

Desire Satisfactionism and the Irrelevant Desires Problem

Desire Satisfactionism about well-being comes in two main varieties: unrestricted and restricted. Both varieties hold that a person's well-being is determined entirely by the satisfactions and frustrations of his desires. But while the restricted theories count only some of a person's desires as relevant to his well-being, perhaps just the fully-informed desires or those that would survive cognitive psychotherapy, the unrestricted theory counts all of his desires as relevant. On this theory it doesn't matter what a person wants or why he wants it; so long as he gets what he wants his life goes well. Because the unrestricted theory counts all desires as relevant it is vulnerable to a wide variety of counterexamples involving desires that seem obviously irrelevant. Derek Parfit offers a well-known example:

Suppose 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... Theory, this event is good for me, and makes my life go better. This is not plausible. We should reject this theory.¹

Similar examples have been offered by Thomas Scanlon, James Griffin, Shelly Kagan and others.² These examples all feature desires whose objects seem well beyond the bounds of what most people take to be relevant to well-being. Consider a few of my own desires, borrowed from the literature: I am a nice guy and so I want people in the 29th century to flourish. I am a fan of prime numbers and so I want the total number of atoms in the universe to be prime. I am interested in cosmic affairs and so I have a desire

¹ Parfit (1984), p. 494.

² Scanlon (1993) pp.186-87; Scanlon (1996) p.100; Scanlon (1998) pp. 120-121; Griffin (1986) pp.16-7; Kagan (1998) p. 37; Sumner (1996) p.132; Murphy (1999) p.269.

about the chemical composition of some distant star. I am a weirdo and so I want it to be the case that Napoleon's favorite color was blue. Are any of these desires relevant to my well-being? Would their satisfaction be good for me? Unrestricted desire satisfactionism entails that it would be good for me if they were satisfied. But obviously it wouldn't be; that's absurd. Or so say the objectors. This is the Irrelevant-Desires Problem.

In what follows I defend a simple unrestricted form of desire satisfactionism from the Irrelevant-Desires Problem. I begin by sketching the theory and outlining some of its theoretical advantages. Then I consider and reject a few flawed responses to the Irrelevant-Desires Problem. I next offer an obvious but widely overlooked response to the problem: I bite the bullet. I conclude with a few suggestions about how unrestricted desire satisfactionism might be reconciled with the kinds of hedonistic intuitions that I think lurk behind the Irrelevant-Desires Problem. My overall goal is modest; I want to dissuade those sympathetic to a desire-based approach to well-being from rejecting unrestricted desire satisfactionism simply because of the Irrelevant-Desires Problem. (There are of course other problems faced by unrestricted desire satisfactionism, but I will ignore those today.)

Formulating a Simple Unrestricted Desire Satisfactionism

The theory I aim to defend, Simple Unrestricted Desire Satisfactionism (SUDS), is a theory about what makes a life intrinsically good *for the person who lives it*. It is not about what makes a person's life good in some other sense. So it is not a theory about what makes a person's life instrumentally good or morally good or aesthetically good or intrinsically good. It is consistent with SUDS, then, that a person could live a life that is

intrinsically very good *for him* and yet a complete disaster for the world. Such a person might, for instance, enjoy a very high level of well-being owing to the fact that he has successfully managed to enslave everyone on earth for the sole purpose of enhancing his own welfare. His life might be harmful to others, full of morally reprehensible behavior, ugly, and it might diminish the intrinsic value of the world in which it occurs; but it might nevertheless be a very good life for him.

The basic idea behind SUDS is that well-being consists in achieving an optimal overall match between the way things are and the way we want them to be, whatever we may happen to want. On this view to advance well-being is to reconcile our actual desires with the world by getting what we actually want or wanting what we actually get. SUDS consists of the following three theses:

T1: Every desire satisfaction is intrinsically good for its subject; every desire frustration is intrinsically bad for its subject. (Satisfactions are of this form: S desires that p & p; frustrations, this form: S desires that p & ~p.)

