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Trivially Satisfied Desires: A Problem for Desire-Satisfaction Theories of Well-Being

Luca Hemmerich 

Institute of Political Science, Technische Universität Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany
Email: luca.hemmerich@tu-darmstadt.de

Abstract

In this article, I argue that desire-satisfaction theories of well-being face the problem of trivially satisfied desires. First, I motivate the claim that desire-satisfaction theories need an aggregation principle and reconstruct four possible principles desire-satisfactionists can adopt. Second, I contend that one of these principles seems implausible on numerous counts. Third, I argue that the other three principles, which hold that the creation and satisfaction of new desires is good for individuals and can be called proliferationist, are vulnerable to an objection from trivially satisfied desires. They implausibly imply that forming desires that are trivially satisfied is good for individuals. Finally, I argue that trivially satisfied desires may also worsen desire-satisfactionism's classical problem of pointless desires. Together, these claims constitute a challenge to desire-satisfactionism.

1. Introduction

Desire-satisfaction theories of well-being hold that the welfare of individuals consists in the satisfaction of their (suitably restricted or idealized) desires. As has recently been emphasized (Barrett 2022; Van der Deijl and Brouwer 2021; see also Fehige 1998; Lemaire 2021: 95), this claim is in need of specification with regard to how the satisfaction of an individual's desires *aggregates* into her well-being. One plausible way of aggregation is *totalism*, which states that the degree of an individual's well-being is the total sum of her satisfied desires, weighted by their strength. Another may be *proportionalism*, according to which the degree of an individual's well-being is given by the proportion of an individual's satisfied desires, relative to all her desires. But there are other plausible aggregation principles.

In this article, I argue that most plausible aggregation principles that desire-satisfaction theorists could adopt run into the problem of *trivially satisfied desires*. They imply that forming desires that are trivially satisfied, such as the desire to live to more than 5 years old (provided one is older than that), increases an individual's well-being. I argue, first, that having trivially satisfied desires is psychologically realistic, and second, that the implication that gaining such desires is good for individuals is both implausible and difficult to avoid for desire-satisfactionism. Finally, I contend that in addition to this problem, the problem of trivially satisfied desires also worsens the classical objection from pointless desires against desire-satisfaction theories of well-being.

Before I get into the core argument, let me briefly explain why I think desire-satisfaction theories of well-being are in need of an aggregation principle. The central claim of desire-satisfactionism without an aggregation principle may be summarized as follows:

Better Satisfied than Frustrated: All else being equal, having a particular (suitably restricted and/or idealized) desire D satisfied is better for one than having D frustrated.

Many debates about desire-satisfaction theories of well-being only appeal to *Better Satisfied than Frustrated*, and whether it does or does not apply to some or all desires. But *Better Satisfied than Frustrated* is a very weak claim. It states that if we already have a desire and then satisfy it, all else being equal, this increases our well-being. In real life, however, we form new desires and lose old desires all the time. *Better Satisfied than Frustrated* cannot tell us whether this is good, neutral, or bad for us. Indeed, in many real-life cases, even the satisfaction of a pre-existing desire is likely to lead to the formation of new desires. If this is the case, then *Better Satisfied than Frustrated* says nothing about whether satisfying this pre-existing desire is good for us all things considered. More generally, it cannot (even in theory) tell us the level of well-being of an individual.

There are possible principles that desire-satisfactionists could appeal to which are stronger than *Better Satisfied than Frustrated* and weaker than full-fledged aggregation principles. For example, one claim that three of the four aggregation principles discussed below agree on is that the creation and satisfaction of a new desire, all else being equal, increases an individual's well-being. Desire-satisfactionists could focus on establishing medium-range claims like this instead of full-fledged aggregation principles. However, a central task for a theory of well-being seems to be to explain theoretically what an individual's total level of well-being consists in. For this, we need an aggregation principle. It therefore seems valuable to explore the space of aggregation principles which have been implicitly or explicitly proposed by desire-satisfactionists. This is the focus of the following section.

2. Aggregating desire-satisfaction

In this section, building on previous works of Barrett (2019, 2022) and Van der Deijl and Brouwer (2021), I describe four aggregation principles that an adherent of a desire-satisfaction theory of well-being could adopt and show how they can be formalized. I then argue that one of these four principles is implausible on numerous counts. As I will show in the following sections, the other three aggregation principles are vulnerable to the objection from trivially satisfied desires.

Broadly following Barrett (2019), we can formally represent an individual's desire for a feature of an outcome¹ at some point in time as a function $D_{I,t}(x) = r$, mapping an individual I , a point in time t , and a feature x onto a desire strength r .² If an individual has no desire for a feature x , this can be represented by $D_{I,t}(x) = 0$. Barrett's view is that

¹Barrett (2019) argues that we desire features of outcomes, i.e., *partial* descriptions of states of affairs, rather than outcomes per se. I believe this is plausible, but nothing substantive hinges on it here.

