Objective List Theories
Table of contents

1. Ideal Desire Satisfaction
2. Remote Desires
3. Objective List Theories
Desires that would harm one if satisfied

Gasoline and water.

Suicidal teenager. What’s Heathwood’s reply?
Ideal Desire Satisfaction Theory

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

Idealization: improved information, including fore-feeling, and improved means-ends rationality

Ideal Desire Theory v1  A life goes well to the extent that its subject gets what she would want for its own sake and isn’t frustrated in getting what she would want for its own sake, were she to have all relevant information, perfect means-end rationality, and perfect understanding (intellectual as well as emotional) of what getting that thing would be like.

Problem: your interests depend on your information state, and you may be better off knowing less.
Problem: your interests depend on your information state, and you may be better off knowing less

**Ideal Desire Theory v2** A life goes well to the extent that its subject get what an ideal advisor would want for her to want for its own sake and not be frustrated in getting what an ideal advisor would want for her to want for its own sake.

An ideal advisor has all relevant information, perfect means-end rationality, and perfect understanding (intellectual as well as emotional) of what getting that thing would be like for the subject.

The advisor is sympathetic and benevolent to the subject.
Adams on Idealization I

The acquisition of an understanding of reality that would be ideally adequate for decision making would change me quite drastically—so drastically, indeed, that I doubt the question, what I would want if I had such an understanding, has a moral importance very different from that of the question, what another, better informed person would want if he were in my position, or what he would want for me if he loved me. (Adams “Finite and Infinite Goods,” 86)

It was supposed to be an advantage of Desire Satisfaction Theory that one’s well-being is rooted directly in what they care about and act for the sake of. But idealization threatens to ruin that advantage.
No doubt we often think we know what someone would want for herself if she cared more for herself. But I suspect that is mainly because we think we know what she believes would be good for her, and we assume that if she cared more for herself she would want what she (in fact) believes would be good for her . . . Or perhaps we project into her transformed mind, not her actual beliefs, but our beliefs about human good in general. In either case we do not have a promising strategy for the desire-satisfaction theorist. For making the definition of a person’s good depend on her beliefs or ours about what would be good for her would introduce a vicious-looking circle as soon as we start to ask what is being believed, by her or by us. (Adams “Finite and Infinite Goods,” 91)
Table of contents

1  Ideal Desire Satisfaction

2  Remote Desires

3  Objective List Theories
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?

A possible reply:

separate the “other-directed” from the “self-directed” desires

maybe this helps with altruistic desires too

but it is very hard to see how to do this in a way that gets all the right results; consider biting some bullets instead
Table of contents

1. Ideal Desire Satisfaction
2. Remote Desires
3. Objective List Theories
The things that we took as clues to what the good for someone is just *are* the good things.

A diverse list, varies from author to author: health, freedom, knowledge, friendship, beauty, pleasure . . . .

There’s little problem with counterexamples from missing out on some good. Just expand the list!

Disadvantages: lots of the old problems reappear (it’s a good exercise for you to try and figure out which ones). No explanation for why these things and not other things make a life go well. The theory is ad hoc and disunified.

But specific versions of OLT might shore up these problems . . . .
Adams’ theory is much more unified. There are two factors that go into a good life, enjoyment and excellence.

Adams’ Objective List Theory  A life goes well to the extent that its subject enjoys genuine excellence, and goes badly to the extent that its subject does not.
What is enjoyment?

- To enjoy something is to like it and to take interest in it.
- To enjoy something worth enjoying is to appreciate the genuine value in it. (According to Adams, maybe you can enjoy bad things, too, e.g., schadenfreude.)
- Unclear, but quite possible Adams does not think enjoying can be reduced to any combination of desire satisfaction, pleasure, etc. Hypothesis: enjoyment is too tightly tied to *valuing* things, which (Adams thinks) is not reducible to these other psychological states.
What is excellence?

- intrinsic value of the object or the event
- beauty of a work of art, interest of a mathematical theorem, depth of a friendship, etc.
- Adams seems to be a staunch realist about such values. Apparently, they exist independent of human nature, interests, attitudes, and so on. It is worth thinking about how this assumption can be relaxed while retaining the core of his view of well-being. What work is the assumption doing?

Much more on excellence next time . . . .