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What is the
best life?



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Lots of discussions of ethics focus on especially hard moral choices. Those are an important part of life; but much of life does not consist in making very dramatic choices.

Today our focus is not on these kinds of choices. Instead we are going to focus on a broader question: what is the best kind of life to lead?
What kind of life should you want to lead?

This is a question which should seem pressing to all of you. It is, to some degree at least, up to you what kind of life you are going to lead. You should think about what kind of life would be best.



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It is easy to come up with a list of things that you think that a good life would include. Suppose that you think that a good life would include friends, a good job, and a loyal pet. A very natural next question is: why are those things part of a good life?

It is overwhelmingly plausible that this question should have some answer. If you asked someone why they thought that a good life should include a good job, it would be bizarre if they said that this fact simply had **no explanation** at all.

Our central question is: what determines what things get on the list to be part of a good life?

An obvious first answer is one we have already encountered. This is the view that the things that get on the list are the things that bring me **pleasure**. This is hedonism about well-being.

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Parfit distinguishes two different versions of hedonism, based on what they mean by “pleasure.”

According to **narrow hedonism**, pleasure is a certain specific identifiable sensation. The same is true of pain. According to narrow hedonism, the best life contains as much of the first sensation as possible, and as little of the second as possible.

The central problem for narrow hedonism is that there seems to be no such sensation. When one looks at various pleasures — eating chocolate, having a good conversation, watching a good movie, winning a game — there just does not seem to be any identifiable sensation in common between them.



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This can make the very ideas of pleasure and pain seem a little mysterious. The solution, Parfit thinks, is to just give up on the idea of pleasure as a specific identifiable sensation. Instead, it is better to think of pleasures as sensations that you like or desire to have.

This is the view of the **preference hedonist**: the best life contains as many sensations that you want as possible, and as few of the sensations you don't want as possible.

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It is worth noting in passing one practical difficulty for the preference hedonist. This is what is sometimes called 'the paradox of hedonism.' The paradox is that if you aim directly for pleasure, you tend not to get it.

Suppose that you are playing a game with a friend. Imagine that, at every stage of the game, you focus on making the playing of the game as pleasurable as possible. Will this increase the pleasure you get from playing the game? It seems like just the opposite will happen.

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It is a commonplace that different people like different sensations. Given this, it follows from preference hedonism that what may be the best life for me is likely different than what may be the best life for you. I like the experience of eating anchovies; you may not. If not, then the best life for me may contain anchovy-eating experiences, while yours will not.

It is important to separate out two aspects of preference hedonism. The first is the role of experience: only your experiences matter for whether your life is good. The second is the role of desire: your desires about which experiences you want to have are what make certain experiences good or bad for your life.

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We have already seen reasons to question the preference hedonist's focus on experiences. These are cases like Nozick's experience machine, in which one's experiences are disconnected in certain ways from reality.

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Naomi is married with children, and has many friends. She loves her spouse, children, and friends, and they love her too.

Susan is married with children, and has many friends. She loves her spouse, children, and friends. But they do not love her. Her spouse has been having an affair for many years, and her children resent her. Her friends complain about her to each other. But her spouse, children, and friends conceal this from Susan; they act toward Susan just as they would have if they genuinely loved her. Susan never finds out that this is just an act.

Does Naomi have a better life than Susan? What does the preference hedonist say?

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Many people think that examples like this show that things other than your experiences can matter to whether your life goes well. But you still might think that your desires should play a big role in determining what would make your life go well.

These two thoughts lead to what Parfit calls **success theories**. According to these theories, your life goes well in proportion to the degree to which your desires about your own life are satisfied.

This can be thought of as a generalization of preference hedonism. Both give desire an important role. But while preference hedonism focuses only on desires about your experiences, success theories include all desires about your life.

Let's assume that both Naomi and Susan desire that the people in their lives love them. Then, according to success theory, Naomi's life has gone better, since more of her desires about her life are fulfilled.

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As Parfit notices, it is a consequence of success theories that things which happen after your death can affect how good your life was. He gives the example of things that can happen to your children after you are dead:

Consider next the desires that some people have about what happens after they are dead. For a Preference-Hedonist, once I am dead, nothing bad can happen to me. A Success Theorist should deny this. Return to the case where all my children have wretched lives, because of the mistakes I made as their parent. Suppose that my children's lives all go badly only after I am dead. My life turns out to have been a failure, in one of the ways I cared about most. A Success Theorist should claim that, here too, this makes it true that I had a worse life.

This also brings out ways in which, according to success theory, events in the lives of others can affect how well your life went.



In what follows, I'll set preference hedonism to the side, and focus on the success theory. Most of the issues that will come up would also apply to preference hedonism — so if you prefer that view, you can substitute accordingly.

Here's a problem for the view that desires play the central role which the success theory gives to them:

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

Would it make your life go better to be injected with the addictive drug?

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Intuitively, no. You will always have to remember to have ample supplies of the drug around, and will have to give yourself an injection every morning. None of these are things that you want to do.

On the other hand, if you take the drug, you will have a whole new group of extremely strong desires: the desire to take the drug each morning of your life. And each of these extremely strong desires will be satisfied. But according to the success theory, having your desires — especially your very strong desires — satisfied if what makes your life go well. So according to the success theory, taking the drug does make your life go (much) better.

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success theories



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Violet is a softball player. Every time she comes to the plate, she wants very badly to get a hit. But softball is hard, and even the best players don't get hits most of the time. So, knowing that her life goes worse when her strongly held desires about her life are not met, Violet decides to get rid of this desire. Now when she comes to the plate, does not desire to get a hit. She gets hits less often now; but her life is better, since now her desires are not frustrated.