T2: The intrinsic value of a desire satisfaction for its subject = the intensity of the desire satisfied; the intrinsic value of a desire frustration for its subject = – (the intensity of the desire frustrated).

T3: The intrinsic value of a life (or life-part) for the one who lives it = the sum of the intrinsic values of all the desire satisfactions and frustrations it contains.

There are several things to note about SUDS. First, satisfaction and frustration do not require any *feelings* of satisfaction or frustration. They require merely that what one wants is or isn't the case. Second, SUDS assigns value to wanting and getting, not merely getting. In other words, if the object of a person's desire occurs it is not the occurrence of this object that is intrinsically good for the person; rather, it is the occurrence of the state of affairs that consists in his desiring it *and* its occurrence. Thus SUDS does not entail,

for example, that the stranger's cure would be intrinsically good for Parfit. The good thing according to SUDS would be the cure together with Parfit's wanting it. Perhaps the most important thing to note about SUDS is that it places no restrictions on which desires are relevant to well-being. It says that *all* desire satisfactions are good for us and all frustrations are bad, no matter what the relevant desires happen to be about.

Theoretical Advantages of SUDS

The theoretical advantages of SUDS become obvious when we compare it to its archrival, Hedonism. Because Hedonism entails that well-being is determined entirely by how much pleasure and pain we experience, it is open to a host of well-known objections involving experience machines, deceived businessmen, and posthumous harm and benefits.³ Such objections play on the intuition that faring well in life is not simply a matter of enjoying oneself and avoiding unpleasantness. The main strength of a theory like SUDS is its ability to account straightforwardly for this very intuition. To see how SUDS shines here, consider the case of Thomas Nagel's deceived businessman. The man is happy because he believes himself to be getting two things he wants very much: the love of his family and the respect of his colleagues. But his happiness is built on a tissue of lies. He is surrounded by consummate actors who all merely pretend to love and respect him. In reality, no one loves him and no one respects him; indeed, his adulterous wife hates him; his children despise him, and his colleagues ridicule him behind his back. Nevertheless, due to the elaborate deception of those around him, the man's life is very pleasant. Hedonism entails that his life is outstandingly good for him and that the

³ See for example, Nagel (1970) p.76; Feinberg (1984) p.88; Kagan (1992) pp.169-89; Kagan (1994) pp.311-12; Nozick (1974) pp.42-5.

deception isn't bad for him. Many of us disagree with Hedonism's assessment of the case. We think the man would be better off if he were to get genuine love and respect. SUDS can explain this intuition: the problem here is that the man's desires for love and respect are all frustrated, and this harms him; it makes his life worse, even though it doesn't make his life less pleasant. Hedonism can offer no such easy explanation of what seems wrong with the man's life.

Advocates of SUDS can tell a similar story about Nozick's experience machine. Many of us believe that life on the machine, though perhaps enjoyable, would be intrinsically worse for the one who lives it than a relevantly similar genuine life, off the machine. Hedonists can offer no easy explanation of why the genuine life is better. For hedonists, as well as defenders of other so-called *mental state* theories of well-being, what matters is how life seems from this inside. And since, from the inside, life on the experience machine seems pretty good, these theories entail that it is. SUDS has a much easier time here. Most of us want to live genuine lives, here in the real world. We want to actually do things, not merely experience simulations. Life on the machine frustrates these desires, and so according to SUDS it is worse.

So one main advantage of SUDS is its breadth. Because our desires often range very broadly over the world, the theory can explain why it seems that there must be more to the Good Life than simply enjoying ourselves or having experiences of the right sort. When it comes to the things that matter most to us, we don't merely want to experience that things are thus-and-so; we want them to actually be thus-and-so. Most of us don't merely want to have the experiences typically associated with having loving families and

good friends; we want to actually have these things, as well as the associated experiences and pleasures.

But of course the breadth that makes SUDS attractive comes at a price: it commits us to saying that it would be good for Parfit if his desire about the stranger were satisfied and that it would be good for me if people in the 29th century flourish, if the total number of atoms in the universe is prime, and if Napoleon's favorite color was blue. So it appears that SUDS is stuck with the Irrelevant-Desires Problem.

