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In Defence of Satisfaction

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Abstract

We are repeatedly told that living well is more than finding harmless satisfactions because instances fitting that definition may not be examples of well-being: a man who lives only to pick up leaves; a woman whose husband is secretly cheating on her; the widespread unwillingness to find contentment using a virtual reality machine; an individual whose life goes steadily downhill; or a person who fails to develop talents. We find that these cases do not have the implications commonly ascribed to them and defend the thesis that gaining satisfaction is the essence of living well.

In *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), J. L. Austin remarked that the 'constant obsessive repetition of the same small range of jejune "examples" … [is] far too common to be dismissed as an occasional weakness of philosophers'. This warning applies to discussions of the good life. We are repeatedly told that living well is more than finding harmless satisfaction because instances fitting that definition may not be examples of well-being: a man who lives only to pick up leaves; a woman whose husband is secretly cheating on her; the widespread unwillingness to find contentment using a virtual reality machine; an individual whose life goes steadily downhill; a person who fails to develop talents.

We find that these cases do not have the implication commonly ascribed to them, and in what follows we shall consider each in turn and show why it fails to undermine the thesis that gaining satisfaction is the essence of living well.

I

As to the case of the man who finds satisfaction picking up leaves, this activity would not bring fulfilment to most of us, but so what? Many activities that appeal to some may not be enjoyed by others. One of our friends lived to practise and play golf; another considers walking along hitting a ball to be an utter waste of time. Some find fulfilment dressing up as Union or Confederate soldiers and re-enacting Civil War battles; others find this activity pointless.

You need not be skilled at an activity to find that it brings satisfaction. Chess players are ranked from a low of 100 to a high of over 2,700, but your position in this scale does not determine how much you enjoy the game. A beginner may delight in playing chess daily, while a highly skilled player may find that the fierce competition results in deep unhappiness. For instance, many years ago the three-time United States Junior Champion, Robin Ault, gained automatic entry to the United States Chess Championship

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but there lost every game. He soon became so discouraged that he gave up chess.

Philosophers may derive satisfaction from their inquiry even if they lack the talent of Plato, Aristotle, Hume or Kant. Even a single article accepted in a philosophical journal may have more significance to an aspiring scholar than a hundred articles published by a prolific author who is frustrated by a lack of acclaim.

In *Natural Goodness* (2001), Philippa Foot denigrated 'the life of a man or woman who has in fact spent a lifetime in childish pursuits'. Who is to say which pursuits are 'childish'? How about collecting dolls, telling jokes, planting vegetables, selling cookies, running races, recounting adventures or singing songs? While children engage in all these activities, so do adults who may thereby find satisfaction in life. Why belittle them or their interests?

As to the man who finds satisfaction picking up leaves, he may engage in that activity for various reasons. Perhaps he is a horticulturist who studies garden management, or a lover of nature, or someone with a brain injury that severely limits his mental powers. Regardless, if picking up leaves brings a person satisfaction, so be it. Perhaps it wouldn't bring you satisfaction, but what difference does that make? The harmless satisfaction someone finds in an activity can make a life worth living.

Consider the true story of a young man who was complaining that he couldn't find an appropriate woman to marry. When asked whether any of his friends had been more fortunate, he replied with a touch of disdain that one had married recently but that the woman he had married was not pretty. Someone listening to the conversation then asked, 'Does your friend find this woman attractive?' The young man replied, 'Yes, very much so.' To which the questioner responded, 'That's all that matters. What you think is of no account.'

If you are tempted to make light of someone's source of harmless satisfaction, be it visiting every major league ballpark, collecting autographs of movie stars, riding merry-go-rounds or picking up leaves, keep in mind that what you think is of no account.

II

We next turn to the claim that satisfaction based on ignorance is a mirage. This category is exemplified by the familiar hypothetical of

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the seemingly happy woman who is unaware her husband is cheating on her. (For some reason, the scenario is never that of a seemingly happy man who is unaware his wife has been cheating on him.) This case is not only stale but unconvincing because while satisfaction may be based on a false belief, satisfaction, if sincere, is genuine.

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To illustrate, here with names masked is a true account of events that occurred years ago. Susan was an assistant professor at Euclid University. She found satisfaction in her life there, enjoying the campus setting, amiable colleagues and motivated students. She especially admired her chair, a renowned scholar who was highly complimentary about her value to the department. The chair asked her to serve on important committees, represent the department in college-wide meetings and take the lead in planning the curriculum. She was delighted to participate in these activities while she continued to relish her teaching and develop her research.

In her sixth year at Euclid, she was considered for tenure. She assumed all would go smoothly, especially because she had such strong support from the chair. She recognized, though, that her scholarship presented a problem. She had spent so much time undertaking collegial responsibilities that she published only a couple of articles. Yet she was confident of a positive outcome because her efforts had greatly benefitted the school.

