

Perfect Happiness

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Abstract: In this paper, I will develop a new theory of the nature of happiness, or “perfect happiness.” I will examine what perfect happiness *is* and what it *is not* and I will try to answer some fundamental questions about this property. According to the theory, which I shall call “the fulfillment theory,” perfect happiness is perfect fulfillment. The analysis of happiness in this paper is a development of the old idea that happiness is getting what you want and can be classified as a kind of desire-satisfaction theory. According to the fulfillment theory of happiness, it is necessarily the case that an individual *x* is perfectly happy if and only if all *x*’s wants are fulfilled. The interpretation of this basic definition is important, since the consequences of the particular version defended in this essay are radically different from the consequences of many other popular theories of happiness. The fulfillment theory is also quite different from most other desire-satisfaction theories of happiness. We will see that it has many interesting consequences and that it can be defended against some potentially serious counterarguments. The upshot is that the analysis of (perfect) happiness developed in the present paper is quite attractive.

Keywords: happiness, perfect fulfillment, desire-satisfaction theories, final ends, The Rational Will.

1. Introduction

Happiness has been studied for thousands of years by philosophers, poets, religious thinkers and theologians.¹ More recently, scientists have turned their eye to this phenomenon: psychologists,² economists,³ biologists⁴ and many others. There is even a whole journal devoted to the study of happiness: the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.⁵ Some recent philosophical contributions to the study of this subject include Feldman (2010), Haybron (2008), Martin (2012), and Russell (2012). Nevertheless, there is no consensus on what happiness is. In this paper, I will first briefly mention some different views on this issue. Then I will develop a new theory of the nature of happiness, or rather – what I shall call – “perfect happiness.” According to this theory, perfect happiness is perfect fulfillment. I will call this theory “the fulfillment theory of (perfect) happiness.” I will examine what perfect happiness *is* and what it *is not* according to this theory, I will prove some theorems that follow from it, and I will defend the theory against some possible

¹ Annas (1993), Bok (2010), McMahon (2005), White (2006).

² Boniwell, David, and Ayers (2013).

³ Bruni and Porta (2005).

⁴ Grinde (2012), Nes (2014).

⁵ For a collection of some papers published in this journal, see Delle Fave (2013).

counterarguments. The upshot is that the fulfillment theory of (perfect) happiness is quite attractive.⁶

The paper is divided into six sections. In Section 2, I discuss some preliminary linguistic and methodological questions and I propose a classification of various approaches to the topic of happiness. In Section 3, I turn to the explication of the theory developed in the present paper: the fulfillment theory of happiness. I try to render what I mean by this theory more precise by answering some fundamental questions. In Section 4, I will prove some interesting theorems that follow from our definition. I will focus on some of the most interesting consequences and try to explain their significance. In Section 5, I defend the theory against some possible counterarguments that are potentially quite serious. I try to argue that these problems cannot be used to refute the fulfillment theory of happiness. Finally, Section 6 contains a brief summary of the paper and a conclusion.

2. Theories of happiness

Different theories of happiness try to answer different kinds of questions: metaphysical (What is the nature of happiness? What kind of ‘thing’ is it?), linguistic (What does ‘happiness’ mean? Do sentences that include ‘happy,’ ‘happiness,’ etc. have truth-values?), scientific (What are the sources, causes and effects of happiness?), epistemological and methodological (How should we study happiness, what methods should we use?), ethical and metaethical (What is the value of happiness and how is happiness related to morality and rationality?), and so on.

In this paper, I will primarily be interested in the metaphysical questions. I will develop a theory of the *nature* of happiness. However, I will first say a few words about the meaning of ‘happiness’ and about my methods. Later, I will also consider some ethical questions.

Most people – for example, most thinkers mentioned in the introduction and later in this section – seem to agree that ‘happiness,’ ‘happy’ and similar words are ambiguous in natural languages.⁷ I share this view. At least, it seems obvious to me that various philosophers and scientists use these words to refer to different phenomena. When I use the term ‘happiness’ and speak about ‘perfect happiness,’ I am focusing on one important aspect of this concept. I do not deny that ‘happiness’ can be used in other interesting senses. Nowadays, for example, we often seem to use ‘happy’ as synonymous with ‘feeling happy.’ According to this interpretation, someone *is* happy if and only if (iff) she is *feeling* happy. But this does not seem to be the only sense of the word. My theory is therefore partly

⁶ For more on some empirical research on happiness, see, for example, Diener and Diener (1996), Easterlin (2003), Kahneman, Diener, Schwarz (1999), Myers and Diener (1995) and Seligman (2002).

⁷ See also Davis (1981) and Thomas (1968).

‘stipulative’ in the sense that I focus on one reading of ‘happiness.’ Still, even stipulative definitions of various concepts should not depart too much from our ordinary languages. The way I use the term is not arbitrary; the idea that happiness is getting what you want is very old and has been defended, in one form or another, by many philosophers throughout history. To be able to say something interesting about happiness, we should define what we mean by the concept. I try to do this in the present paper.⁸

According to the theory presented in this paper, the concept of happiness is not the concept of a purely mental phenomenon. We cannot immediately observe with our senses whether someone is happy and we cannot use introspection to decide whether or not we are happy, at least not in most cases. Happiness is usually not something immediately given in experience. It is not something in the mind (in contrast to the feeling of happiness), it is not something in the head and it is not something in the body. At least, it is not always and necessarily something *only* in the mind, head or body. Even if we had perfect knowledge of someone’s mental and bodily states, we would not normally know whether she is happy or not. Since perfect happiness is perfect fulfillment, according to our theory, we cannot know whether someone is perfectly happy or not without knowing whether the things she wants are true or not. If a mother wants her daughter not to suffer from some illness, for example, she is perfectly happy only if her daughter is *in fact* not suffering from some illness. Therefore, to know whether the mother is perfectly happy or not, it is not enough to know everything about the mother, we also need to know something about an objective state of the world – the health of the daughter.