Flawed Responses to the Irrelevant-Desires Problem

One obvious and popular response to the problem is to restrict which desires count. Derek Parfit offers a restricted version of desire satisfactionism in the form of his Success Theory, according to which a person's desires are relevant to his well-being only if they are “about his own life”. According to this view, Parfit's desire about the stranger would be irrelevant because it isn't about his own life; if anything it is about the stranger's. But it is not clear that the Success Theory will solve the Irrelevant-Desires Problem. To see this, suppose that after chatting with the stranger for a while Parfit had not formed a desire that the stranger be cured. Suppose instead that he had formed a desire about his own life, viz., the desire to live a life in a world where the stranger is cured. If this is Parfit's desire, then the Success Theory entails that it would indeed be good for him if the stranger is cured. But surely it is not enough to simply repackage the stranger's cure like this. Anyone who thinks Parfit's original desire was irrelevant must certainly think this new one is too. If SUDS has a problem with irrelevant desires, then surely the Success Theory does also.

Another way to restrict desire satisfactionism involves building in some kind of experience requirement. We could say, for instance, that a desire satisfaction is good for its subject only if the subject involved is aware that the desire is satisfied. Wayne Sumner suggests a theory along these lines.⁴ This sort of view would allow us to say that Parfit's desire about the stranger is irrelevant because Parfit will never know one way or the other whether the stranger is cured. But if we adopt Sumner's experience requirement we lose the ability to account for cases like that of the deceived businessman. If, as stipulated, the man is unable to distinguish genuine love and respect from the phony variety, then he will never be aware that he is getting the one kind rather than the other. And so even if the affections around him were genuine, he would not be aware of it; and therefore, according to the view under consideration, he would not be better off if he were to actually get the love and respect he wants. Thus the theory suggested by Sumner simply trades one problem for another. It may solve the Irrelevant-Desires problem but at the cost of sacrificing what's best about SUDS: its breadth.

Recently Chris Heathwood has suggested a kind of desire theory that might avoid the Irrelevant-Desires Problem. According to Heathwood's Subjective Desire Satisfactionism (SDS), the fundamental bearers of value are not satisfied and frustrated desires but *subjectively* satisfied and frustrated desires, i.e., desires that are believed by their subjects to be either satisfied or frustrated. According to SDS, if a person has a desire he benefits only if, at the same time he has the desire, he believes it is satisfied; and he is made worse off only if he believes it is frustrated. The desire need not actually be satisfied or frustrated. On this view getting what we want is irrelevant to well-being; what matters is that we believe we're getting it. According to SDS, then, the stranger's

⁴ See Sumner(1996)p. 127-28 and Sumner(2000)p. 9.

fate would be entirely irrelevant to Parfit's well-being since, we may suppose, Parfit never comes to believe that the stranger has been cured or that he hasn't.

Whatever the merits of SDS regarding the Irrelevant-Desires Problem, we should note that it lacks the breadth we're looking for in a genuine desire-theory. SDS is no better than Hedonism or Sumner's proposal at handling experience machines or cases such as Nagel's businessman. As stipulated, the businessman wants genuine love and respect, and he believes that he is getting it. According to SDS, therefore, he has nothing further to gain by actually getting what he wants. SDS has the result that there is nothing bad for him about being the pathetic chump that he is. Moreover, given the businessman's ignorance, the puppet masters in his life have no reason whatsoever to feel guilty about how they are treating him; for if SDS is true, they are not harming him. These are counterintuitive results that no self-respecting desire theorist should accept. Surely, even though he doesn't realize he is one, there is something bad for the businessman about being a cuckolded stooge.

