

24.231 Ethics – Handout 11 My Notes on Theories of Well-Being

(1) Hedonism and Nozick's Experience Machine: What does the thought experiment teach us?

- We might have some worries about the experiment which can be fixed by adjusting the experiment: for example, if we're worried that any pleasures experienced in the machine would be outweighed by the intermittent pain, when we're not in the machine, of knowing none of it was real, we should imagine that we never leave the machine...
- The thought experiment is intended to show that we *actually* desire some things other than pleasure for their own sake. So it undermines Mill's claims in defense of utilitarianism in last week's readings.
- But Hedonism is a view about what is actually good for us, not necessarily about what we desire. So hedonist could agree that we sometimes desire things other than pleasure, but say this just shows that we sometimes want things that aren't actually good for us. (And note, most of us would agree with this.)
- Of course, in that case H can't be defended along the lines Mill suggests, and it loses much of its appeal (one of the big things it seemed to have going for it was that the thing it identified as the good was something close of all of us actually valued).
- This way of thinking about H makes it an Objective List View (OL), with a very short list: pleasure is the only item on it. Mill's defense of H makes it look more like a desire-satisfaction view (DS), plus an empirical claim about what we actually desire.
- What does Nozick's example teach us about what we actually value? It may teach us that some things we value can't be achieved by means of such a machine. For one thing, we value more than mere subjective experiences. We value not just the subjective experience of, e.g., writing the novel, winning the race, forming the friendships, but actually *doing* these things. The machine can't make it the case that we actually do these things (at least not of our own volition). Though Nozick denies this, we might also think that some other things we value – e.g. being a certain kind of person – can't be achieved by means of the machine: perhaps being a certain kind of person essentially involves actually doing certain things (of our own volition). And we might think that if we have certain goals which might be achieved or not without our knowledge, how well our life goes can depend on things that happen without our knowledge, or even after our deaths.

(2) Nozick's experience machine example suggests that we desire much more than the mere subjective experience of certain pleasures. And it leads us to conclude from this that our well-being therefore depends on more than just such pleasures. So perhaps the DS component of the view was right, and just the empirical claim

about what we actually desire was wrong. Perhaps our well-being consists in the satisfaction of our actual desires?

- Which desires? It can't be just my present desires, because I might now have a desire the satisfaction of which would significantly undermine the likelihood of my future desires being satisfied. What about saying my well-being consists in the maximum satisfaction of the desires I have over my whole life.
- But if we interpret this as meaning my life goes better the more desires I have satisfied (Parfit's "summative theory"), this runs into the problems raised by Parfit's addiction example. The point can be made better by means of a real-life example: I repeatedly have powerful desires to breathe, which are repeatedly satisfied. This version of DS seems to suggest that my life is much better in virtue of my having these satisfied desires than it would be if I didn't have them (or had them much less often). But that's implausible. My life would be no worse if I didn't need to breathe. The mere satisfaction of a powerful desire does not seem to make my life go better (though having such a desire unsatisfied would surely make it go much worse). Why doesn't having a satisfied desire to breathe make my life go better? We might think this is because having such a satisfied desire doesn't add any pleasure to my life that it would not have if I lacked the desire. But this brings us back to H.
- The summative theory also seems to suggest that a life filled only with the satisfaction of very minor desires could become better than one filled with the satisfaction of important desires if only it is long enough (Haydn and the Oyster). But most of us would not choose such a life.
- Finally, we have some preferences which are not preferences-at-a-particular-time: that is, preferences which range over a whole life. E.g., I would prefer that my whole life get better as I age, rather than worse, even if the number/strength of local preferences satisfied in each case is the same.
- This suggests that we should be interested not in whether just any desire is satisfied, but in whether our "global" preferences are satisfied: this allows us to recognize as valuable the satisfaction of some preferences that aren't preferences-at-a-time, and also to discount as not valuable the satisfaction of some preferences-at-a-time (like my preference to breathe). But it seems to me the global-local distinction is not easy to make out. Surely the satisfaction of some local preferences at least adds to my well-being?
- Finally, we might think that the satisfaction of my preferences might not be good for me if what I prefer reflects the fact that I'm misinformed or in some other way confused. But at the same time, if we're DS theorists, we might not want to say that something could be good for me even if I had *no* preference for it (this seems to take away the authority over what matters that DS theorists wanted to accord to *me* and my preferences). So perhaps we should say that the satisfaction of one of my actual preferences is valuable only if I would retain that preference under conditions of full information and reflection?
- A DS view might, like H, be thought of as an OL view with a very short list: what's valuable is the satisfaction of my (global) preferences. But DS

theorists might instead be taken to have the reverse view about the relation between desires and goodness: if what *makes* something good is that it is preferred, then nothing is good *before* we have preferences, including the satisfaction of our preferences.

(3) Objective-List Views

- Perhaps all these considerations suggest that the satisfaction of our preferences is good only if we have reason to have the preferences in the first place. This reverses the relationship between desire/preference and goodness: things aren't good because they are desired – rather, they're desired because they are good. And perhaps the lesson we should draw from Nozick's Experience Machine is not that pleasurable experiences are not what matters, but rather that they are not the only thing that matters. Now we are moving towards an OL view.
- An OL view might claim that my life goes well if it has in it a certain amount of pleasure, but also knowledge, moral goodness, the appreciation of beauty, close friendship and mutual love... This might explain why we think Rawls's grass-counting mathematician's life less valuable than it could have been, despite the fact that she's living it as she prefers. But it's important to remember, when thinking about this example, that we're only asking whether her life is better *for her*, not whether it's better for the world, e.g. Even the most simple-minded hedonist or DS theorist could acknowledge that the life that is best for her may not be best for the world.
- But is getting the things on the list really good for me if I have no desire for them? Doesn't this seem elitist? Worries like this lead Parfit to suggest that perhaps the best approach to well-being is a *hybrid* approach: "What is of value, or good for someone, is to have both; to be engaged in these [objectively-valuable] activities, and to be strongly wanting to be so engaged." (p. 674)
- Do we need the hybrid approach? We might think that some of the things on the list have *wanting to engage in them* built into them: e.g. Is a friendship I don't want to be in a real friendship? Can I experience awareness of beauty without wanting to experience it? Without having some kind of pro-attitude or enjoyment? Can I act morally-worthily without wanting to, or at least wanting to do what I'm doing?

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