²One might think that individuals can have multiple desires and/or aversions toward the same feature. In that case, $D_{I,t}(x)$ would simply represent the *net* desire strength toward x .

we should call $D_{I,t}(x)$ with negative strength *aversions* toward x , and that these constitute a phenomenon psychologically distinct from desires. Alternatively, one might have the view that aversions toward x are simply (positive) desires that x not obtain, which could be represented formally as an additional constraint for all I, t, x that $D_{I,t}(x) \geq 0$. As we will see, aversions slightly complicate some aggregation principles. However, nothing in my objection from trivially satisfied desires turns on the status of aversions.

Following Van der Deijl and Brouwer (2021), we can represent the degree to which a desire for x is satisfied at some point in time t as a function $S_t(x) = s$, where $0 \leq s \leq 1$. This allows desires to be partially satisfied, although again, nothing in the following argument depends on this assumption. Alternatively, one could require that $S_t(x)$ has to assume either the value of 0, when the desire for (or the aversion toward) x is not realized, or 1, when it is realized.³

Which aggregation principles could desire-satisfactionists adopt? There seem to be four broadly plausible answers: totalism, proportionalism, differentialism, and anti-frustrationism. The most straightforward view may be *totalism* (Barrett 2022; Van der Deijl and Brouwer 2021): the view that the degree of an individual's well-being consists in the sum of the strength of her satisfied desires. Totalism can be considered a variant of what Parfit (1984: 497) calls "summative theories." On totalism, an individual I 's degree of well-being $W_I(t)$ at a point in time t can be represented formally as follows:

$$W_I(t) = \sum_x D_{I,t}(x)S_t(x)$$

This sums over all features x toward which the individual I has a desire or aversion, i.e., where $D_{I,t}(x) \neq 0$. Since we have formalized aversions toward x as having a negative strength $D_{I,t}(x)$, this view subtracts an individual's realized aversions from her satisfied desires, if we allow for aversions. If we deny the existence of aversions as a welfare-relevant psychological phenomenon distinct from desires, all $D_{I,t}(x)$ will be non-negative and so will be the total degree of an individual's well-being.

A second possible aggregation principle can be called *proportionalism* (Barrett 2022). Proportionalism claims that the degree of an individual's well-being is the proportion of her satisfied desires relative to all her desires, weighted by their strength. In contrast to totalism, this view tries to incorporate the "Epicurean Intuition" (Van der Deijl and Brouwer 2021: 778) that gaining a new unsatisfied desire is intrinsically bad (and conversely, losing an unsatisfied desire is intrinsically good) for an individual. Van der Deijl and Brouwer (2021), modulo some slightly different notation, formalize it as follows:

$$W_I(t) = \frac{\sum_x D_{I,t}(x)S_t(x)}{\sum_x |D_{I,t}(x)|}$$

Proportionalism represents the degree of well-being of individuals on a scale between -1 and 1 . If an individual has no aversions and only fully satisfied desires, her well-being is 1 . On the other hand, if all aversions of an individual are fully realized and if she has no desires, her well-being according to proportionalism is -1 .⁴ This points

³I call aversions "realized" when their object is realized, and "unrealized" when it is not. For example, if I am averse to eating potatoes and do it anyway, my aversion is realized. For desires, I use "realized" and "satisfied" interchangeably.

⁴In the first case, it is also required that the individual has at least one desire; in the second, that she has at least one aversion.

to the implausible implication that an individual with the worst possible well-being –1 actually becomes better off if she forms an *unsatisfied* desire. More generally, this is the case when starting from *any* negative level of well-being, which means that proportionalism actually violates the Epicurean intuition for individuals with negative welfare. Conversely, on proportionalism, gaining even unrealized aversions decreases one's well-being slightly if it was positive before. This is because gaining a new unrealized desire or aversion will increase the denominator of the fraction while holding the numerator constant. Thus, on proportionalism, whether forming a new unrealized desire or aversion is good or bad for an individual depends on her prior well-being.

In addition to these two aggregation principles identified by Van der Deijl and Brouwer (2021), two more possible aggregation principles are sometimes alluded to in the literature. Heathwood (2006: 548) and Parfit (1984: 496) can be read as suggesting a variant of totalism which satisfies the Epicurean intuition. In contrast to proportionalism, this principle does not appeal to the proportion of satisfied desires to all desires, but to the *difference* of satisfied and unsatisfied desires and could therefore be called *differentialism*. Differentialism can be formalized as follows⁵:

$$\begin{aligned} W_I(t) &= \sum_x D_{I,t}(x)S_t(x) - \sum_x D_{I,t}(x)(1 - S_t(x)) \\ &= \sum_x D_{I,t}(x)(2S_t(x) - 1) \end{aligned}$$

Like totalism, differentialism claims that forming a new satisfied desire is good for an individual. But unlike totalism, it satisfies the Epicurean intuition that gaining a new unsatisfied desire is not neutral, but actively bad for one. As stated, this view also implies that if we allow for aversions, *unrealized* aversions add toward an individual's well-being. One might consider this an implausible implication – if I now form a strong aversion to eating blue apples, does this really make me better off?⁶ Differentialists may therefore want to deny aversions as an independent welfare-relevant phenomenon, as Heathwood seems to do. Alternatively, one could treat aversions asymmetrically, counting unsatisfied desires as negative but unrealized aversions as neutral toward an individual's welfare.

