Desire Satisfaction
The Experience Machine Objection: the case and the argument

Robert Nozick’s experience machine is supposed to show that we care about other things than pleasure.

1. A life outside the experience machine is better than it would be inside the experience machine.

2. A life inside the experience machine would have more pleasure than one inside the experience machine.

3. So: a life with less pleasure is better than one with more pleasure.

4. So: pleasure cannot be the only thing responsible for how good a life is.

Why not enter the experience machine?
The Reverse Experience Machine

Consider the following case:

Charlie the scientist comes up to you and makes you an offer.  

_I’m afraid you’ve been living in an experience machine your whole life. You have thought you were interacting with other people, your friends, your family, but it only seemed that way. [She offers incontrovertible proof of her claims.] But if you would like, I can relieve of you of your situation._

Would you “plug out?”
The Experience Machine redux

A new case. The *only* difference is whether one is in the machine or not.

Hedonism predicts that the two lives are, from the perspective of well-being, entirely the same. How should you choose between them? Flip a coin . . . .
Consider Bob₁. Bob₁ lives a life full of joy, cute children, cushy job, great house, etc., whatever you want. His wife loves him dearly.

Consider Bob₂. As far as Bob₂ can tell, Bob₂ lives a life full of joy, cute children, cushy job, great house, etc., whatever you want. His wife seems to love him dearly.

In fact, Bob₂ has all the same experiences as Bob₁—everything seems exactly the same. But unbeknownst to him, his wife is cheating on him, his kids hate his guts, his friends talk shit about him when he’s not around.

Hedonism predicts that the two lives are, from the perspective of well-being, entirely the same. Flip a coin . . . .

But who wouldn’t say Bob₁ is better off than Bob₂?
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What do these have in common?
The Desire Satisfaction Theory

What unites the things we think are good for us is that we want them, for their own sake.

The Desire Satisfaction Theory A life goes well to the extent that its subject gets what she wants for its own sake and isn’t frustrated in getting what she wants for its own sake.

Getting what you want = your desire is satisfied = the way you want the world to be actually happens.

Heathwood: on this view well-being appropriately depends on what the actual person concerned cares about. Well-being is subjective.
What’s all this about subjective and objective?

I sort of wish he hadn’t used those terms . . . .

Heathwood: Well-being is **subjective** because it depends on what the subject of that well-being wants.

Ex. If Alice wants cake, then getting cake is good for her. If Bob wants there to be no cake, then getting cake is bad for him.

Heathwood: Morality is **objective** because it *doesn’t* depend on what the subject of that well-being wants.

Ex. If Ted Bundy wants to brutally murder a bunch of people, *it’s still not right* to do so.

(Keep in mind that Bundy probably did want to brutally murder a bunch of people . . . )
Can we define subjective terms? (Compare with context-sensitive terms like “now,” “I.”)

And the fact that this is wrong does not as subjectivists about morality would have it depend upon my or anyone else's negative attitudes towards this kind of act.
Digression into morality

Heathwood doesn’t defend this claim (in this paper). (He raises the issue of morality’s sub/objectivism mostly just to stress that it is *not* an issue about well-being.) But the reference to lighting cats on fire gives us a pretty good idea what he’d say . . . .

1. It’s bad to torture babies just for fun, no matter what.
2. So: it’s bad to torture babies just for fun even, even if the torturer wants to torture babies just for fun.
3. So: it can’t be the case that the wrongness of torturing babies just for fun depends on the desires of the torturer.
4. So: for at least one action, morality isn’t subjective.

This doesn’t rule out *any* sensitivity to people’s desires in the account of morality. Ex., Heathwood may well think that *what constitutes harming someone* depends on what they want.

As we’ll see in the metaethics portion of this course, “subjectivism about morality” may mean many things, and the argument hardly rules out all of them.
The General Argument

1. There are desires the satisfaction of which does not make the person’s life go better (so-called defective desires).
2. If the Desire Satisfaction Theory is true, then the satisfaction of such desires makes the person’s life go better.
3. So the Desire Satisfaction Theory isn’t true.

