



“Summary of article by Thomas Scanlon: Value, Desire and Quality of Life”
in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and
Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 191-194

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

“Summary of article by Thomas Scanlon: Value, Desire and Quality of Life”

"What makes a life good for the person who lives it?" Answers will vary depending on whether the question is asked from the point of view of the individual, the policy-maker, or from the standpoint of morality. This paper contends that desire theories of the good, while amenable to economic and policy analysis, should be rejected as the appropriate account of well-being for individuals and also for moral argument. For the latter, an alternative, substantive theory of good is proposed that makes claims about what things, conditions, and opportunities make life better.

In his 1984 book, Reasons and Persons, Derek Parfit identifies what have become the three standard alternative theories of the good. Hedonistic theories hold that changes in quality of a life must affect personal experiences. "Desire theories reject the experience requirement and allow that a person's life can be made better and worse not only by changes in that person's states of consciousness but also by occurrences elsewhere in the world which fulfill [sic] that person's preferences." [186] Objective list theories recognize that a person may be mistaken about what makes his or her life proceed in the best way and that assessments of well-being must involve substantive judgments about the goodness of things. Desire and objective list theories differ with respect to who makes judgments of goodness. Desire theories require that assessments originate with the individual, while objective list theories are not so constrained.

This "standard" approach to classifying well-being theories glosses over important similarities among the different categories. For instance, there is a strong sense in which hedonistic theories typify Parfit's "objective list" category - which might be more aptly labeled "substantive good theories" since they make claims about what things are good. The conceptual line between hedonism and substantive good theories collapses once it is recognized that hedonism makes a substantive judgment about the kind of good, i.e., pleasure, that constitutes well-being.

A similar collapse occurs at the conceptual line between James Griffin's informed desire account and substantive good theories. Central to desire accounts is the claim that things are good because they are objects of desire. However, informed desire theory makes a different claim. It holds that goodness can arise from certain features of an object, features that will be desired and appreciated by the appropriately informed person. Griffin thinks his account represents a desire theory because it is flexible, allowing different objects to be viewed as good by different people. However, substantive good theories can also accommodate flexibility, as well as the position that it is sometimes a good thing to get what you want.

What then is the objective of a philosophical theory of well-being? One objective is to describe a class of things which make lives better. A second, more ambitious, objective is to give a general account of what it is that makes a life a good life. Most substantive good theories aim only to achieve the first objective. The justification for this more limited objective is the perception that it is unlikely that there are any good-making properties which are common to all good things. Thus rather than seeking a general theory of goodness, it may be sufficient to describe characteristics of things which are conducive to well-being.

A CRITIQUE OF DESIRE THEORIES

Desire theories should be rejected as theories of well-being appropriate to the individual's point of view. Individuals and benevolent third parties assess well-being in terms of substantive goods, not desire fulfillment. Desire theories imply the false claim that desire fulfillment confers a basic reason for wanting a certain outcome. Consider an outcome that satisfies the desire to improve life quality. The fact that this outcome fulfills a desire does not motivate an individual to want it. Rather, a preference for this outcome is due either to the pleasure it is expected to bring or to the substantive judgments that this state of affairs is desirable for some reason other than the mere fact that it is preferred, such as the judgment that it is morally good.

Support for this argument comes from the observation that both past and future preferences often matter very little to well-being. Past desires that carry no weight in the present provide little reason for action and their fulfillment does not contribute to well-being. For example, a child who desires to ride a roller coaster to celebrate his fiftieth birthday finds that as the date approaches he prefers other kinds of activities. Fulfilling the childhood desire will not contribute to the adult's well-being, just because he once desired it. Future preferences may seem to have more weight in present discussions than past preferences do. For example, if a youth believes that in thirty years he will prefer to have a set of family photographs that he cares little about now this may seem to provide him with reason to keep them. But insofar as the reason in such cases is matter of future wellbeing what is in fact providing this reason is in most such cases future happiness, not the satisfaction of future preferences as such. Suppose, for example, that while the youth knows that in future he will prefer having the photographs, he also knows that they will make him miserable. If he still has reason for saving the photographs in this case, the reason seems to be a regard for the autonomy of his future self, not a concern with his future wellbeing.

Desire theories are also inappropriate as accounts of individual well-being from the point of view of third party benefactors. Benevolent third parties, such as friends or parents, often promote well-being by aiming at the happiness of the intended beneficiaries rather than the fulfillment of their desires. The aim is not always to please, since there are cases in which it is best to aim at a person's overall good, though this may require going against a person's preferences. This commonly occurs when parents make choices for their children that are not well liked.

Desire theories is most plausible when we consider people whose role is solely that of agents for other adults. It is reasonable to suggest that officials who must choose social policies should do so with respect for the preferences of the people whom they represent. These preferences can count as ultimate sources of reasons from the point of view of the decision-maker, whatever the

considerations that have led members of society to express these preferences. "Here, then, is a natural home for desire theories." [195]

A CONTRACTUALIST MORAL THEORY

The role of well-being in moral argument differs from its use in social policy. Decision-makers know the stated preferences of the individuals they represent and combine these preferences to formulating policy. In contrast, according to certain non-utilitarian moral theories, such as contractualism, the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on what an indefinite range of individuals whose detailed preferences are not fully known would have reason to agree to. On this view people are moved to do what is right "the desire to be able to justify one's actions to others on grounds that they have reason to accept if they are also concerned with mutual justification." [196]

Well-being enters into moral calculations if individuals have reason to reject a principle on the ground that following it will result in harms or burdens from the point of view of their substantive judgment of what makes a life good. Such rejection is reasonable if there are alternative principles which would not entail comparable burdens for other members of society.

Given a pluralistic society, individual members are bound to disagree on what counts as moral goods and bads, although there may be common ground with respect to judgments that certain losses of basic functionings are bad. The contractualist's objective is to build consensus on the assignments of moral weights to conditions, goods, and kinds of activity, by formulating abstract categories of good and bad, using a vocabulary that is understandable to all. "The aim then is to develop a set of goods and bads which we all, in so far as we are trying to find a common vocabulary of justification, have reason to accept as covering the most important ways in which life can be made better or worse." [198] Such a system of moral goods and bads is not an expression of any individual's preference, and the process of constructing the system may yield different outcomes in different societies.