A fourth and final aggregation principle has been called *anti-frustrationism* (Fehige 1998). Peter Singer (1993: 128–29) has tentatively advocated this principle in the past, calling it the “moral ledger” view. This view thinks “of the creation of an unsatisfied preference as putting a debit in a kind of moral ledger that is merely cancelled out by the satisfaction of the preference” (Singer 1993: 128). As a first approximation, it can be formalized as follows:

$$W_I(t) = - \sum_x D_{I,t}(x)(1 - S_t(x))$$

Basically, the anti-frustrationist agrees with the differentialist that having unsatisfied desires decreases an individual's well-being but disagrees that having satisfied desires

⁵As the latter formulation suggests, differentialism can be viewed as a variant of totalism with an affine transformation of the satisfaction function from [0,1] to [-1,1]. One might think that differentialism is most plausible if we require that desires are either entirely satisfied or unsatisfied (thus, $S_t(x) \in \{0,1\}$ for all t, x). I remain agnostic on this question here.

⁶This might lead to a problem of *trivially unrealized aversions* that is analogous to, and adds to, the problem of trivially satisfied desires described below – i.e., the differentialist would have to claim that forming aversions to features that do not (and will never) obtain increases individuals' well-being.

increases it. In the naive formulation above, where aversions are straightforwardly treated like desires with negative strength, anti-frustrationism has a similar potential problem with unrealized aversions as differentialism: it implies that forming an unrealized aversion makes one better off. Moreover, formalized as above, anti-frustrationism would imply that *realized* aversions are neutral toward one's well-being. To avoid these implications, anti-frustrationism could be revised as follows:

$$W_I(t) = - \sum_{\{x|D_{I,t}(x)>0\}} D_{I,t}(x)(1 - S_t(x)) + \sum_{\{x|D_{I,t}(x)<0\}} D_{I,t}(x)S_t(x)$$

This revised version counts unsatisfied desires and realized aversions as negative toward one's welfare, while satisfied desires and unrealized aversions are seen as neutral. But anti-frustrationism as represented above has another potential problem: it holds that individuals' well-being is always negative. We may think that the zero-point in a theory of well-being should represent the point above which life, to use Parfit's (1984: 358) description, is (intrinsically and prudentially) "worth living." Taken as formalized above, anti-frustrationism would then imply that a life full of desire-satisfaction which also contains one single weak unsatisfied desire is not worth living. Singer (1993: 129) has proposed to avoid this implausible implication by specifying a baseline of desire-frustration at which an individual's well-being is zero. This second revised version of anti-frustrationism can be formalized as follows, where the positive number L represents the compensation for the baseline amount of desire-frustration:

$$W_I(t) = L - \sum_{\{x|D_{I,t}(x)>0\}} D_{I,t}(x)(1 - S_t(x)) + \sum_{\{x|D_{I,t}(x)<0\}} D_{I,t}(x)S_t(x)$$

However, as Singer (1993: 129, 1998) concedes, introducing such a zero-level seems ad hoc. If desire-frustration is what fundamentally makes individuals' lives go badly on anti-frustrationism, and there is nothing on the other side of the ledger which fundamentally makes lives go well, then it seems natural to conclude that individuals' well-being *is* always negative, i.e., a life that contains even one unsatisfied preference is not worth living. Fehige (1998: 521–23), who advocates anti-frustrationism, concurs with the latter conclusion.

As we have seen, the four aggregation principles have different strengths and weaknesses. Besides the potential problems discussed above, another test is how aggregation principles handle cases like depression (Spaid 2020; Van der Deijl and Brouwer 2021). Depressed individuals typically lose many of their previously held desires. Consider Anna, an individual who has lost all her desires and aversions and is left with a single satisfied desire, the desire to lie in bed all day. Proportionalism implies that if this desire is satisfied, Anna is as well-off as possible, having a well-being of 1 (Van der Deijl and Brouwer 2021: 778–79). The same conclusion holds for anti-frustrationism, on which Anna has the best possible well-being level 0 (L in Singer's revised version). That some depressed individuals are considered very well-off appears to be a very unpalatable implication. It is also an avoidable one. Neither totalism nor differentialism implies that Anna is nearly as well-off as possible, although they do imply that her well-being is positive.

Anti-frustrationism in particular seems to have many issues. We have already seen anti-frustrationism's forced choice between the implication that no one's life is worth living and an ad-hoc zero-level, as well as its implausible verdicts in some cases of depression. In addition, since anti-frustrationism claims that losing an unsatisfied desire is as good as satisfying it, the principle is vulnerable to an adaptiveness objection. Consider the following case:

Prison: Beth is in prison and strongly desires to be free. She could try to break out through a secret tunnel. If Beth tried this, she would likely succeed without getting caught. A fellow inmate offers her an alternative: a pill that is certain to remove her desire to be free immediately and forever. Except for her strong unsatisfied desire to be free, Beth experiences a similar level of desire-frustration in prison as she would in the outside world.