Premise (2) is just a matter of what Desire Satisfaction Theory says, and its defender would agree with it. So the debate centers around (1).
In general, Heathwood’s reply is that either

- The satisfaction of those desires made the person’s life go better in the well-being sense, but made it less choiceworthy in some other way. Or

- The person’s life did go better just because their desire was satisfied. It’s just that something else about the desire and its satisfaction was also bad, making for a net loss. (E.g., other desires were frustrated.)

Let’s see if he can pull it off in practice . . . .
Pointless Desires

Thus imagine someone whose only pleasure is to count blades of grass in various geometrically shaped areas such as park squares and well-trimmed lawns. He is otherwise intelligent and actually possesses unusual skills, since he manages to survive by solving difficult mathematical problems for a fee. The definition of the good forces us to admit that the good for this man is indeed counting blades of grass . . . . Naturally we would be surprised that such a person should exist . . . . But if we allows that his nature is to enjoy this activity . . . [this activity] will be for him the end that regulates the schedule of his actions, and this establishes that it is good for him. (Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 432–433)
What was Rawls trying to illustrate?

How would someone use this example to object to Heathwood?

How would Heathwood reply?

Remember that our question is not exactly “is this a choiceworthy life,” and even less is it “is it acceptable to interfere with the grass-counter’s choice” or “should we tolerate other people’s desires,” etc.
Base and Immoral Desires

Ted Bundy?

Muzak vs. Mozart?

One objection to Hedonism was that it is “a doctrine worthy only of swine,” that it encourages us to nourish the meanest and lowest parts of human nature.

On this point, is Heathwood any better off than the Hedonist?
Induced desires

Say Chris watches an infomercial and the clever marketing causes him to develop a desire for some expensive and useless gizmo, which he then purchases.

Was Chris better off when he got his gizmo?

What something wrong about his desire?

What would Heathwood say in order to maintain that the case isn’t a problem for his theory?
Desires that leave you cold

(note the similarity with the Stoic who was a problem for Hedonism)

Say Danielle badly wants a F-150. She saves up, and she gets one. But it leaves her cold; she doesn’t enjoy it; she doesn’t feel any pleasure when looking at it or driving it.

Does this happen?

Is she better off for getting the F-150?

Heathwood: she has to want it at the same time when she gets it.

Can we imagine that she does?

Addiction?
Desires that would harm one if satisfied

Gasoline and water.

The usual reply: idealization. (Would this fix base or immoral desires?)

Information vs. idealized advisor.
Imagine the case of Emily.

Emily was sitting on a train one day when a stranger, Frank, sat down in the seat across from her. Eventually Emily and Frank got to chatting. Frank was a married man and a father of three, and he was down on his luck. He had been laid off from his plant and was looking for work, but was having trouble finding any. Indeed, he was currently on his way to an interview! At this point Emily had developed a small but genuine fondness for Frank, and she wished him luck and that he would get the job. They both got off the train and parted ways at the next stop, and they never saw each other again.
Let’s consider two possibilities:

- Frank’s interview goes well and he gets the job.
- Frank’s interview goes terribly and he doesn’t get the job.

According to the Desire Satisfaction Theory, Emily’s life goes better in the first case than the second, even if *nothing* changes about her own experiences. Is this right?
Imagine the case of Ginny. Ginny really, really wants there to be extraterrestrial life. She spends a lot of time investigating this and looking for such life. Unfortunately, Ginny dies before any is found. Indeed, the human race is wiped out before any is found.

Let’s consider two possibilities:

- Unbeknownst to Ginny (and to us) there is such life, very very far away.
- Unbeknownst to Ginny (and to us) there is no such life, anywhere.
According to the Desire Satisfaction Theory, Ginny’s life goes better in the first case than the second, even if \textit{nothing} changes about her own (or indeed, any of our) experiences. Is this right?

Problems with Hedonism might make us think that experience couldn’t be the \textit{only} factor in a person’s well-being. But this problem suggests that the Desire Satisfaction Theory has gone too far in removing it from the equation.