will continue to want it to be occurring as it is occurring, yet (iv) supposedly experience no pleasure during any of this. The idea that this is possible is in fact in tension with the desire-based theory of pleasure that Parfit endorses throughout the Appendix. According to this theory, "whatever someone wants or does not want to experience – however bizarre we find his desires – should be counted as being for this person truly pleasant or painful" (501).²² If so, then the experience of injecting the drug cannot fail to be pleasant, contrary to what Parfit's thought experiment stipulates.

This matters because if taking the drug is pleasurable, and being "addicted" to it is as benign as Parfit stipulates, it is, upon reflection, not very intuitive to think that it is bad to be in this way addicted. In fact, describing it as a case of addiction is simply inaccurate (hence the scare quotes above). "The defining features of addiction are significant distress or harm," according to a standard psychology textbook (Kalat 2016: 362). The same book also notes that a person qualifies as being addicted to something only if it "cause[s] serious trouble in [their] life" (Kalat 2016: 497). It is therefore simply false that the subject in Parfit's example suffers from addiction. Moreover, it is likely that attaching the label of 'addiction' to the case distorts our judgment about it, by causing us to assume that there must be something bad going on.

²¹ Yet another problem with, or at least another thing worth noting about, the appeal to global desires is that it is not clear how a Preference Hedonist would make use of the notion.

²² My own view is that this connection between pleasure and desire is true on only one sense of 'desire' (Heathwood forthcoming).

In fact, it is hard to see what bad is going on. If you would get pleasure from each injection, it seems impossible to distinguish what Parfit does to you in making you “addicted” to this drug than what a friend does to you in turning you on to, say, a new, in-no-way-unhealthy food that you love and come to crave each day – and are able to get each day (e.g., morning coffee, an apple a day). Being “addicted” to such things is bad only if you run out of supplies, which is already ruled out in Parfit’s example (cf. Heathwood forthcoming: §3b).

There is admittedly the following difference between Parfit’s case and the case of craving and getting coffee each morning or an apple each afternoon: in Parfit’s case, you want not to be addicted. Fair enough, but it is not clear why such a desire frustration (one of an intuitively irrational desire, given the above analysis of Parfit’s thought experiment) should trump the stronger daily desire fulfillments. It seems similar to a case in which a person, due perhaps to a severe religious upbringing, has a preference against certain innocent pleasures that they regularly receive. Of course the best option would be to rid oneself of the religiously induced aversion. But if that is not possible, the next best option is to enjoy the innocent pleasure and put up with the – by hypothesis weaker – global desire frustration.

Upon analysis, then, Parfit’s drug-addiction counterexample, rich and worthy of study as it is, does not seem to be successful.

b. The Single-Life Repugnant Conclusion

Parfit’s other main thought experiment in this subsection is also terrifically interesting. This is “the analogue, within one life, of the *Repugnant Conclusion*” (498). You could live one of two lives. In one – call it ‘(a)’ – you get “fifty years of life of an extremely high quality”; you “would be very happy, would achieve great things, do much good, and love and be loved by many people.” In the other – call it (z) – you would receive “an indefinite number of years that are barely worth living” (498). In later work, Parfit refers to a similar pair of lives as the “Century of Ecstasy” and the “Drab Eternity” (Parfit 1986: 160). Assuming a Desire-Fulfillment framework, this amounts to a choice between (a) a fifty-year life containing very many fulfillments of strong and important desires and few desire frustrations, and (z) an indefinitely long life containing occasional, very mild desire fulfillments and few desire frustrations. As Parfit puts it, (z) “would each day contain a few small pleasures” (498).

Parfit does “not believe that the second alternative would give [him] a better life” (498). But Summative Desire-Fulfillment Theories may seem to

imply otherwise. For however much benefit (a) contains, the amount contained in (z) can eventually surpass it, since each additional day adds value to it. Global Theories, by contrast, appear to get just the result Parfit wants, for Parfit has a global preference for (a) over (z).