If Beth is only concerned with her own well-being, should she take the pill? It appears that anti-frustrationism would recommend that she does. The pill is certain to increase her well-being by removing her unsatisfied desire to be free, whereas the attempt to break out carries a small risk of failure. But this seems absurd, and none of the other aggregation principles have this implication. All in all, anti-frustrationism seems to be an implausible view. I think desire-satisfactionists should reject it. For the remainder of this article, I therefore set aside anti-frustrationism. Since the other three aggregation principles imply that the proliferation of new satisfied desires is good for the desirer, I call them *proliferationist* principles. I suggest that proliferationist principles suffer from the problem of *trivially satisfied desires*.

Desire-satisfactionists might hope that there is an entirely different aggregation principle out there that avoids these problems. But this seems unlikely: it appears that all plausible non-proliferationist aggregation principles will yield counterintuitive verdicts in some cases of depression. Recall Anna, a depressed person who has lost all her desires and aversions and is left with a single satisfied desire, the desire to lie in bed all day. On plausible non-proliferationist aggregation principles, there seems to be nothing that can make Anna better off: forming new aversions or unsatisfied desires will surely not increase her well-being; she has no unsatisfied desires that could be satisfied in order to make her better off; and forming and satisfying new desires is not good for her by stipulation on non-proliferationism. So, aggregation principles that are prima facie plausible may face a dilemma: either they yield unacceptable verdicts in some cases of depression, or they face the problem of trivially satisfied desires. If this is the case, then the search for a new aggregation principle seems unlikely to solve the problems for desire-satisfaction theories of well-being discussed here. In the following sections, I examine the second horn of the dilemma: the problem of trivially satisfied desires faced by proliferationist principles.

3. Defining trivially satisfied desires

In this section, I define trivially satisfied desires and argue that having such desires is psychologically realistic. I call a desire that an individual forms at a certain point in time *t* *trivially satisfied* if the desire is already satisfied at *t*. Examples of desires that would be trivially satisfied if I were to form them right now include the desire that $1 + 1$ equal 2, the desire that I live to more than 5 years old, and (hopefully) the desire that my friends like me.

I call a desire *trivially future-satisfied* if it is not satisfied when it is formed at t , but will almost certainly be satisfied at some point in time after t even when nobody intentionally acts toward fulfilling this desire. Examples of trivially future-satisfied desires include the desire that the sun rise tomorrow and the desire that my blood type stay the same over the coming week. Trivially future-satisfied desires are, by definition, not trivially satisfied (because they are not satisfied at the time of their formation). In this article, my main argument is about trivially satisfied desires, not about trivially future-satisfied ones. But it will sometimes be useful to have the concept of trivially future-satisfied desires at hand.

One might think that having trivially satisfied desires is psychologically unrealistic. Can we really desire that $1 + 1$ equal 2? If we could not realistically have such desires, one might argue that our intuitions about these cases could plausibly be mistaken, or at the very least, that they do not have any practical import. However, on reflection, it seems that we can have desires very similar to the desire that $1 + 1$ equal 2. When I was in high school, a friend told me that $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$. When he told me this, I formed a desire that this mathematically beautiful identity be true. Later, when I learned about proofs of Euler's identity, I found out that this desire of mine was in fact (trivially) satisfied. Other psychologically realistic desires that may well be trivially satisfied include a moral philosopher's desire that ethical egoism be false and an American businessperson's desire to live (presently) in a capitalist economy. These examples seem to show that human beings can have desires that are trivially satisfied.

In response, one might retreat to the claim that an individual can only realistically have a trivially satisfied desire *while she is not aware of the satisfaction of this desire*. Once someone comes to learn that her desire is in fact trivially satisfied, one might think, she cannot plausibly continue to have that desire. But first, this is only relevant to the claims about well-being at issue if the *belief* or *knowledge* that one's desires are satisfied, rather than just their actual satisfaction, matters to an individual's well-being – a non-standard subjectivist view (see footnote 14). Second, and more importantly, I in fact continue to desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0 even after having learned that this desire is satisfied. When I imagine finding out that my belief that $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$ were mistaken, I feel like a (relatively weak) desire of mine would be frustrated. Similarly, an individual may very well form the desire that her friends like her while knowing this to be the case. These states of mind seem not at all psychologically unrealistic. It thus appears that it is psychologically possible to have trivially satisfied desires even while knowing that these desires are satisfied.