Whether an individual is perfectly happy or not at a particular moment in time cannot usually be decided empirically at that time, for the content of what someone wants might be about another time, for example a state of affairs in the future. We cannot *now* directly observe the future, even though it might be possible *in the future* to observe what is the case *then*. Sometimes it is in principle impossible to decide whether someone is perfectly happy only by empirical methods, for someone can want abstract things that cannot be observed. Someone might, for instance, want a mathematical theorem, say the Goldbach conjecture, to be true. We cannot observe whether this theorem is true or not. Hence, we cannot observe whether this person is perfectly happy or not.

⁸ It is not obvious that ‘happiness’ is ambiguous in English. Feldman (2010, Appendix C) argues against this view. Suppose that he is correct about this. Even if it were true that ‘happiness’ is not ambiguous in English, we do not have to go on using this word in the same sense that we have so far. Words in natural languages do change meaning over time, and there may be good reasons for introducing a new reading. So, the fact that some scientific or philosophical theory about happiness uses the term ‘happiness’ in some unusual sense, is not a decisive argument against such a theory. For more on the use of ‘happiness’ in this paper, see Section 5 and footnote 36.

It is conceivable that it is in some cases possible to empirically decide whether an individual is perfectly happy. If all of an individual's wants are about present states of affairs that are empirically observable at a particular moment in time, then it is in principle possible to decide whether or not this individual is perfectly happy at this time. It might in principle even be possible for an individual to decide by introspection whether she is perfectly happy or not. If all an individual's wants are about her own present introspectable mental states and all her wants are introspectable, she might use introspection to 'observe' whether she is perfectly happy or not. Even though cases of this kind are possible, it does not follow that there are any actual examples of such conceivable situations.

It is, of course, possible to empirically study the feelings and physical, biological and psychological processes that go on in someone who is perfectly happy (in our sense) or who is happy in some other sense of 'happy,' for example, someone who is feeling happy or is 'satisfied' with her life. Nevertheless, according to the current theory, this is not the same thing as studying happiness itself. Perhaps one aspect of happiness can be studied by introspection and, in the future, even by brain scans: namely, what someone wants. Yet, to know whether these wants are satisfied or not, something more is usually needed.

'Happiness' is neither an evaluative term nor a normative term according to the fulfillment theory. Sentences that include 'happiness' are normally used to express beliefs that are true or false; they are not used simply to express our feelings or to prescribe certain things. The concept of happiness is a purely formal, intellectual or theoretical concept. 'Happiness' has more in common with logical expressions, such as 'everything,' 'something' and 'nothing,' than with empirical words such as 'red' or 'sweet,' according to the fulfillment theory. This does not entail that no aspects of what it means to be happy can be investigated empirically and it does not entail that empirical sciences do not have anything interesting to say about happiness, as obviously they do. Still, it is very difficult to study the kind of happiness that is described in this paper by empirical methods alone.

There are many kinds of theories of happiness: hedonistic theories,⁹ desire-satisfaction theories,¹⁰ life-satisfaction theories,¹¹ final end theories, eudaimonistic and well-being theories, and functional and self-realization theories,¹² subjective well-being theories,¹³ virtue theories,¹⁴ emotional state

⁹ Bentham (1781/1988), Feldman (2004, 2010), Mill (1863/1987), Sidgwick (1907/1981), Sprigge (1991), Tännsjö (2007).

¹⁰ Chekola (1974, 2007), Davis (1981b), McGill (1967), Perry (1926), Rawls (1972), Solomon (1976).

¹¹ Benditt (1974), Brandt (1967), Kekes (1982), Martin (2012), Nozick (1989), Suikkanen (2011), Sumner (1996, 2000), Tatarkiewicz (1978), Telfer (1980), Thomas (1968), van Praag and Ferrerer-i-Carbonell (2004), Veenhoven (1984, 1984b), von Wright (1963), Wilson (1968).

¹² Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Franklin (2010), Russell (2012).

¹³ See Pavot and Diener (2013) for an introduction to theories of this kind, which are currently very popular among social scientists.

¹⁴ The ancient Stoics, see Annas (1993), Becker (1998).

theories,¹⁵ harmony theories,¹⁶ “supernatural” theories,¹⁷ pluralistic (objective list) theories,¹⁸ etc.¹⁹ The theory that I introduce in this paper can be classified as a kind of desire-satisfaction theory. Now, let us turn to this approach.

3. The fulfillment theory of perfect happiness

In this section I will develop the fulfillment theory of happiness, or perfect happiness. It is important to emphasize that it is a theory of *perfect* happiness and not of happiness, since it is possible to be happy without being perfectly happy and since it seems possible to talk about different degrees of happiness. ‘Happy,’ in contrast to ‘perfectly happy,’ is vague. In this sense the theory is about an “ideal.”²⁰ Hence, when I speak of ‘happiness’ in this paper, I usually mean ‘perfect happiness.’ I will not try to define what it means to be less than perfectly happy.

According to the theory, perfect happiness is perfect satisfaction or perfect fulfillment. More precisely, we shall use any of the following equivalent definitions:

Definition of perfect happiness

D1. It is necessary that, for every individual x : x is perfectly happy iff all x 's wants are fulfilled (satisfied).

D2. It is necessary that, for every individual x : x is perfectly happy iff everything x wants is the case.

D3. It is necessary that, for every individual x : x is perfectly happy iff for every A , if x wants it to be the case that A , then A is the case.

¹⁵ Haybron (2001, 2005, 2008), Sizer (2010).

¹⁶ Perhaps Plato's *Republic*.

¹⁷ St Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*.

¹⁸ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Montague (1967).