In fact, however, it is not clear that Summative Theories imply that life (z) is better. For it depends on what Parfit's global desires are in (z). Summative Theories, recall, "appeal to *all* of someone's desires" (496, emphasis mine).²³ They thus count global as well as local desires. Almost as an afterthought to this subsection, Parfit, to bolster the judgment that (a) is a better life than (z), adds the detail that, "It is likely that, in both alternatives, I would globally prefer the first" (499).

This detail may help elicit the intuition that (a) is better, but it undercuts the other main premise in Parfit's argument: that Summative Theories imply that (z) is better. This is because, in addition to the fact that (z) would each day contain a few minor desire fulfillments, it now has, with this detail added, a continuous stream of global desire frustration. In (z), Parfit is continually wishing that he were leading life (a). Parfit never specifies the relative strengths and durations of the daily fulfillments and frustrations in (z) so described, but, given the ever-present global desire in (z) for life (a) and the modest size of (z)'s desire fulfillments, it seems likely that the disvalue of its frustrations would exceed the value of its fulfillments, thus making (z) negative in value overall. This would make it worse than (a) according to Summative Theories and would thus undermine Parfit's argument against them.

To give Parfit's argument a better chance of working, we can suppose that, in (z), Parfit does not have a global desire to be living (a) instead. Let's suppose that, in (z), he has no global desires at all; he lives in the moment, taking things one day at a time. This will deliver Parfit's intended result that Summative Theories imply that (z) is better than (a).

Is this a problem for Summative Theories? At first blush it may appear so, but upon scrutiny, arguably not. For there is a powerful and by now familiar sort of argument for the initially dubious conclusion that the drab, indefinitely long life (z) is better than the half-century of ecstasy (a). The argument begins by asking us to compare (a) to a certain other life, (b). (b) is twice as long as (a) and only slightly less good at each moment; let's say that it's about 95% as good at each moment. Or if that sounds too artificial, we can say instead that each day, or week, or year of (b) is about

²³ That is, all of someone's desires after any upstream filters – such as to restrictions to desires about one's life on the Success Theory or restrictions to desires about one's experiences on Preference Hedonism – have been applied.

95% as good as each day, week, or year of (a). Putting aside for the moment issues of global desires, which life is, intuitively, the better life to get? Obviously, life (b). Each year of (b) is almost as good as each year of (a), but there are twice as many of them in (b).

Next consider life (c), which stands to (b) as (b) stands to (a). (c) is a 200-year life, twice as long as life (b), and each year of (c) is almost as good as each year of (b). Which seems better to you and which would you rather have: a 100-year-long life in which you “would be very happy, would achieve great things, do much good, and love and be loved by many people,” (498) – all while wanting exactly these things – or a *very* similar life of almost as high a quality each year but in which you get to live twice as long? Again, the latter life, life (c), is clearly preferable.

Of course we can repeat this reasoning, and when we do, we will find that life (d) – twice as long as (c) and only slightly lower in quality – is better than life (c); we will find that life (e) is better than life (d); and so on, until we reach the claim that life (z) is better than its predecessor, life (y), a life half as long as (z) but only slightly higher in average annual quality. Finally, because the relation of *being better than* is a transitive relation, it follows that life (z), contrary to initial appearances, is better than life (a).²⁴ The implication of Summative Theories about lives (a) and (z) can thus be shown via an independent argument to be the correct verdict after all.

Can Parfit appeal to global desires to block this line of reasoning? It seems not. In addition to each life in the sequence (after life (a)) being *intuitively better* than its predecessor, each is also (and surely not unrelatedly) a *more appealing* life to get. For these reasons, it would be very odd for someone to have a global preference for one of these lives over its successor in the series. So I assume that Parfit would in fact globally prefer (b) to (a), (c) to (b), and so on, eventually globally preferring (z) to (y). Once Parfit learns this about himself, then, since he is presumably not prone to blatant irrationality, he will reverse his initial global preference, and come to prefer (z) to (a). In this case, even his preferred Global Theory will imply that (z) would be a better life for him to get than would (a).