Biting the Bullet for SUDS

The challenge for those sympathetic to a desire-based approach to well-being is to find a way to handle the Irrelevant-Desires Problem without giving up what's best about SUDS, viz., its breadth, its ability to account straightforwardly for the intuition that there is more to the Good Life than how it appears or feels from the inside. The best way to do this, I suggest, is to bite the bullet, embrace the absurdity and simply deny the intuition that some desires are irrelevant to well-being. But to make this position palatable, the defender of SUDS owes us an explanation; he needs to explain away the apparent

irrelevance of desires such as Parfit's desire about the stranger and my peculiar desires about Napoleon's favorite color and the number of atoms in the universe.

Let me offer such an explanation. I think it's fair to say that over the course of our lifetimes, moment-by-moment, each of us will have a huge number (millions? billions?) of often very intense desires. Many of these desires will be occurrent, such as my present desire to drink some beer; many will be so-called *dispositional* desires, lurking in the background. Many of our desires will be *local* desires, typically focused on mundane matters of immediate concern, such as my current desire to scratch my ear. Other desires will be so-called *global* desires, desires about ones entire life or large segments of ones life. I think my desire to live a life that is on balance more pleasant than painful counts as a global desire. In addition to the occurrent, dispositional, local and global desires, there are certainly other kinds of desire that we all typically have in abundance over the course of a lifetime. Collectively these many desires reveal what we hold important and they determine for each of us, uniquely, what makes life worth living. And I think it's pretty obvious that a person's desires will tend to cluster around those parts of his life that he takes to be most important. These are the parts of his life that play the biggest role in determining how well his life goes.

Presumably Roger Federer has far more tennis-related desires than I do. This reflects the fact that tennis is far more important to him than it is to me. Tennis is an important part of his life. And whether or not his many tennis-related desires are satisfied will in part determine, I think, how well his life goes. Tennis is not so important to me and so my desires tend to cluster around different things, like watching T.V. and drinking beer. But when it comes to the overall desiderative contents of our lives, I think that in

some obvious respects Federer and I are probably more similar than different. Surely the overwhelming majority of our desires, and the most intense among them, are exclusively parochial. They concern our own lives, matters directly involving our jobs and our families and friends, and from moment-to-moment they include myriad desires about our own sensory experiences and what's going on immediately around us. I want to stop feeling that itchiness on my ear, I want to continue breathing, I want my heart to keep pumping, and I want the room to be a little less stuffy, et cetera, et cetera. No doubt, as we speak, Federer has similar, mundane and parochial desires. Maybe he's in the middle of a match and perhaps he wants the string tension in his racket to be a bit tighter, maybe he wants that sun to stop shining in his eyes whenever he serves, and certainly he'd like to keep breathing, etc., etc.

But of course Federer and I are not special cases. When it comes to what they want, most people, most of the time, are almost exclusively focused on themselves. These self-focused desires form the dense core of a sphere of desires that extend outward, usually to include desires about things less directly related to our own moment-to-moment existence. These include desires about our friends, families, and careers. Sometimes the sphere of desires will extend to include desires about strangers. And sometimes it will extend even further, including desires with even more remote objects, like desires about the number of atoms in the universe.

Now if we imagine ourselves in Parfit's place, and we imagine ourselves with a desire like his about some diseased stranger, most of us will probably conclude that the stranger's cure, whether it happens or not, would have no bearing at all on our well-being. Perhaps his, but not ours. I think what's going on when we reach such a conclusion is

something like this. We realize that in the grand scheme of our own lives the stranger and his problems just aren't very important to us. The stranger is after all just a stranger; we spend a few minutes with him, and then he is gone. And because he plays such a small part in our lives, our concern for him takes the form of just one measly desire, the desire that he be cured. When compared with our many other concerns, revealed by all our self-focused, parochial desires about our own lives, and our own subjective experiences, our concern for the stranger pales in significance. At best, our solitary desire about him is near the remote edge of the sphere of desires that determine our most significant interests.