Finally, one might argue that what I have called a trivially satisfied desire is really not a desire at all, and that the class of trivially satisfied desires as defined above is therefore an empty set. Perhaps, trivially satisfied “desires” are insufficiently action-guiding to count as desires. But we seem to have a lot of desires that we do not, or even cannot, do anything about. Or maybe a feature can only be desired if it does not obtain. But this would implausibly imply that desires can never be satisfied. In general, this line of argument does not seem promising. Examples like the desire that the number of atoms in the universe be prime or the desire that Napoleon's favorite color was blue – desires very similar in structure to some trivially satisfied desires that may well be trivially satisfied themselves – are taken as perfectly valid instances of desires in the literature on “pointless desires,” even by those who defend desire-satisfactionism against this objection (Bruckner 2016; Heathwood 2006; Lukas 2010).⁷ If the desire-status of the apparent desire that the number of atoms in the universe be prime is not questioned by

⁷It seems even more implausible to deny desire-status to what appear to be trivially *future-satisfied* desires. For example, if I want the sun to rise tomorrow, it seems perfectly natural to call this a desire.

anyone, then it seems that the status of trivially satisfied desires should also be uncontroversial. All in all, there appear to be trivially satisfied desires that are psychologically realistic. In the next section, I explore how the proliferationist aggregation principles reconstructed above deal with them.

4. Proliferationist aggregation principles imply that gaining trivially satisfied desires is good for individuals

On the aggregative views introduced above, what happens when an individual – let us call her Claire – forms a new desire that is trivially satisfied? For the sake of simplicity, I assume that the only change to Claire’s desire set and to the degree of satisfaction of her existing desires at the point in time t is gaining a new trivially satisfied desire for a feature x with strength $D_{\text{Claire},t}(x)$. Then, on totalism and differentialism, Claire’s well-being increases by the strength of her new trivially satisfied desire $D_{\text{Claire},t}(x)$. On proportionalism as well, it increases,⁸ except in the edge case where Claire’s prior degree of welfare is the perfect score of 1 (i.e., where she has at least one satisfied desire, no unsatisfied desires, and no aversions at all). Prima facie, gaining a trivially satisfied desire therefore seems to increase an individual’s welfare on the three proliferationist views.⁹ However, there are several potential ways to resist this conclusion.

4.1 Idealizations

As a first way to resist the claim that gaining trivially satisfied desires is good for individuals, one might adopt an *idealized* desire-satisfaction theory, according to which only desires that survive some kind of idealization procedure count toward an individual’s well-being. But many of the examples of trivially satisfied desires discussed above appear to survive the common methods of idealization. Consider the desires that $e^{ix} + 1$ equal 0 and the desire to live to more than 5 years old. It seems that these desires could persist under conditions of full information, rationality, and/or autonomy. And there is no apparent reason to believe that an ideal advisor would recommend to me that I lose these desires. In general, the class of trivially satisfied desires is sufficiently large and diverse that it seems unlikely that a formal idealization procedure would weed all of them out. A potentially more promising strategy, explored in the next section, appears to be to *restrict* the class of welfare-relevant desires, rather than trying to sort out trivially satisfied desires through idealization.

4.2 Restrictions

As a second strategy, one might adopt a *restricted* form of desire-satisfactionism, according to which some types of desire do not count toward an individual’s well-being. A typical restriction is that only *self-regarding* desires contribute to an individual’s well-

Even if trivially satisfied desires would turn out not to be desires, one could thus potentially raise an objection from trivially future-satisfied desires.

⁸To see this, consider that the same positive term $D_{\text{Claire},t}(x)$ is added to both the numerator and the denominator of the fraction that describes Claire’s well-being at t . Since the numerator is smaller than the denominator, and the latter is positive, this increases the value of the fraction.

⁹Note that *Better Satisfied than Frustrated* alone does not imply this; indeed, it has nothing to say about gaining trivially satisfied desires because it has nothing to say about gaining desires at all. Another way to see this is that anti-frustrationism implies *Better Satisfied than Frustrated*, but it also implies that gaining trivially satisfied desires is *not* good for individuals.

being. This excludes trivially satisfied desires like the desire that $1 + 1$ equal 2. But the desire that I live to more than 5 years old is a self-regarding trivially satisfied desire on any plausible account of self-regardingness. It is hard to believe that gaining this desire would increase my well-being. Another restriction that Bruckner (2016) proposes in reaction to the problem of pointless desires is what he calls the *minimal accountability condition*. This condition demands that the desirer, if called upon, could offer a reason for her desire. But I could certainly offer a reason why I desire that $e^{ix} + 1$ equal 0: because this identity, if true, is mathematically beautiful.¹⁰ Still, it seems far-fetched that having this trivially satisfied desire is good for me.

Another possible restriction is proposed by Heathwood (2019) in response to a case presented by Feldman (2010: 66), in which someone gains the desire not to be eaten by a dinosaur.¹¹ Heathwood responds to this and other cases by distinguishing two senses of desire: “desire in the genuine-attraction sense,” where the desired object, event, or state holds a genuine appeal to the desirer, and “behavioral desire,” which merely consists in a behavioral disposition to bring about the desired state. He then goes on to argue that the desire not to be eaten by a dinosaur is only of the behavioral kind, whereas well-being consists in the satisfaction of desires in the genuine-attraction sense. This line of response may succeed against the dinosaur case. However, at least some trivially satisfied desires, like the desire that $e^{ix} + 1$ equal 0, seem to fall under the genuine-attraction sense rather than the behavioral sense of desire. It is not clear what it would even mean to be disposed to act in ways that make $e^{ix} + 1 = 0$ true. And this seems likely to be the case for many trivially satisfied desires.