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In response to cases like the addict and Violet, Parfit introduces the distinction between **summative** and **global** versions of the success theory. Summative versions count every desire equally. Global versions give priority to desires which are about "some part of one's life considered as a whole, or is about one's whole life."

The addict has the global desire not to be addicted to drugs; Violet has the global desire to be a successful softball player. On global success theories, these desires are more important than the individual desire to have the drug today or the individual desire to get a hit this time up. So the global success theory can explain why it is a mistake to take the drug, and why it is a mistake for Violet to give up her desires.

But even after we introduce this distinction between summative and global theories, one might think that a problem somewhat like the one posed by the case of Violet remains. This is brought out by the example of the grass-counter:

Consider the man that Rawls imagined who wants to spend his life counting the numbers of blades of grass in different lawns. Suppose that this man knows that he could achieve great progress if instead he worked in some especially useful part of Applied Mathematics. Though he could achieve such significant results, he prefers to go on counting blades of grass. On the Success Theory, if we allow this theory to cover all imaginable cases, it could be better for this person if he counted his blades of grass rather than achieving great and useful mathematical results.

Here the desire to spend his life counting blades of grass is a global desire. So even the global success theory has to say that the man has a better life counting blades of grass than he would have achieving great and useful things in mathematics.



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One can have two different kinds of reactions to this case.

First, one might regard this result as unproblematic. If this is what the man wants to spend his life doing, then his best life genuinely is spent counting blades of grass.

On the other hand, one might regard this as a waste of a life. Counting blades of grass is pointless; and a life spent doing pointless things can't be a good life.

One way to bring out the second response is to imagine that the grass-counter is someone you love — perhaps a child. Suppose that you want them to have the best life possible, and that you know that they desire life as a grass-counter. Wouldn't you still hope that they moved on from grass-counting at some point?

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If you think this, then this would be a reason to abandon the success theory in favor of what Parfit calls an **objective list theory**.

An objective list theory says that a good life is one which contains certain features — the ones on the objective list of good-making features. What gets on the list is not determined by what you want — it is something fixed independently of your desires.

The objective list theorist can say that, despite his global desires, the grass-counter would have lived a better life by spending his time on other pursuits.

The natural question for the objective list theorist is: what determines what gets on the objective list?

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There are different answers to this question. The one we will explore goes back to Aristotle.

Let's forget about human lives for a second, and think about the lives of non-human animals. Consider the following two beasts:



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Do we get the same answer in the two cases?

It is natural to think that we do not. Lions are different kinds of things than dogs, and so the best kind of life for a lion will be very different than the best kind of life for a dog. In each case it depends on the nature of lions, and the nature of dogs.

Humans are different than both lions and dogs. So, Aristotle thought, to figure out what the best human life is, we have to ask: what is part of human nature?

When we ask this question, a number of plausible answers suggest themselves:



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Humans have bodies (of certain distinctive kinds).

Humans are social animals, who live with other humans.

Humans are strategic animals, who plan for the future.

Humans are creative animals, who make art & music.

Humans are rational animals, who try to get knowledge of the world

According to a **perfectionist** version of the objective list theory, the best human life is the one which most perfects these aspects of human nature. The reason why these aspects matter is because they are part of what it is to be human — just as perfection in the hunting of gazelles matters for lions but not my dog, because this kind of hunting is in the nature of lions but not of my dog.

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Does this mean that the best life for me is the same as the best life for you, even though we are different in any number of ways?

No. One of the ways in which people differ is in their capacity for perfection in various dimensions. You may have the capacity for great artistic creativity; I do not. This might mean that your greatest overall perfection would be achieved by devoting yourself to music, whereas mine would not be.

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Usain Bolt can achieve a kind of physical perfection and excellence which I cannot. So perhaps his greatest overall perfection is achieved by spending a lot of time getting as fast as possible, whereas mine is better achieved by thinking about philosophy. The best life he can lead is different than the best life I can lead.

So the perfectionist can capture some of the variability between people which the success theory and the preference hedonist theory can also capture. But this difference is not due to a difference in what people want — it is due to a difference in their talents.

So the perfectionist can capture some of the variability between people which the success theory and the preference hedonist theory can also capture. But this difference is not due to a difference in what people want — it is due to a difference in their talents.

This leads lots of important questions unanswered. Sometimes trying to perfect one aspect of my nature conflicts with trying to perfect others. If I focused solely on trying to produce the best philosophy that I can, my physical well being would suffer and I would ignore the social aspect of my nature. Different perfectionists have different views about how these trade-offs should be managed.

We also face trade-offs involving other people. Sometimes trying to perfect one aspect of my nature conflicts with helping other people to perfect aspects of their nature. This kind of trade-off is a part of any close relationship. Again, different perfectionist views are possible here.



But this is enough to bring out a fundamental difference between the way that the success theorist (or preference hedonist) and the perfectionist recommend that you think about what kind of life would be best for you.

The key question for the success theorist is: what, in the end, do you want?

The key question for the perfectionist is: what, in the end, are your talents?

This focus gives rise to an objection to perfectionism: what if you don't enjoy developing your talents? What if, for example, you are amazing at math but find it boring and hate doing it? Is the best life for you really one devoted to mathematics?

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The perfectionist might say that perfecting your nature always in the end does bring pleasure and satisfaction. Maybe you don't like math because of the way that it has been taught to you, or because of pressure to which your parents have subjected you — but you would enjoy it once these outside influences have been stripped away.

But let's imagine that this is not always so. Then what should you do?

The **pure perfectionist** says: tough. Your best life is the one in which you most perfect your nature, and that is so whether or not you happen to find pleasure in that.

But one might also be a **pluralist perfectionist** and say that perfecting your nature is one central part of a good life, but not the only one. Perhaps another is finding pleasure in what you are doing. This would be a kind of blend of the objective list and preference hedonist theories.