¹⁹ It is not obvious how various philosophers and scientists should be classified. Some thinkers might belong in several categories. For example, Aristotle sometimes seems to defend a well-being theory of happiness, sometimes a functional theory, sometimes a virtue theory and sometimes a pluralistic theory (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 11–17; 1097a15–1099b10). The picture is complicated by the fact that not all individuals use the same language. Aristotle, for example, uses the Greek term “*eudaimonia*,” which is often translated as ‘happiness.’ Some seem to think that this is reasonable, e.g. Kraut (1979) and Annas (1993), others, that it is misleading, e.g. Sumner (1996) and Haybron (2008). How various thinkers should be classified will, of course, depend on exactly how the different theories are formulated. They are not necessarily defined in such a way that they are mutually exclusive. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of these various views about happiness. Note also that not all thinkers intend to study the same ‘thing’ when they study ‘the phenomenon’ they call ‘happiness.’ Therefore, these theories are not necessarily inconsistent with the fulfillment theory of happiness or with each other.

²⁰ One could argue that how happy someone is, is determined by how many of this person's wants are satisfied. The more wants that are satisfied, the happier the person is. This is perhaps approximately true, but it does not seem entirely right to me. Some wants are more important than others. Having one fundamental desire fulfilled might be much more important for overall happiness than having many unimportant wants fulfilled.

These definitions can be interpreted in many different ways depending on what we mean by ‘necessary,’ ‘every individual,’ ‘iff,’ ‘everything,’ ‘wants’ and ‘fulfilled.’ To try to make the theory more precise, I will answer some questions about it.

Q1. What kind of theory is this and how is it related to other similar theories of happiness in the literature?

A. The fulfillment theory of happiness can be classified as a desire-satisfaction theory of happiness. According to theories of this kind, happiness is satisfaction of desires or wants or inclinations in some sense. However, there are many different versions of this type. Let us consider three important distinctions.

Firstly, there are *subjective* and *objective* forms. According to the subjective forms, the important thing is that we *believe* that our desires are satisfied, not that they *in fact are* satisfied. If someone *believes* that her desires are satisfied (even when they *in fact are* not), then she *is* happy. Some subjective theories emphasize the pleasure we often *feel* when our desires are satisfied or when we believe that they are satisfied. According to those theories *feeling* satisfied is a necessary and perhaps sufficient condition for happiness. Davis (1981b) is an example of a subjective form of desire-satisfaction theory of happiness. According to objective desire-satisfaction theories, the important thing is that our desires *in fact are* satisfied, not that we *believe* that they are satisfied or that we *feel* satisfied. It is neither necessary nor sufficient that we *feel* satisfied or fulfilled to *be* satisfied or fulfilled, according to objective forms, and it is neither necessary nor sufficient that we *believe* that we are satisfied or fulfilled; we can *be* satisfied without *feeling* satisfied and without *believing* that we are satisfied and we can *feel* satisfied and *believe* that we are satisfied without *being* satisfied. Chekola (1974, 2007) and Solomon (1976) are examples of objective forms. The fulfillment theory of happiness in this paper is an objective kind of desire-satisfaction theory.

Secondly, there are *actual* and *ideal* versions of desire-satisfaction theories. According to actual forms it is our *actual* desires that must be satisfied for us to be happy, and according to ideal forms it is our *rational* desires (or perhaps the desires we would have if we were perfectly wise) that must be satisfied. Chekola (1974, 2007) can be classified as an actual and Rawls (1972) as an ideal desire-satisfaction theory. The fulfillment theory of happiness in this paper is an actual kind.

Thirdly, there are *restricted* and *unrestricted* forms. According to unrestricted forms, *all* desires must be satisfied for an individual to be (perfectly) happy; according to restricted forms, only *some* desires must be satisfied, for instance, our most ‘important’ desires, or our ‘now-for-now’ desires, or our desires based on true, justified, rational beliefs, or desires about our own lives or about our own subjective, conscious experiences, etc. Chekola (1974, 2007) and Solomon (1976) are examples of a kind of restricted version; Chekola, for example, focuses on “global” desires (relatively permanent, comprehensive and important desires), not “local” desires. Kant, in some places, appears to defend an

unrestricted form (see, for example, Kant (1788/1997, 104; 5:124)). Even the expression “all desires” can be interpreted in many ways. Let us consider one important distinction. There are *eternal* unrestricted and *temporal* unrestricted forms. According to the eternal version “all desires” means “all desires at all times”; according to the temporal version “all desires” means “all desires that the individual *c* has at the particular moment when the sentence ‘*c* is (perfectly) happy’ is evaluated.” The fulfillment theory of perfect happiness is a temporal, unrestricted form. This means that individual *x* is perfectly happy at time *t* iff *absolutely all* wants *x* has at *t* (but not necessarily at other times) are satisfied at *t*.²¹ An individual can, therefore, be perfectly happy at one moment in time even though she is not perfectly happy at some other time. At any time she is either perfectly happy or not and at no time is she both perfectly happy and not perfectly happy.

Q2. Has anyone else defended a similar theory? How is the fulfillment theory different from these theories?

A. Chekola (1974, 2007) and Solomon (1976), as we have seen, defend theories that are close to the theory introduced in this paper, but they do not argue for an unrestricted form. Kant, in some places, appears to express a view of happiness that is very close to the one defended in this paper (see, for example, Kant (1785/2002, 15; Ak 4:399), Kant (1788/1997, 104; 5:124) and Wike (1994)). But it is difficult to interpret the Prussian philosopher and perhaps his version is more similar to an eternal form.

The theory in this paper is unrestricted. Few desire-satisfaction theories of happiness are. This is reasonable since we are speaking of *perfect* happiness. It is possible to be happy without being *perfectly* happy, but someone is *perfectly* happy only if *all* her wants are fulfilled. In this sense, the fulfillment theory is more ambitious than many other similar theories. It is very difficult to be perfectly happy (see **Q8** below). Most desire-satisfaction theories in the literature have little to say about what it means for a desire to be satisfied. As far as I know, the analysis in this paper has not been defended by anyone else in the literature, at least not explicitly (see **Q7** below). Yet, it seems to be intuitively very plausible.

Q3. To what category does happiness belong?