But matters went awry. In view of her thin publication record, the department recommended against awarding her tenure. The chair did not support her, writing that although her service had been useful, she had not demonstrated strong potential as a scholar. Eventually, after all appeals were exhausted, she was rejected for tenure. She was furious at her chair, disappointed with her colleagues and extraordinarily dissatisfied.

Now some would doubt that Susan was ever satisfied. For instance, in *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (2007), Richard Kraut argues that to be happy you need to be 'attaining … important things'. According to this view, Susan wasn't satisfied because she was operating under the illusion that she was attaining a significant goal when she wasn't. To suppose she was always dissatisfied, however, is to misdescribe the situation. In fact, she was delighted to be at Euclid. Granted, her outlook eventually changed, and her satisfaction disappeared, but her later dissatisfaction didn't change her earlier satisfaction. Future events cannot alter past ones.

Admittedly, her earlier satisfaction was based on misreading the situation, for she misunderstood the trouble she faced. Had she realized, she would not have been satisfied and might have sought to leave Euclid. But she didn't have the slightest interest in departing. Why? Because she was satisfied.

The appropriate response to examples of false satisfaction is that sincere expressions of satisfaction are never false but may be based on false assumptions. In that case, the satisfaction is not false, but the beliefs on which it rests are false. Indeed, if satisfaction is based on false beliefs and a person never discovers the truth, then the person has lived a satisfying life.

Wasn't the satisfaction spurious? No, because whatever satisfaction you may find is invariably achieved in a setting containing incomplete or misleading information. For example, you may be satisfied while unaware or misled about travails of your family or friends, criticisms of you that others may express only in private,

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lurking threats to you or your loved ones, injustices you could mitigate that may be occurring without your awareness, and physical or mental frailties that unbeknownst to you threaten your long-term well-being. If the pervasiveness of such conditions tempts you to conclude that all satisfaction is illusory, you thereby rob the term *satisfaction* of its usefulness in distinguishing those who are content from those who are not.

III

Another challenge to the view that a good life consists of harmless satisfaction is a frequently cited and widely admired thought experiment offered by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974). He conceived the following hypothetical situation:

> Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain … Would you plug in?

Nozick presumed that no one would choose this option because 'we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them'. Thus, the worth of our satisfaction depends on how we attain it. In the decades since Nozick posed this puzzle and presented his solution, most philosophers have taken his treatment as conclusive. Almost no one has argued that people would choose the experience machine.

To find such unanimity among philosophers is unexpected, and the situation is especially surprising because Nozick's conclusion appears mistaken. In support of this view, we shall present various reasons why an individual might be inclined to choose the experience machine. We illustrate these with examples at least as plausible as the experience machine itself.

First, consider cases in which people may not desire to *do* certain things but instead want to have the experience of doing them. For example, one of the pleasures of going to the movies is the opportunity to experience adventures we would not risk undertaking in reality. While safe in our plush seats, we can feel the excitement of skiing precipitously down a steep mountain, participating in dangerous international intrigue or fighting a raging fire. Yet how many of us actually wish to *do* any of these things? Such cases demonstrate that using an experience machine is not in principle objectionable. The only controversial issue is the length of time during which you would be willing to employ it.

The cinema, however, is not the only case in which we seek appearance rather than reality. Consider the popularity of bungee jumping, roller coasters or aggressive computer games. All these activities offer participants the experience of pursuing thrilling adventures without facing the possible consequences of the real-life activities they simulate.

Granted, the examples we have discussed so far involve individuals who might use the machine only occasionally. And in *The Examined Life* (1989), Nozick reformulated his challenge: 'The question is not whether to try the machine temporarily, but whether to enter it for the rest of your life.'

In response, let us turn next to cases in which people, to change who they are, might choose the experience machine for the rest of their lives. Consider the ardent music lover who dreams of becoming a concert pianist. Few persons, even if they had the necessary talent, would choose to exhaust their energy and patience in such a strenuous effort. Suppose, though, that without any exertion they could revel in the experience of performing recitals in great halls and appearing with the world's leading symphony orchestras, each time receiving adulation from a cheering audience. Might some not be willing to trade their lives in order to embrace such experiences?

Another sort of case concerns individuals who would wish to change their characters. For example, how would you feel if you possessed the moral and intellectual virtues of the

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Buddha? The experience machine could provide the answer.

The experience machine would also enable you to have experiences of inestimable personal value. For example, you could experience a world inhabited by your loved ones who died. In our dreams we often imagine such a scenario and, when awakened, are sorely disappointed that the dream did not continue. Suppose, however, you could opt for the vision to endure. Wouldn't many do so?

'A person's choices may not win admiration, but why should that matter? If your satisfaction depends on whether others praise you, then they control how satisfied you will be with your life.'

Another reason why people might choose the experience machine is a desire to escape a life of sorrow or even unending agony. How many are in such an unfortunate position? Consider Schopenhauer's view in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818):

> Life with its hourly, daily, weekly, yearly, little, greater, and great misfortunes, with its deluded hopes and its accidents destroying all our calculations, bears so distinctly the impression of something with which we must become disgusted, that it is hard to conceive how one has been able to mistake this and allow oneself to be persuaded that life is there in order to be thankfully enjoyed.