Nor does adopting a *global* theory, which only appeals to desires “about some part of one’s life considered as a whole, or [...] one’s whole life” (Parfit 1984: 497), exclude all trivially satisfied desires. Although Parfit (1984: 497) sometimes seems to present global theories as an alternative to “summative theories” (i.e., versions of totalism or differentialism), the global/local distinction cuts across the distinctions among methods of aggregation and can more plausibly be viewed as a restriction of which desires count toward an individual’s well-being. Someone who accepts a global theory could adopt any of the aggregation principles described above. Now unfortunately, there are many examples of *global* trivially satisfied desires, such as the desire that I live to more than 5 years old. If I were to gain such a desire, I would be better off according to *global* totalism, proportionalism, or differentialism. Thus, adopting a global theory does not get rid of the implication of proliferationist views that gaining trivially satisfied desires can be good for individuals.

As a final possible restriction, one might try to exclude trivially satisfied desires from well-being considerations by fiat. One could say that only desires that are not trivially satisfied count toward an individual’s well-being. However, this move seems ad hoc and leads to unintuitive implications. Consider the following two cases:

¹⁰One might object that this suggests that my desire that $e^{ix} + 1$ equal 0 is merely instrumental, and the underlying intrinsic desire is that mathematical beauty obtains. I do not think this is an adequate characterization: the truth of Euler’s identity is not a *means to* mathematical beauty; rather, it may *instantiate* mathematical beauty. However, even if it were true that this is a merely instrumental desire, to the extent that mathematical beauty obtains, the desire for it would itself be a trivially (at least partially) satisfied desire which would increase my well-being on proliferationist views. Note that in general, I refer to intrinsic rather than instrumental desires in this article. Since my objection refers to desires that individuals could gain (such as the desire to live to more than 5 years old), rather than desires they already have, it is unproblematic to require, for the sake of this discussion, that these desires be intrinsic desires.

¹¹Those who think aversions are psychologically distinct from desires would likely call this an aversion rather than a desire. Therefore, I do not adopt it as an example of a trivially satisfied desire here.

Anticipation: A second before Dorothy turns 50, she forms the strong desire to live to more than 50 years old. She then maintains this desire for at least a second.

Triviality: The second Dorothy turns 50, she forms the strong desire to live to more than 50 years old.

The proposal under consideration would hold that *Anticipation* would be good for Dorothy, but *Triviality* would not. But how could this be the case? It seems that for the proposed restriction to be plausible, we would at least require a principled reason why these cases are different in a way that matters for Dorothy's well-being. In response, one might exclude trivially *future-satisfied* desires from consideration as well. This would get rid of the asymmetry in the case of Dorothy because it implies that neither *Anticipation* nor *Triviality* is good for her. However, one would then have to explain why trivially future-satisfied desires differ in a welfare-relevant way from other, non-trivial desires that will likely be satisfied in the future. Consider the following two cases:

Coffee: Eve strongly desires to see her friend Florence. They text and agree to have coffee together. Since Florence also wants to see Eve and is a reliable friend, they will almost certainly see each other.

Train: Eve strongly desires to see her friend Florence. Unbeknownst to each other, they sit in the same train car. Since they have the same destination, when disembarking they will almost certainly see each other.

Recall that we have defined trivially future-satisfied desires as desires that are not satisfied when they are formed, but will almost certainly be satisfied at some future point in time even when nobody intentionally acts toward satisfying them. According to this definition, Eve's desire is trivially future-satisfied in *Train* but not in *Coffee*. Hence, the proposed criterion would claim that the satisfaction of Eve's desire is good for her in *Coffee*, while it is not in *Train*. This seems implausible.

One might object that this implication of the restriction in question is merely an artifact of an idiosyncratic reference to intentional action in the definition of trivially future-satisfied desires. Instead, one might propose to define trivially future-satisfied desires simply as desires that are almost certain to be satisfied in the future. However, on this view, the satisfaction of Eve's desire is good for her neither in *Coffee* nor in *Train*. Nor would it be good for me to eat my favorite lunch if I will almost certainly be able to satisfy my strong desire for it. Surely, these cannot be acceptable implications to desire-satisfactionists. On desire-satisfaction theories of well-being, excluding all desires that are almost certain to be satisfied in the future from welfare consideration is too restrictive.

It is certainly conceivable that there is some other restriction that can distinguish welfare-relevant from welfare-irrelevant desires in a way that excludes trivially satisfied desires without having implausible implications like these. And perhaps there is even an independent justification for such a criterion. But until we have such a criterion and such a justification, the strategy of restriction does not solve the problem of trivially satisfied desires.¹²

¹²Note that even if these responses to the first or second strategy fail in some way, and a suitably restricted and/or idealized desire-satisfaction theory can avoid counting trivially satisfied desires toward

4.3 Countervailing aversions

A third potential strategy for proliferationists might be to appeal to a *countervailing aversion*. An individual may be averse to having trivially satisfied desires.¹³ If this aversion is sufficiently strong to outweigh the trivially satisfied desires she could gain, then gaining these desires would not be good for her. But note that we could potentially have a *lot* of trivially satisfied desires. The objector pursuing this line of response would have to concede that if someone gained enough and sufficiently strong trivially satisfied desires, this could outweigh her aversion to having such desires. In order to resist this, one might switch to a theory that not only weights desires and aversions by strength but gives priority to higher-order desires and aversions.