A. Most people seem to assume, often without much discussion, that happiness is some kind of property. This is natural, since ‘happy’ is often used as an ordinary predicate. We say, for example, that Susan is happy or that Jones is happy, or that someone has the property of being happy, and so on. However, sometimes philosophers and scientists have located happiness in some other category. Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008) appear to think of happiness as a process. Zamagni (2005) speaks about happiness as an interpersonal relation. Sentences such as

²¹ However, to be able to respond to argument five in Section 5, this proposition must be qualified somewhat. The quantifier in the definition of perfect happiness is a propositional or sentential quantifier. When this quantifier is instantiated, the instances will be “quantifier-free,” that is, free from propositional quantifiers.

“Peter is happy with his wife” and “Jenny is happy with her teacher” suggest that this might be a fruitful way of looking at happiness. According to some life-satisfaction theories, happiness might be a relation between a person and that person’s life. A person stands in this relation to her life iff she is satisfied or happy “with her life.”²² According to some views, happiness might be a relation between a person and a state of affairs (or a proposition). We say such things as, “He is happy that he has a job,” “She is happy that her children are healthy,” etc. In these cases, happiness appears to be a relation between a person and a state of affairs. Both Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) and Russell (2012) seem to think that happiness (eudaimonia) is an activity. According to the fulfillment theory, happiness is a property. An individual x has this property iff all x ’s wants are satisfied.²³

Q4. What does ‘necessarily’ mean?

A. The theory is a definition of perfect happiness; it is supposed to tell us something about the essence of perfect happiness. The necessity is, therefore, an absolute necessity. The equivalence is supposed to be true in every possible world at every point in time.

Q5. What kinds of things are happy? What does ‘every individual’ mean?

A. We speak of many things as being happy: a happy person, a happy individual, a happy dog, a happy life, a happy marriage, a happy day, month or year, a happy moment, a happy time, a happy feeling, and so on. In this paper, I am primarily interested in happiness as a property of individuals. The expression ‘every individual’ could mean every individual whatsoever of any kind or it could range over some subset of individuals. If we assume that ‘every individual’ ranges over absolutely everything, then everything that does not want anything will be perfectly happy. This view may shed some light on certain eastern philosophies and religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, and on asceticism as an ideal. If we could get rid of all our wants (desires, inclinations), we would become perfectly happy according to the fulfillment theory. Nevertheless, as long as we are alive, it is probably impossible not to want anything at all. Furthermore, if dead people do not want anything (and dead people can have properties), everyone who is dead will be perfectly happy. This might seem to be a comforting view. If we will be perfectly happy being dead, why fear death? Yet, some might think that these consequences are counterintuitive. It seems somewhat strange to call such things

²² Note that I do not want to suggest that everyone who says that happiness is ‘life-satisfaction’ thinks that happiness is a relation between a person and his life. Such a philosopher might, for example, think that happiness is a monadic property, but that a person has that property iff she is satisfied with her life as a whole.

²³ Elsewhere, I speak about individuals as perfectly happy at particular moments in time (see, for example, **Q1** above) or as perfectly happy in a possible world or in a possible world at a particular time (see, for example, **Q11** below). So, it is possible to think of perfect happiness as a relation that involves time (and/or possible worlds). However, in this sense, all ordinary properties can be interpreted as relations. Therefore, I shall continue to speak about perfect happiness as a property.

as stones, raindrops and carbon atoms ‘perfectly happy.’ Still, if such entities do not want anything, it follows that they are perfectly happy according to the theory. If we want to avoid these consequences, we can restrict the expression ‘every individual’ to every individual who wants something (or are able to want something). This will include all (or most) humans and many animals; it might include aliens and supernatural beings (if there are any), and in the future perhaps various artificial agents. Things that do not (are not able to) want anything will then not count as perfectly happy.

Q6. What does ‘wants’ mean?

A. A want is a kind of attitude, often called a ‘propositional attitude,’ since it is supposed to have a proposition or state of affairs as its content or object. Let us abbreviate the expression “Individual *c* wants it to be the case that *A*” in the following way: *WcA*. If *c* wants it to be the case that *A*, we can say that *c* has the property of wanting it to be the case that *A*. Here are some other words that are often used as synonyms for ‘want’: ‘desire,’ ‘inclination,’ ‘urge,’ ‘propensity,’ ‘wish,’ ‘love.’ I will sometimes use ‘desire’ as an alternative to ‘want’ for linguistic variation. An individual *c* has a desire or want for *A* iff *c* wants *A* to be the case.

In this paper, wanting something means wanting it all things considered. It is possible to want something without feeling like doing it. One can, for example, want to go to the dentist without being particularly keen on doing it. One wants to go to the dentist because going to the dentist is a (necessary) means to having healthy teeth and avoiding toothache. So, it is possible to want something as a means to something else and it is possible to want something in itself.

According to the fulfillment theory of happiness, it is possible to want ‘anything.’ ‘*A*’ in the expression “*WcA*” can be replaced by any well-formed sentence whatsoever. ‘*A*’ can be about the present time (I want to talk to you now)²⁴, about the future (She wants to write a book [sometime in the future]) or about the past (I want [hope, desire, wish] that I made the right choice yesterday (Feldman, 2004, 2)); it can be about a contingent state of affairs (She wants to go to Europe) or a necessary state of affairs (He wants the Goldbach conjecture to be true); it can be about facts concerning nature (He wants the sun to shine tomorrow) or about various mental states (She wants to feel the pleasure of eating an apple pie); it can be about *c* (He wants to be perfectly happy) or about some other individual or individuals (She wants her daughter to be happy); it can be about things within *c*’s control (He wants to climb Mount Everest) or about things that are not within *c*’s control (She wants there to be peace in the Middle East); it can be about something *c* wants to *do* (She wants to play tennis) or about something *c* wants to *be* (He wants to be a member of the group); and so on. It is even possible to want impossible states of affairs. Someone can both love and hate

²⁴ Let ‘*A*’ stand for “I talk to you now.” Then “I want to talk to you now” can be symbolized in the following way: *WiA* (read: “I want it to be the case that I talk to you now”), etc.

something at the same time according to the theory (He wants to be married to her and he wants not to be married to her.).²⁵

Q7. What does it mean to say that a want is fulfilled?