Suppose, however, that despite preferring (b) to (a), (c) to (b), (d) to (c), ... , and (z) to (y), Parfit digs in his heels and continues to prefer (a) to (z). Well, either his Global Theory will allow irrational sets of preferences such as this one to determine one's well-being, or it will not. If it allows it, then, since *better than* is transitive (even if Parfit's global preferences

²⁴ Although it seems undeniable that *better than* is transitive, this has been denied. E.g., by Temkin (1987) and Rachels (1998).

aren't), his feared result that (z) is better than (a) will remain. And all this view will have done is added the additional, contradictory result that (a) is also better than (z). This hardly seems like an improvement over the Summative Theory. If Parfit's Global theory *doesn't* allow intransitive preferences, and so requires preferences to be laundered, this will presumably wash away Parfit's recalcitrant preference for (a) over (z), and we will be back where we were a paragraph ago. It seems hard to avoid the (to some) repugnant conclusion that life (z) is better than life (a), and in any case the appeal to global desires does not appear to help in avoiding it.

If life (z) is, contrary perhaps to initial appearances, better than life (a), this raises the question of why things should have appeared to some as if life (a) is better. Though Parfit doesn't cite him, the single-life analogue of the repugnant conclusion was discussed generations before *Reasons and Persons* by J.M.E. McTaggart. Astonishingly, McTaggart even writes that "this conclusion" – one similar to the conclusion that (z) is better than (a) – "would . . . be repugnant to certain moralists" (McTaggart 1927: 453). McTaggart, for his part, accepted the conclusion that Parfit finds repugnant, and offered explanations for why this conclusion might appear false. "It must be remembered that men's choice in such cases is very much affected by their imagination," he said, adding that it is not easy to properly imagine enormously long durations of time. McTaggart also cited a bias that Parfit discusses extensively in Part II of *Reasons and Persons* – the bias towards the near – in explaining why people might prefer the shorter, worse life: "we are generally affected more than is reasonable by the present or the near future in comparison with the far future" (McTaggart 1927: 453).²⁵ It is curious that Parfit didn't think to consider whether his preference for (a) over (z) might be the result of a bias that he discusses extensively elsewhere in the book.

Parfit spends much more time on the Repugnant Conclusion proper than on its single-life analogue. (The Repugnant Conclusion proper is the claim that "For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living" (388).) Parfit would reject the sort of "continuum argument" presented above if applied to whole populations in an attempt to establish the Repugnant Conclusion proper. Interestingly, however, at least some

²⁵ We also might cite the idea that "we have no reason to trust anyone's intuitions about very large numbers" (Broome 2004: 57-9; see also Huemer 2008: 908-9) and the fact that we commonly make intuitive mistakes in the compounding of small quantities (Huemer 2008: 909-10; cf. the "mistakes in moral mathematics" Parfit discusses in §§27-8).

of Parfit's reasons for rejecting a continuum argument in that context don't carry over to the present context. In the context of the Repugnant Conclusion proper, Parfit would reject (or at least regard as dialectically illegitimate) the initial step, the one that claims that a world with a "population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life" is not as good as a world with twice as many people, all with a quality of life almost as good as in the first world. Parfit would reject this step in order to accommodate the view that it doesn't make things better when we make happy people (as we would if we move from the first to the second world above) but only when we make existing people happy.²⁶ But these reasons don't apply to the single-life case. There is at least some plausibility to the thought that "of the two ways of increasing the sum of happiness - making people happy, and making happy people - only the first" (394) is an improvement. But there is no plausibility to the thought that, of the two ways of increasing the sum of happiness in a single life - making some fixed number of years better, and adding on additional good years - only the first is an improvement. Parfit's main views about how one might block certain arguments for the Repugnant Conclusion proper thus don't make problems for the above argument for the single-life repugnant conclusion.

6. Objective vs. Subjective vs. Hybrid Theories

After considering these various controversies within Desire-Fulfillment Theory, Parfit turns to the more fundamental question of whether we should accept a subjective theory of self-interest in the first place. The main alternative is to accept the Objective List Theory, which holds that getting a good life is less a matter of how we regard or feel about the things we get in life (that is what subjectivists think is important) and more a matter of the nature of those things themselves. The good things in life on an Objective List Theory "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" (499).

