

Goodness and Rational Desire

I. Recap

Bentham's Hedonism

The best life is the life that scores highest according to the hedonic calculus, i.e., the one that will offer the most intense, durable, fecund, pure, and probable pleasures, taking into account the distribution of pleasures and pains over time. In other words, "It's all about pleasure."

Non-Hedonic Accounts

There's more to a good life than just pleasure. Nozick's discussion even suggests that there's more to a good life than what we get in experience.

II. Satisfaction of Desire

But what else is there? It seems that even such things as happiness, health, and knowledge are good for you only if you want them. This has led some to endorse *internalism about well-being*:

Internalist Principle: *How things go for X is determined – to some substantial degree – by what X desires.*

Internalism recommends the following account of the good life:

Desire Satisfaction Account: *What is good for me is the satisfaction of my desires.*

III. Rational Desire?

Can we criticize desire? It seems clear that we can criticize instrumental desires (why?); but can we criticize intrinsic desires? David Hume would say that there is no basis for criticizing this desire. He says:

Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chooses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it. It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. (See Brandt, p. 623).

But consider:

Desires for Bad/Immoral Things

Childish Desires

Whimsical Desires

Far-Future Desires

Self-Destructive Desires

Misguided Desires

Impossible Desires

IV. Brandt's theory

Rational Desire Satisfaction Account: *What is good for me is the satisfaction of my rational desires, where a desire is rational if it would survive exposure to all relevant, available information in "an ideally vivid way". (623-4)*

- “all relevant available information” – all information theoretically available to me via the scientific theories and methods of my time.
- “ideally vivid way” – the person gets the information when alert, with plenty of vivid detail, and “with no hesitation or doubt about its truth”. The information may need to be repeated.

Problem 1: Why restrict the basis for critique to “all relevant available information,” i.e. to what science has currently established? Why not allow all true facts to be a basis for critique, even if science hasn’t yet established them?

Problem 2: Does exposure to truths really bring about correction of belief and desire?

V. Further developments of the view

I myself am pretty limited. Instead of considering how I would in fact respond to additional information, perhaps we should consider how Super Sally would respond if given all the facts. This view is elaborated by Peter Railton in his “Moral Realism”.

Souped-Up Agent’s Rational Desire Account: *What is good for me is what my souped-up self would want for me, given knowledge of the relevant facts.*

VI. Challenge for any desire satisfaction account.

We saw above that part of what is appealing about the desire satisfaction accounts is that they locate what is good for me in *my desires*, i.e., in something important about *me*. This was articulated as:

Internalist Principle: *How things go for X is determined – to some substantial degree – by what X desires.*

Brandt illuminates, however, that desires should be weighted differently if we are considering a person’s good. How the world is – the facts – matter to what’s good for me. This suggests another principle:

Epistemic Principle: *How things go for X is determined – to some substantial degree – by how clued in X is about the facts, i.e., by how much information X has, how well X can integrate information about how the world works, etc.*

VII. Loeb’s challenge:

Don Loeb argues that full-information accounts of the sort we’re considering can accommodate either the internalist principle, or the epistemic principle, but not both.

On one hand, a view such as Brandt’s does well in accommodating the internalist principle – what’s good for me is a matter of how *I* would respond if given more information. But it doesn’t adequately accommodate the epistemic principle: why shouldn’t we consider more information than I could, in fact, incorporate into my reasoning? If we’re trying to capture what’s *good* for me, such information is relevant.

On the other hand, a view such as Railton’s does well in accommodating the epistemic principle, but what comes to matter is not *my* desires, but Super Me’s desires. Part of the appeal of internalist accounts is that they explain why we are motivated to pursue our own good: we’re motivated because what’s good for us is grounded in our desires. But if we’re not talking about our desires, but the desires of souped up versions of ourselves, then this advantage is lost.

Question: Is there a way to balance the demands of the internalist and the epistemic principles that will yield an acceptable account of a person's good?