A. Here is a first preliminary answer. If individual *c* wants it to be the case that *A*, then *c*'s want is fulfilled (or satisfied) iff *A*. In other words, if *c* wants it to be the case that *A* and *A* is in fact the case, then *c*'s want is fulfilled, and if *c* wants it to be the case that *A* and *A* is in fact not the case, then *c*'s want is not fulfilled. If *c*'s want is not fulfilled, we can say that it is frustrated. However, things get more complicated when we consider the fact that the content of a want can be about the future, for example as in the following scenario: on Monday (t_1), I want you to meet me here on Friday (t_3). On Monday and on Wednesday (t_2) it is not the case that you meet me here. Suppose that you in fact meet me here at t_3 . Then, my want seems to be fulfilled. But *when* is it fulfilled? At t_1 or at t_3 ? And is the want *not* fulfilled and thus frustrated at t_1 and at t_2 ? Suppose, instead, that you do not meet me here at t_3 . Then, my want seems to be frustrated. But *when* is it frustrated? At t_1 , t_2 or t_3 ?

According to the fulfillment theory in this paper we shall use the following terminology, which I think makes the fulfillment theory unique and quite different from other desire-satisfaction theories in the literature. In the possible world(s) (if there are any) where you do meet me here at t_3 , my want (at t_1) is fulfilled at t_1 (not at t_3), and in the possible world(s) (if there are any) where you do not meet me here at t_3 , my want (at t_1) is not fulfilled, and hence frustrated, at t_1 (not at t_3). It is not until t_3 we can know for sure whether or not my want is satisfied at t_1 . If you do in fact meet me here, my want is satisfied at t_1 , and if you do not in fact meet me here, my want is frustrated. We do not say that my want is frustrated at t_1 and we do not say that it is frustrated at t_2 due to the fact that you do not meet me here at either t_1 or t_2 , because what I want at t_1 is not that you meet me here at t_1 and it is not that you meet me here at t_2 , it is that you meet me here at t_3 . It is not until t_3 (or until it is settled that it will be the case that you will not meet me here at t_3) that it is settled that my want is frustrated at t_1 . All of this is compatible with the idea that I might change my mind. At t_3 , I might no longer want you to meet me here now (at t_3). In fact, suppose that it is true at t_3 that I want it to be the case that you do not meet me here now (at t_3). Furthermore, suppose that you do in fact meet me here at t_3 . Then, my want at t_3 is frustrated, even though my want at t_1 is fulfilled. Suppose, instead, that you do not meet me here at t_3 . Then, my want at t_3 is fulfilled, but my want at t_1 is frustrated. These clarifications will become important in Section 5.

Q8. Is it possible to be perfectly happy in this life? Are there any individuals who are perfectly happy?

²⁵ The theory of wants that is used in the proofs in Section 4 and throughout the present article is developed in more detail in the paper Rønnedal (2020). See also Rønnedal (2019b) and Rønnedal (2019c).

A. Some people seem to think that it is impossible to be perfectly happy in this life. According to St Thomas Aquinas, for example, a certain participation in happiness is possible but perfect and true happiness cannot be had in this life; we have to wait for the afterlife to experience that kind of happiness (*Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 5, Article 3). Of course, Thomas does not use the expression 'perfect happiness' in the same sense as in this paper. Yet, he seems to think that perfect happiness entails perfect fulfillment. So, he would perhaps also reject the idea that we can be perfectly fulfilled in this life. According to the fulfillment theory, however, it is in principle possible to be perfectly happy in this life. It is possible that all a person's wants are fulfilled. Nevertheless, it seems to be very difficult for most humans. Perhaps no living person has ever been perfectly happy and perhaps no living person will ever be. Although it is not absolutely or logically impossible to be perfectly fulfilled, it might be historically impossible for some individuals.²⁶ We cannot know a priori whether there has ever been a living individual who was perfectly happy.

Q9. What does it mean to say that the concept of perfect happiness is a purely formal concept?

A. The fact that the concept of perfect happiness is a purely formal concept means that there are no restrictions on the contents of the wants that must be fulfilled for an individual to be perfectly happy according to the theory (however, see footnote 21). The concept itself has no matter. Almost any kind of individual living almost any kind of life can in principle be perfectly happy. Someone living a quiet life in solitude can be perfectly happy. Someone living an active, hectic, social life can be perfectly happy. Ascetics and hedonists, introverts and extroverts, married and unmarried people, active and contemplative individuals can all be perfectly happy. It does not matter if you are male or female, young or old, rich or poor. You can be perfectly happy no matter what your social class, ethnicity or sexual orientation is. It is possible that there are perfectly happy bus drivers, businessmen, nurses and philosophy teachers. Perfect happiness is, in principle, compatible with almost any kind of job. Even slaves and wicked villains can, in principle, be perfectly happy according to the theory. However, it will be more difficult in some positions than in others, given the way we are constituted physically and mentally. For example, most people do in fact want certain things. We want to drink when we are thirsty, eat when we are hungry, sleep when we are tired; we want to feel secure and live in peace with our neighbors; we want to be with other people when we are lonely and have at least some good friends; we want to be free and healthy; we want to have a meaningful job and develop our talents; we want to feel pleasure (at least sometimes) and we do not want to feel pain; and so on. If we want those things and do not get them, we will not be perfectly happy. A slave who wants to be free, for example, will not be perfectly happy. It will be very difficult for someone who suffers from chronic pain to be

²⁶ For more on the concepts of historical possibility, impossibility and necessity, see Section 4.

completely fulfilled. And, even though it is not *logically* impossible, it is probably *historically* impossible for all (or at least most) people who live as wicked villains to be perfectly happy given the way we are constituted and what it means to live a life of this kind.

Q10. Is happiness good? Is it good in itself? Does it have intrinsic value?