The sheer quantity and intensity of all the desires we have that are *not* about the stranger indicate that we care far more about ourselves, our own experiences, and things close to us than we do about the stranger. And since the satisfaction of our lone desire about the stranger would make no difference whatsoever to whether or not we get any of the many things we really care about (winning the French Open, a beer, an itch-free ear, a loving family, happiness) we are apt to conclude that his cure would really make no difference at all to our well-being. This is a natural conclusion to reach, but I think it is a mistake. At most, I think we are entitled to conclude that the stranger's cure would have just a negligible relevance to our overall well-being; after all, our desire about him is probably rather mild and just one amongst a vast universe of far more intense desires. That we should conclude his cure would have some relevance rather than none is, I think, justified given that we do after all care whether or not he is cured; his cure is a concern of ours, though I grant a very minor one. If it weren't, then we wouldn't even have just the one desire.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I'd like to address what I take to be one of the key intuitions held by opponents of SUDS: the idea that pleasure is intrinsically good for us and pain is bad. Like most people I want to enjoy myself. And I tend to want things that I believe will bring about some enjoyment. Indeed when I reflect upon the multifarious desires I have from day-to-day or moment-to-moment it seems that the overwhelming majority of them are in some way tied up with my own apparently ceaseless drive to enjoy myself and avoid pain. It is natural to infer, therefore, that my own welfare is in some important way determined by the extent to which I manage to enjoy myself. But in what does my welfare lie? In the achievement of what I want, which often happens to be enjoyment? Or in the enjoyment itself?

I confess that as a defender of SUDS, I find myself with what might appear to be some incompatible intuitions. On the one hand, I think that the basic building blocks of well-being are desire satisfactions; on the other, I can't deny the appeal of hedonism. I enjoy pleasure as much as anyone, and it seems to me that when I do I'm getting something that is intrinsically good for me. Thus I find myself with intuitions that draw me towards Hedonism and other intuitions that draw me towards SUDS. Let me finish up by outlining what I take to be a promising way to reconcile these battling intuitions.

One way to resolve the apparent conflict here is to establish that whenever we get pleasure we automatically get desire satisfaction. If something along these lines could be shown, we could then explain the apparent value of pleasure in terms of the desire satisfaction that necessarily accompanies it. If, for example, pleasure is ultimately *reducible* to desire satisfaction, then whenever someone enjoys himself, he necessarily

gets some thing, or things, he wants. If such a reduction were available, then the defender of SUDS could account for the apparent value of pleasure (and many, if not all, of our hedonic intuitions) in two ways. First, he could say that when someone wants to enjoy himself and does, then his desire for pleasure is satisfied and he thereby benefits by getting something he wants. Second, since pleasure is *reducible* to desire satisfaction, when a person experiences some pleasure, whether he wants the experience or not, he gets some desire satisfaction anyway since the experience itself entails desire satisfaction

Reductions of pleasure to satisfaction have been suggested by a number of philosophers. On one reading, Sidgwick suggests such a reduction in the form of what William Alston calls a 'motivational theory' of pleasure.⁵ Richard Brandt, Derek Parfitt, Tom Carson and others have suggested similar views.⁶ Recently, as part of an avowed program to reduce all types of pleasure to satisfaction, Chris Heathwood has argued for the reduction of just *sensory* pleasure.⁷ The basic idea behind such reductions is that the experience of pleasure itself involves the occurrence of events that one wants. This is not to say that one necessarily wants every pleasure one experiences. It is just to say that for an experience to count as a pleasure, it must involve the occurrence of at least something one wants -- what kind of thing this "something" actually is will vary depending on how the details of the reduction are fleshed out. But while some philosophers endorse such reductions, others argue against them. Not surprisingly, Fred Feldman, a prominent hedonist, argues that there is no interesting conceptual connection between pleasure and

⁵ See Sidgwick (1962) p. 131 and Alston (1967).pp. 344-46.

⁶ Brandt (1979)p. 38;Parfit(1984)p.493; Carson (2000)p. 13.

⁷ Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire," forthcoming.

desire.⁸ Of course the jury is still out on whether such a reduction of pleasure will ultimately succeed.

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⁸ Feldman, "Pleasure and Desire," unpublished.

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