One need not be as pessimistic as Schopenhauer to sympathize with his outlook. If we can substitute joys for tortures of mind and body, why not do so? Granted, such satisfaction would be based on an illusion, but the satisfaction would be real.

IV

If harmless satisfaction alone results in well-being, then a life's trajectory from better to worse or worse to better should make no difference, yet some believe it does. For example, in *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (2024), Russ Shafer-Landau argues that 'it is hard to resist the thought that a life that begins badly but continually improves is better than a life that starts out with a bang and goes slowly, steadily downhill'. Yet this thought should be resisted for it rests on minimizing the advantages of early success and maximizing the advantages of late success.

To see this phenomenon, consider two philosophers, A and B, who receive their doctorates at the same age and in the same year. Within a decade, A publishes a book widely regarded as a key work in the development of contemporary epistemology. A, therefore, receives an appointment at a prestigious university, is invited to give a variety of named lectures and is celebrated throughout the world. As the years go by, A publishes less and less, and the later efforts are few and widely regarded as unimpressive. Yet, A continues to be celebrated as the author of a famous book. Thus, A's career ends with continued admiration for the initial achievement but disappointment that later work did not live up to expectations.

B's career, on the other hand, takes off slowly. B teaches at a little-known college, publishes few articles, struggles through many years without recognition and continues to suffer from doubt. At first B publishes little, but eventually B's vita lengthens dramatically. As a result, B's reputation grows and by retirement B is considered an international star. Late in life, B is appointed to a chair at a prestigious university and receives a variety of honours.

Keeping in mind A's stellar reputation through much of life and B's struggle to achieve

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success, we doubt Shafer-Landau's claim that 'continual improvement makes for a better life than one that has long been sliding downward'. Granted, a life story might be more suspenseful if accomplishments come late, but in the course of our lives we are unaware of what the future may bring. Those who suffer through decades of tribulation can hope that success will appear towards the end, but even in the unlikely chance that it finally arrives, the satisfaction achieved is unlikely to be greater than that achieved in a life that ends in frustration but offers continued happiness along most of the way.

Those who would choose B's career should consider the life story of virtually every professional athlete. In almost all cases, fame comes early, and any later accomplishments pale in comparison. The careers of actors typically follow that same trajectory; most fade into oblivion as time takes its toll. Nevertheless, most of us would welcome a successful career as a famed professional athlete or movie star.

V

Many of those who are uncomfortable with understanding living well as finding harmless satisfaction are inclined to assume that their own choice of valued activities should be shared by all. In *Reasons and Persons* (1984), for example, Derek Parfit offers a list of goals that all should seek to make their lives go best: 'rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty'.

But why adopt these criteria? Why is engaging in rational speculation better than engaging in athletic competition? Why do those who cannot have children or choose not to do so live lesser lives? Why is acquiring knowledge of the history of philosophy more desirable than acquiring vast financial resources? Why is awareness of beauty better than awareness of the amazing variety in the animal kingdom?

Perhaps the most problematic of Parfit's list is the development of one's abilities. To see the difficulty, consider the real-life case of Phil Saltman, a jazz pianist in the 1930s and 1940s whose extraordinary talents could have propelled him to international renown. After appearing as a soloist with the Boston Pops Orchestra, however, he decided that life as a touring musician was not to his liking. He chose instead to open a summer camp for boys and girls who enjoyed playing music, even if they did not plan to pursue the activity professionally. The camp, known as Encore/Coda, has remained active for seventy-five years, and Phil Saltman never doubted his choice to give up the opportunity for a distinguished solo career in order to guide youngsters and play music with them in amateur combos.

Did he make a mistake? Did he limit his chances for living well? Did he waste his talents? Some of his friends thought so; others agreed with his choice. But the decision was his to make, and he found satisfaction with his life. So why question his decision?

Of course, most philosophers express no doubt that a life devoted to philosophy is worthwhile, but likewise most rugby players express no doubt that a life devoted to rugby is worthwhile. But which life is preferable? The question is unanswerable.

To see an even deeper problem with a list such as Parfit's, consider a person we shall call Leslie who has found harmless contentment and does not suffer from anxiety, alienation, frustration, disappointment or depression. Leslie prefers a single life, works as a salesperson, enjoys hiking, listening to country music, reading mysteries, and watching baseball and football games on television.

Is Leslie engaging in rational activity, developing abilities, acquiring knowledge and admiring beauty? We are not sure, but a person's well-being does not depend on intellectual sophistication, enjoying opera, socializing, marrying, visiting museums or cultivating a garden. What matters is finding satisfactions that do no harm.

A person's choices may not win admiration, but why should that matter? If your satisfaction depends on whether others praise you, then they control how satisfied you will be with your life. If you wish to avoid being subject to

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the power of others, you need to free yourself from dependence on their judgements. You may admire or deprecate harmless activities that someone else finds satisfying, but your attitude is irrelevant to whether that person is living well.

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