About many philosophical topics, the main theories agree about most or all ordinary cases. This is true for our topic as well. Items that would appear on many Objective Lists tend to be just the sorts of things that people want in their lives and would enjoy getting. Thus, for most actual people, objective and subjective theories will agree on how well their lives are going (though of course they will give different explanations for why they are going as well or as badly as they are going). For this reason, to decide among theories, we often need to test them using cases that aren't found in the actual world. Thus Parfit says, "In choosing between these

²⁶ See the chapter in this volume by Melinda Roberts for more and related details.

theories, we must decide how much weight to give to imagined cases in which someone's fully informed preferences would be bizarre" (499). Parfit seems generally inclined to rely on such cases in deciding among theories (500). And that's probably a good thing: if we didn't so rely, it's not clear how else we would decide.

Classic objections to subjectivist theories are based on cases featuring certain sorts of intuitively defective desires. One such case involves an imagined life full of satisfied *pointless* desires, as illustrated by Rawls's grass counter (499-500; and see Rawls 1971: 432). Another such case involves an imagined life full of satisfied *immoral* desires (500). Many fair-minded people – perhaps including Parfit, though he never quite says so (500) – find it hard to accept that such lives are best for the people with these desires.

But, as a passage in the fifth and final section of the Appendix shows, there are arguments on the other side as well. Consider an Objective List Theory that "claims that what is good for someone is to have knowledge, to engage in rational activity, and to be aware of true beauty" (501). "Would these states of mind be good, if they brought no enjoyment, and if the person in these states of mind had not the slightest desire that they continue?" (501). Many fair-minded people – perhaps again including Parfit – find this hard to accept too. It is hard to accept that a life that leaves one completely cold can nonetheless be of great benefit to one. This argument is essentially appealing to an internalist doctrine about self-interest according to which, as Peter Railton put it in 1986, "what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware" (Railton 1986: 9).

We thus seem to have arguments against both main approaches – subjectivism and objectivism – that fair-minded people find compelling. This causes Parfit to wonder if *both* approaches might be wrong, because "each side . . . saw only half the truth" (502). Perhaps the best theory of what makes someone's life go best will combine objectivist and subjectivist elements. Perhaps

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 of value, or is good for someone, is to have both; to be engaged in these activities, and to be strongly wanting to be so engaged. (502)

This idea, which is now referred to as the Hybrid Theory of well-being, has been developed in recent years in different ways by a number of different philosophers.²⁷ Although it is not obvious that, as Parfit hopes, Hybrid Theories do sufficient justice to internalist intuitions about well-being,²⁸ it is a promising category of theory that deserves the increased attention that it has been getting.

* * * * *

Parfit never returned to explore in as much depth the question of what makes someone's life go best. The notion of well-being does feature prominently in some of his later work, most notably *On What Matters*, where he discusses at length the roles that well-being should play in morality and our reasons for action more generally. Although it is possible that which theory of well-being one endorses will affect the normative reasons that one thinks one's well-being provides for oneself and others, the question of what role well-being plays in these matters can be carried out to a large extent in abstraction from the question of which theory of well-being is true. Parfit's rich and fertile Appendix illustrates, however, that the question of what makes someone's life go best is worth exploring very much for its own sake.²⁹

²⁷ E.g., Robert Adams (1999: 93–101), Fred Feldman (2004: 119–22), Shelly Kagan (2009), and William Lauinger (2012). For more on Hybrid Theories (and a concept of them more capacious than the category of theory Parfit is delimiting here), see Woodard 2015.

²⁸ For an argument that they don't, see Heathwood 2010 (652–3).

²⁹ Thanks to Ben Eggleston, Brian Hedden, Eden Lin, Susanne Mantel, Andrea Sauchelli, and audiences at Saarland University and at the University of Colorado Boulder's Center for Values and Social Policy.

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