

2. What is the most plausible account of what makes a person's life go well?

Since the dawn of human civilization, the human race has grappled unceasingly with what it means to live a good life. And for good reason, as it is unlikely, if ever, for humanity to discern a complete and accurate account of what makes a life go well due to the sheer variation in behaviour, cultures, and lifestyles that have managed to subsist within the human population. Consider for instance, the possible existence of the "best life". This would entail a means of existence which completely outranked all other conceivable ways of life, and thus be logically desired by every individual being. That is, each individual would direct their lives with the goal of attaining this very standard for themselves. Should this be the case with reality, we quickly realize this to be implausible, not only for it reduces the human experience to a simple formula of predictability, but also because society leans not towards this trajectory.

What this suggests for a theory of well being, is that it must account for the possibility that different human lives go well, without their conforming to a universal standard. Our acceptance of a theory that describes our well being, need derive logically through reconciling the definition of a life well lived to account for human individuality. It must speak to the human experience, encapsulating within its formulation an evident grain of truth regarding the way lives are lived. Thus, while it may be beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate in detail each of the three traditional theories of happiness, it may be of value instead to examine the extent to which these theories concede alternative possibilities for what it is that makes life worth living. Hence, a conclusion can be drawn regarding a plausible account of what makes a person's life go well.

Firstly, Hedonism in almost all its forms posits that the greatest balance of pleasures over pains would lead to a life well lived. As English philosopher Jeremy Bentham concludes, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do." To Bentham, the duration and intensity of an activity dictates the degree to which the pleasantness and painfulness of experiences are to be regarded concerning their impact on a person's well being. Certainly, there exists other interpretations, such as those of Bentham's contemporary, English philosopher John Stuart Mill, who took into account quality to discern the better of two experiences to be preferred by the majority of people to have experienced both.

As evidenced by its historical roots, Hedonism has long seemed a plausible account of what makes a person's life go well, since it reasons a life of pleasure (which certainly seems beneficial to most people) to be associated with a good life. Objections with the theory however, assert that reducing our well being to be based solely on attaining pleasures over pains, is inadequate and unsatisfactory an answer. As Robert Nozick points out in *The Experience Machine*, "... something matters to us in addition to experience..." since when offered to "plug in" to a machine that would give one any experience desired, not everyone would.

What Nozick's thought experiment tells us, is that there is certainly more to life than pleasures and pains. If we are to assume the human population lies on a spectrum of contentment with their lives, then although there exists people who would indeed favor the machine for its capacity to provide them a more comfortable life, there are also individuals who have no reason to favour the machine over their current lifestyle (either because they are already content, or because such

a machine negates the significance of their endeavors in life). Since it appears that Hedonism is unable to provide an adequate response that encompasses different ways of life, it is not entirely capable of providing an adequate description of a good life.

Now, let us consider the extent to which the Objective List Theory permits good lives for individuals of different circumstances, lying on different positions on the spectrum of contentment. Objective List Theories generally claim there to exist a list of worthwhile pursuits, that would naturally make one's life better, irrespective of subjective personal feelings and beliefs on the matter. In one instance of the Objective List Theory, Australian philosopher John Finnis proposes, "...life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion..." to be the seven basic forms of good on the list, from which other objectives and forms of good may derive.

While the list suggested by Finnis contains a great many elements which certainly seem beneficial, it is well within the realm of possibility for people to find fulfillment elsewhere. For instance, we may consider those individuals who have already found their *raison de vivre* (and ultimately, hold a satisfaction with their lives that could be improved not with additional items on the list), and those who find that even with every item on the list in their possession, they are left empty on the inside. We may attempt to amend the list by including the "pursuit of goals" or "striving" to the list, as it appears to meet Finnis' definition of a basic good that is not reducible to any other, but we soon find that this criterion is neither necessary nor sufficient for a good life. It is for this reason, that while the Objective List Theory holds merit in that it presents objectively worthwhile pursuits, its principle objection lies in its elitist construction and foundation.

As it can be seen that the Objective List Theory also possesses an inherent inability to account for the well being of all individuals, we shall now turn to Desire Satisfaction Theory which holds that a greater net balance of desires satisfied to those left unfulfilled, leads to a better life. We can immediately recognize Desire Satisfaction to be an improvement over Hedonism in the *Experience Machine* objection, as it is precisely, as Nozick describes it, the "... desire to live ourselves, in contact with reality" that results in our refusal of the machine. Furthermore, as Desire Satisfaction allows for a good life regardless of variation in desires of each human being, there exists reduced opposition on grounds that the theory maintains a condescending stance on what it means to live a meaningful life.

In the assumption that humanity lies on a spectrum of contentment, we must recognize that it is entirely conceivable for people lying on opposing extremes of the spectrum to find that their life has indeed gone well. Those who find contentment are, under Desire Satisfaction, individuals who have led wonderful lives on the basis that they had much of their desires fulfilled. Every individual who lies between the two extremes, is thus also capable of leading a good life given that we associate desires with a worth corresponding to the satisfaction they bring. Since desire satisfaction is intrinsically good under this theory, it follows that these lives have certainly gone well. But what about those individuals who exist on the other end of the spectrum?

Although slightly contradictory, this could be resolved with the conclusion that due to their "desire to have desires", these individuals may have failed to find fulfillment in their lives, yet

have simultaneously lived a good life. While it not necessarily the case that these individuals attain satisfaction of the greatest quantity of desires, it is certainly the case that their desire of an exceptional quality found fulfillment. That is, for these individuals, life was more a journey rather than a destination. The value in their lives derived not so much from attaining contentment, but rather from their pursuit of happiness. And it is precisely this lifelong pursuit of an ideal which has made the individual life tantamount to one well lived.

While there are other objections to Desire Satisfaction, it appears to be the case that should one contend that different lives may each go well, this theory appears the most plausible with a few modifications. For instance, we may draw from the Objective List Theory to establish a further constraint that the satisfaction of desires concerning items on the list to lead to a good life, or we may consider a unification with Hedonism to suggest that the attainment of pleasant experiences is always preferable, except in the case where this contradicts one's desires. The question of what provides the most plausible account of what makes a person's life go well is certainly a complex question rooted in humanity's insatiable thirst for knowledge. We may never know the answer, but this will certainly never halt the dedication of our lives in its search.