A. Nothing in the fulfillment theory in itself entails that the property of perfect happiness is good, good in itself or intrinsically good. Nor is it necessarily the case that it is good that someone is happy. As we have seen, it is possible that even wicked villains are perfectly happy. It is doubtful that it is good that such people are completely fulfilled; it is probably bad (at least 'all things considered' and in most cases). But perfect happiness might have positive value given certain conditions. Whether or not it has will depend on what value theory is correct. It would take me too far from the main topic to pursue this question in the present paper.²⁷

Q11. How is the fulfillment theory of happiness related to other non-desire-satisfaction theories of happiness?

A. In many respects the fulfillment theory is radically different from other popular views of happiness. Perfect happiness is not pleasure. It is not life-satisfaction. It is not a harmonious life, it is not an activity (according to virtue). It is not an emotion or a mood or a feeling or a sensation, or a disposition to feel certain things or be in certain moods. It is not a mental state, or a type of mental state. It is not a property of a mental state or of a type of mental state. Happiness is not in the head. It is not in the body. It is not the same thing as well-being or virtue. One can be happy without faring well and without being morally good, and one can fare well and be morally good without being happy. A happy person is not necessarily functioning well or developing her talents or (human) dispositions.²⁸

Even though happiness is not essentially connected to pleasure, life-satisfaction and similar phenomena, according to the fulfillment theory, it is likely that many individuals will not be perfectly happy if they experience a lot of pain, are dissatisfied with their lives, and so on. For many people probably do in fact want to be satisfied with their lives and do not want to feel pain, they do want to be good persons and develop their talents and dispositions, they do want to be in

²⁷ The theory of happiness that is developed in this paper is part of a larger project where I try to construct a formal ethical system in a Kantian spirit. According to this system, everyone who is perfectly virtuous (and hence deserves to be happy) ought to be perfectly happy. So, the concept of perfect happiness can play an important role in ethics. However, this is not the place to defend this view. For more on this, see Rønnedal, forthcoming.

²⁸ Of course, it is possible to combine the fulfillment theory of happiness with a happiness theory of well-being. Then, one could argue that an individual *x* has a life that is perfectly good for *x* iff all *x*'s wants are fulfilled. But to show this would require some extra arguments and I am not sure that this theory of well-being is correct. In any case, it is likely that there is a positive correlation between fulfillment and well-being. For more on happiness theories of the good life, see, for example, Brülde (2007).

a 'happy' mood, and so on. If those wants are not fulfilled, they will not be perfectly happy.

The matter of x's happiness may consist in pleasure, the matter of y's happiness in satisfaction with life, the matter of z's happiness in pleasure, satisfaction with life, virtue and friends, and so on, because x, y and z want different things. Even though this is possible, it does not follow that the *nature* of x's happiness is something other than the *nature* of y's happiness, and so on, and it does not follow that 'happiness' is ambiguous.²⁹ The nature of happiness is still the fulfillment of wants. Other theories of happiness are interesting for the fulfillment theory of perfect happiness because they tell us something important about what kinds of things many people in fact do want. If a person in fact wants those things, she will not be perfectly happy without them.

Q12. Is there a maximum degree of happiness?

A. It is plausible to claim that there is in principle a maximum degree of happiness according to the fulfillment theory; one cannot be more happy than perfectly happy. If someone is perfectly happy, there is *absolutely nothing* that she wants that is not the case. In this sense, she lacks *absolutely nothing* and is perfectly 'self-sufficient.' *Absolutely all* her desires are fulfilled, no matter how trivial or insignificant they might seem. Getting more money will not make her happier since she does not want more money. Being more famous will not make her happier since she does not want to be more famous. Having more power will not make her happier because she does not want more power. Not even feeling more pleasure, less pain or being more healthy will make her happier since she does not want to feel more pleasure, less pain or be more healthy. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that if someone is perfectly happy, she cannot be happier.³⁰ According to some other theories, there is no maximum: no matter how happy someone is, he could conceivably be happier (Davis (1981b)).

4. Arguments for the fulfillment theory and some theorems

There are many possible arguments for the fulfillment theory of happiness. It is an intuitively plausible, simple and elegant theory. The version developed in this paper is more precise than many similar theories. Therefore, it is easier to decide what follows and what does not follow from it. Some theories of happiness are so vague that they are almost unfalsifiable in principle. The fulfillment theory is the development of an idea that seems to have been around for more than two thousand years and which has been attractive to many thinkers from various backgrounds. Some kind of desire-satisfaction theory appears to have already been considered by the ancient Greeks – see, for example, Plato's *Gorgias* 491e–

²⁹ Even though it does not follow from our theory that 'happiness' is ambiguous, I am inclined to believe that this word can be used in several different senses (see Section 2).

³⁰ However, note that this conclusion does not strictly follow from the fulfillment theory in itself as it has been defined in this paper. For more on this, see Section 5.

494c. According to the medieval theologian and philosopher St Augustine, “he alone is blessed [happy] who has all that he wills, and wills nothing wrongly” (*The Trinity*, Book XIII, Chapter 5). Augustine is approvingly quoted by the scholastic thinker Thomas: “Augustine says (De Trin. Xiii, 5) that ‘happy is he who has whatever he desires, and desires nothing amiss’” (*Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 3, Article 4). The enlightenment philosopher Kant appears to defend a theory that is very similar to the one in this paper. According to him, “... all human beings always have of themselves the most powerful and inward inclination to happiness, because precisely in this idea all inclinations are united in a sum” (Kant (1785/2002, 15; Ak 4:399)). In *Critique of Practical Reason*, he expresses what is basically the same idea: “Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*” (Kant (1788/1997, 104; 5:124)). *The Metaphysics of Morals* contains a similar characterization: “That *everything* should *always* go the way you would like it to. ...What is such a condition called?... It is called *happiness*” (Kant (1797/2017), 6:480). In this paper, I will concentrate on one kind of argument, the fruitfulness of the theory. I will show that we can use the theory to prove several interesting theorems that follow from it. Since we have used a very precise definition of ‘perfect happiness,’ all arguments are without doubt deductively valid. This means that the conclusions must be true if the premises are true. In so far as the theorems are intuitively reasonable, we can also read the arguments in the other direction, that is, as abductive arguments in support of the fulfillment theory.