However, I simply doubt that many people actually have an aversion to having trivially satisfied desires. (I certainly do not.) Why would one have such an aversion? Trivially satisfied desires do not seem to hurt – at worst, having them is neutral, and at best, it is good for one. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that many people have given trivially satisfied desires much thought. While it is certainly possible in general to desire or be averse to things one has not thought about, this appears implausible for such a higher-order, seemingly reflective aversion as the aversion to having trivially satisfied desires. Finally, those who are not convinced by these responses to the appeal to a countervailing aversion may just restrict the scope of the following arguments to the set of people who do not have such a countervailing aversion. If people like this exist, or are at least conceivable, proliferationist desire-satisfaction theories of well-being may at least have implausible implications with respect to *their* welfare. This would, I contend, already constitute a substantial challenge to these theories.

5. The view that gaining trivially satisfied desires is good for an individual is implausible

If the responses discussed in the preceding section fail, and if they exhaust the space of promising replies, the proliferationist has to hold that gaining trivially satisfied desires is good for individuals. How problematic is this? When I found out that my desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0 was in fact satisfied, this felt good for a moment. This brief moment of pleasure may have been good for me. The proliferationist, however, is committed to a different, more implausible claim: the claim that my well-being increased the very moment I formed the desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0, independent of any potential pleasure I might later get from my knowledge of its satisfaction.¹⁴

an individual's well-being, the problem of trivially satisfied desires might still constitute a challenge to *actualist* desire-satisfactionism.

¹³See Yu (2022) for a related strategy in defense of desire-satisfactionism. For those who deny aversions, the response can be reformulated: someone may desire not to have trivially satisfied desires.

¹⁴Subjective desire satisfactionism (Heathwood 2005), the theory on which the *belief* that one's desire is satisfied (rather than its actual satisfaction) is what matters for one's well-being, fares somewhat better here. Heathwood (2006: 555–59), who holds a motivational theory of pleasure, might claim that my brief moment of pleasure *just is* the combination of my desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0 and my belief that this identity holds. However, it seems that Heathwood's theory is committed to the implausible view that my moment of pleasure is not so brief after all, since I have held both the belief and the desire in question ever since. Moreover, as a mental-state theory, subjective desire satisfactionism departs some way from classical subjectivism and lacks some of the typical appeals of classical subjectivist views, such as the easy avoidance of the experience-machine objection (Heathwood 2005).

One might think that the intuition that forming the desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0 is not good for me is parasitic on another objection against desire-satisfaction theories: the objection from pointless desires. This objection appeals to the intuition that some desires are too strange in order for their satisfaction to be relevant to one's well-being. Common examples include the desire to count blades of grass (Rawls 1971: 432), the desire that the number of atoms in the universe be prime (Kagan 1998: 37), and the desire to make handwritten copies of War and Peace (Wolf 2010: 16). Although I will argue below that the existence of trivially satisfied desires may also render the objection from pointless desires more troubling for desire-satisfactionism, for now, we should consider the question whether gaining trivially satisfied desires can be good for an individual independently of this objection.

Arguably, though, the desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0 is not pointless. I have argued above that it meets Bruckner's (2016) minimal accountability criterion that aims to filter out pointless desires, and there seems to be no reason to believe that it could not survive common idealizations such as full information. (In particular, the desire has already survived the information that it is satisfied.) Moreover, consider the very similar – and arguably to some degree trivially satisfied – desire that mathematical beauty obtains. When we judge whether this is a pointless desire, we have to do this independently of welfare considerations, i.e., without appealing to the fact that forming it does not seem to increase the desirer's well-being. Considering this, the desire that mathematical beauty obtain and the desire that $e^{i\pi} + 1$ equal 0, which is similar in the relevant respects, like other desires for beauty, do not appear to be pointless.

However, because these desires are not self-regarding, an advocate of a restricted desire-satisfaction theory could still argue that gaining them is not good for the desirer. To show conclusively that trivially satisfied desires constitute a problem for proliferationist desire theories with *any* plausible restriction or idealization conditions, we should consider some desires as “innocuous” as possible, i.e., trivially satisfied desires that are non-adaptive, self-regarding, would survive idealization procedures, and appear non-pointless when formed at a time when they are not trivially satisfied. If even those trivially satisfied desires seem unlikely to contribute to an individual's welfare, then this would constitute a significant problem for proliferationist principles.