The idea that happiness (eudaimonia), well-being or blessedness is something everyone, or at least everyone who is rational, wants, is old. It has, for example, been expressed by Seneca the Younger. “To live happily... is the desire of all people” says the Stoic philosopher (*De Vita Beata (On the Happy Life)*, 99). According to Augustine, the roman philosopher Cicero, asserted that “[a]ll of us certainly will to be blessed [happy]” (*Hortensius*³¹). Augustine himself defends this proposition. According to him, “... [a]ll of you wish to be blessed [happy]; you do not wish to be miserable... whatever else it is that anyone secretly wills, he does not withdraw from this will which is sufficiently known to all and is in all men” (*The Trinity*, Book XIII, Chapter 3; see also Book XIII, Chapter 7). Thomas expresses a closely related idea in *Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 3, Article 1: “Happiness is the last end, to which man’s will tends naturally.” Kant, as we have seen, defends a similar claim. According to him, “... all human beings always have of themselves the most powerful and inward inclination to happiness” (Kant (1785/2002, 15; Ak 4:399)), and “There is *one* end... that one can presuppose as actual for all rational beings... and thus one aim that they not merely *can* have, but of which one can safely presuppose that without exception they *do have* it in accordance with a natural necessity, and that

³¹ Only fragments of this work are still available.

is the aim at *happiness*” (Kant (1785/2002, 32; Ak 4:415)). In *Critique of Practical Reason* he expresses the same view: “To be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being...” (Kant (1788/1997, 23; 5:25)). If the fulfillment theory is true, we can prove that this intuition, in a certain sense, is correct. Before we establish this, we will consider how we can make this intuition more precise.

If someone is not perfectly rational, almost nothing of interest follows from the fact that she wants something. So, we cannot prove that anyone whatsoever wants to be happy. If this proposition is true, it is not logically true. If someone is perfectly rational, however, we will assume that ‘wanting’ functions as a kind of modal operator in normal modal logic.³² We will say that it is true that a perfectly rational individual, *c*, wants something, *A*, in a possible world, *w*, iff *A* is true in every possible world, *w'*, that is acceptable to *c* in *w*. We will also assume that if a possible world *w'* is acceptable to *c* in *w*, then *w'* is acceptable to *c* in *w'*. Furthermore, we will, as is standard, assume that it is true that it is (historically) necessary that *A* in a possible world, *w*, iff *A* is true in every possible world that is alethically accessible from *w*, and that the alethic accessibility relation is an equivalence relation. In addition, we shall assume that if the possible world *w'* is acceptable to individual *c* in the possible world *w*, then *w'* is alethically accessible from *w*, and if *c* wants it to be the case that *A* in a possible world, *w*, then *c* wants it to be the case that *A* in every possible world that is alethically accessible from *w*. Given these assumptions, which are plausible, we can now prove our first theorem **T1**.³³

T1. *It is necessary that every perfectly rational individual wants to be perfectly happy.*

Proof. Suppose that **T1** is not valid. Then there is some possible world, *w*₁, in which there is some perfectly rational individual, *c*, that does not want to be perfectly happy. Hence, *c* is perfectly rational in *w*₁ and it is false that *c* wants to be perfectly happy in *w*₁. It follows that there is a possible world, *w*₂, that is acceptable to *c* in

³² For some introductions to modal logic, see, for example, Blackburn, de Rijke and Venema (2001), Chellas (1980), Garson (2006) and Hughes and Cresswell (1968).

³³ I cannot defend all these assumptions in the present paper. For more details about the background theory, see Rønneidal (2020), (2019b) and (2019c). In a more developed theory, the accessibility relations can be ‘relativized’ to time. Intuitively, *A* is historically possible in a possible world *w* at a certain moment in time *t* iff *A* is still possible at *t* given the history of *w* and the laws of nature that hold in *w*, and it is historically necessary that *A* in *w* at *t* iff *A* is true at *t* in every possible world that is still possible at *t* given the history of *w* and the laws of nature that hold in *w*. In the present paper, when we say that *w'* is alethically accessible from *w*, we mean that *w'* is alethically accessible from *w* at a particular moment in time (and similarly for the acceptability relation). However, for our current purposes, we do not need to introduce any moments in time in our models. So, this element is suppressed in the present paper. Intuitively, *w'* is alethically accessible from *w* at *t* iff *w'* is still possible given the history of *w* and the laws of nature that hold in *w* (in a tree-like structure *w* and *w'* have not yet branched off at *t*). Furthermore, in this paper we assume that if *x* is perfectly rational, it is necessary that *x* is perfectly rational (this assumption is not necessary to prove all theorems).

w_1 in which c is not perfectly happy. Since c is not perfectly happy in w_2 , it is not the case that everything c wants in w_2 is true. Accordingly, there is something, X , that c wants in w_2 that is not the case. Consequently, it is true in w_2 that c wants it to be the case that X and it is false in w_2 that X . The world w_2 is acceptable to c in w_2 [by assumption and the fact that w_2 is acceptable to c in w_1]. It follows that X is true in w_2 , for in w_2 c wants it to be the case that X . Yet, this is absurd. Q.E.D.

In conclusion, the fulfillment theory of happiness does not entail that *everyone* wants to be happy, but it does follow from the theory that *everyone who is perfectly rational* wants to be perfectly happy (given our assumptions). Accordingly, if someone does not want to be perfectly happy, she is not perfectly rational. We now turn to the next theorem.