To this end, consider the desire to live to more than 70 years old. First, one might question whether this could be an intrinsic desire rather than a merely instrumental one. Of course, living to more than 70 years old may be instrumentally useful for satisfying many other desires. But we can certainly imagine an individual who considers it constitutive of a good life that it reaches a certain length, and therefore intrinsically desires this. Second, we need to consider whether this is a pointless desire regardless of the time of its formation, i.e., a desire that is “difficult to understand or appears downright inscrutable, extremely strange, unusual or maximally idiosyncratic” (Bruckner 2016: 2). The fact that many people do have desires like this one (cf. Nussbaum 1992) seems to show that this is not the case. Third, the intrinsic desire to live to more than 70 years old is surely self-regarding. Fourth, it seems that the desire could survive idealization procedures such as full information or autonomy – at the very least, a fully informed individual *could* have this desire, and it could arise in a non-adaptive and autonomous way.

Now imagine Gertrude, who forms the desire to live to more than 70 years old when she turns 80. Could gaining this desire increase Gertrude's well-being? In order to answer this question, it is important to distinguish having a trivially satisfied desire from other states of mind. Desiring to live to more than 70 years old is different

from feeling grateful, feeling glad, or consciously appreciating that one has lived to more than 70 years old. The latter states of mind are emotions which may intrinsically increase one's well-being. But in the same way that I can desire to sleep without any particular emotion being attached to this desire, we can imagine that Gertrude forms the intrinsic desire to live to more than 70 years old without feeling grateful, feeling glad, or consciously appreciating this. If we take this distinction into account, it seems implausible that merely forming this desire has increased her well-being. Imagine, furthermore, that Gertrude goes on to form the desires to live to more than 65, 60, 55 years old, and so on. All of these desires appear to satisfy the conditions given above, yet it seems even more absurd to say that Gertrude's well-being could increase each time she forms one of these desires.¹⁵ If proliferationist aggregation principles are committed to this claim, then this is a serious problem for them.

Besides constituting an objection in itself, the phenomenon of trivially satisfied desires may also worsen other problems of desire-satisfactionism, such as the objection from pointless desires. One common strategy in response to this objection is to bite the bullet (Heathwood 2005; Lukas 2010; see also Yu 2022): imagine someone who is a passionate grass-counter. She simply desires to count blades of grass and does that for year after year of her life. Maybe grass-counting just *is* good for this quirky individual. And of course, such an individual might not even exist in the real world, which can make the cost of bullet-biting appear smaller. For example, our intuitions about the case might be unreliable since we might not be able to understand the grass-counter's psychology.

Now suppose that you are not interested in, and do not care at all about (but are not averse to) mathematics. According to proliferationist principles, if you could somehow gain the pointless desire that $396 + 575$ equal 971, this would – other things being equal – make you better off. This makes bullet-biting substantially less attractive than on the classical version of the objection from pointless desires. Biting the bullet on the classical objection from pointless desires requires you to concede that satisfying a pointless desire is good for some quirky, possibly hypothetical individual who is into that kind of thing. Biting the bullet on the objection from *trivially satisfied* pointless desires requires you to concede that *you, right now*, could be (potentially a lot) better off by gaining (lots of) pointless trivially satisfied desires that you do not care about now. This seems very counterintuitive, and substantially more so than the classical objection from pointless desires. Now of course, there may be other strategies, such as restrictions, that can dispel the problem of pointless desires (see, e.g., Bruckner 2016). I do not raise an objection to those strategies here. But to the extent that one is not entirely convinced that they succeed, the existence of trivially satisfied desires does seem to make the problem of pointless desires worse.

¹⁵One might reply that the satisfaction of the desire to live to more than 70 years old entails the satisfaction of those other desires, and that this is an independent explanation why the latter cannot contribute to her well-being. But the principle underlying this judgment is implausible. Imagine Halima, who is currently going through an adoption process. She loves her future adoptee Irene and intrinsically desires to care for Irene as her child. At the same time, she has always seen herself as a future parent and intrinsically desires to be a mother. The satisfaction of the first of these desires entails the satisfaction of the second, but it seems that a plausible version of desire-satisfactionism should claim that the satisfaction of each of the two desires independently contributes to Halima's well-being.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that desire-satisfaction theories of well-being face the problem of trivially satisfied desires. To this end, I have briefly motivated the claim that desire-satisfaction theories of well-being need an aggregation principle and reconstructed four principles implicitly or explicitly mentioned in the literature. I have argued that one of these aggregation principles, anti-frustrationism, is implausible on numerous counts, and that the three proliferationist principles are vulnerable to the objection from trivially satisfied desires. I have also argued that the search for a different aggregation principle is unlikely to bypass these problems. In raising the objection from trivially satisfied desires against proliferationist aggregation principles, I have defended the following three claims: first, trivially satisfied desires are a psychologically realistic phenomenon; second, proliferationist principles imply that gaining trivially satisfied desires is good for an individual; and third, this implication is implausible. Finally, I have argued that trivially satisfied desires may worsen desire-satisfactionism's classical problem of pointless desires.

Many of these claims are independent of each other. One might accept the typology of different aggregation principles but deny that the objection from trivially satisfied desires is conclusive. Or one might reject the argument against anti-frustrationism and take the objection from trivially satisfied desires as an indirect reason for adopting anti-frustrationism. But if my contention that both non-proliferationist and proliferationist aggregation principles face serious problems is correct, then this may spell trouble for desire-satisfaction theories of well-being.

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