Let us say that a theory of happiness is a 'harmony theory' just in case it identifies happiness with harmony, consistency, unity, (mental) health or some similar property. According to a theory of this kind, happiness *is* coherence, inner peace, integration, tranquillity, harmony, psychological freedom, consistency, unity. Someone is happy iff she has a healthy, well-ordered, well-structured mind, a mind that is integrated and at peace with itself. A happy person is a whole person, a complete person, and a happy soul is a soul where every part of the soul is in harmony with every part of the soul and with the whole soul. The opposite of happiness, according to a theory of this kind, is inconsistency, strife, disunity, incoherence, sickness, inner war. An unhappy soul is a soul that is at war with itself; it is a disintegrated soul, a soul without unity; it is a soul where different parts pull in different directions. It is unclear whether anyone has defended a theory of this kind. Plato occasionally appears to come close to arguing for some kind of harmony theory (see, for example, *Republic*). According to the fulfillment theory, happiness is not *identical* to consistency, etc. However, we will see that consistency, in a broad sense, is a *necessary* but not sufficient condition for perfect happiness. In other words, it is possible to be consistent without being perfectly happy, but it is not possible to be perfectly happy without being consistent. So, even though happiness is not the same thing as harmony, it is closely related to such properties as coherence, integration and peace of mind.

Consider the following definition:

D4. Individual c 's will is free from contradictions iff it is not the case that there is something, X , such that c wants it to be the case that X and c wants it to be the case that not- X . If there is something, X , such that c wants it to be the case that X and c wants it to be the case that not- X , then c 's will is contradictory, and vice versa.

We are now in a position to state our next theorem **T2**.

T2. *It is necessary that someone is perfectly happy only if her will is free from contradictions.*

Proof. Straightforward.

From theorem **T2** we can immediately derive some corollaries, for example, it is necessary that if someone's will is not free from contradictions, she is not

perfectly happy and it is impossible that someone with a contradictory will is perfectly happy.

As usual, we shall assume that it is true that it is (historically) possible that A in a possible world, w , iff A is true in at least one possible world that is alethically accessible from w . It is now easy to establish theorem **T3**.

T3. *It is necessary that someone is perfectly happy only if everything she wants is possible.*

Proof. Left to the reader.

Consider the following definition:

D5. An individual c 's will is free from dilemmas iff there is no A and B such that it is impossible that A-and-B and c wants A to be the case and c wants B to be the case.

Given this definition, we can prove theorem **T4**.

T4. *It is necessary that someone is perfectly happy only if her will is free from dilemmas.*

Proof. Suppose that **T4** is not valid. Then there is a possible world, w_1 , where someone, c , is perfectly happy and in which there is an A and a B such that it is impossible that A-and-B and c wants it to be the case that A and c wants it to be the case that B. Accordingly, it is impossible that X-and-Y in w_1 and c wants it to be the case that X in w_1 and c wants it to be the case that Y in w_1 . Since it is impossible that X-and-Y in w_1 and w_1 is alethically accessible from itself, X-and-Y is false in w_1 . Since c is perfectly happy in w_1 , everything c wants in w_1 is true in w_1 . So, if c wants it to be the case that X in w_1 , then X is true in w_1 ; and if c wants it to be the case that Y in w_1 , then Y is true in w_1 . Consequently, X is true in w_1 and Y is true in w_1 . Hence, X-and-Y is true in w_1 . But this is absurd. Q.E.D.

Consistency, in a broad sense, seems to be the very essence of rationality. If you want to be rational, you should try to be consistent; you should try to avoid not only contradictory beliefs but also contradictions of the will. But why should one be rational and consistent? Our theorems above provide us with one very interesting reason. If you are perfectly rational, then you want to be perfectly happy. And you cannot be perfectly happy if you are not consistent (in a broad sense). Hence, if you are perfectly rational you want to be consistent. In other words, being consistent is a necessary condition for perfect happiness. If you are not consistent, you cannot be perfectly happy. In fact, it is plausible to assume that no perfectly rational individual will have inconsistent desires.

Before we establish our next theorem, we will introduce a definition and prove a lemma. We shall say that B is a necessary means to A iff it is historically necessary that A implies B. The so-called "hypothetical imperative" is a principle that is defended by many philosophers, including Kant (Kant (1785/2002, 34; Ak 4:417)). There are several possible interpretations of this principle. According to the reading we will use in the proof of **T5** below, it is necessary that if a perfectly rational individual, x , wants it to be the case that A, and B is a necessary means to A, then x also wants it to be the case that B. We can now prove our lemma.

L1. *The hypothetical imperative is valid. In other words, if x is perfectly rational, then if x wants it to be the case that A , and B is a necessary means to A , then x wants it to be the case that B .*

Proof. Suppose that **L1** is not valid. Then there is some possible world, w_1 , where some perfectly rational individual, c , wants it to be the case that something, X , is the case, and where something, Y , is necessarily implied by X at the same time that c does not want Y to be the case. Consequently, there is a possible world, w_2 , that is acceptable to c in w_1 in which Y is false. Hence, X is true in w_2 . Since w_2 is acceptable to c in w_1 , w_2 is alethically accessible from w_1 [by assumption]. It follows that it is true that X implies Y in w_2 . Therefore, Y is true in w_2 . But this is absurd. Q.E.D.

Now, let us spell out the details of the argument for theorem **T5**.

T5. *It is necessary that everyone who is perfectly rational wants to have a will that is free from contradictions.*

Proof. It is necessary that every perfectly rational individual wants to be perfectly happy (**T1**). It is necessary that someone is perfectly happy only if her will is free from contradictions (**T2**). Given **T1** and **T2**, it is easy to derive **T5** by using the hypothetical imperative. For the following proposition is an instance of this principle: it is necessary that if a perfectly rational individual, c , wants to be perfectly happy and having a will free from contradictions is a necessary means to perfect happiness, then c also wants to have a will free from contradictions. Consequently, **T5** is valid. Q.E.D.

We can also prove several similar theorems, for example, that it is necessary that everyone who is perfectly rational wants it to be the case that everything she wants is possible and that it is necessary that everyone who is perfectly rational wants to have a will that is free from dilemmas.

Let us now turn to our last two theorems, which are perhaps the most interesting. The idea that happiness is the final, complete, last, supreme, or highest end in some sense is an old idea. Aristotle was perhaps the first philosopher to clearly express this view. According to him, "it is for the sake of [happiness] that we all do everything else [we do]." (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.12, 1102a2-3.) Thomas, as we have seen, expresses a closely related idea in *Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question 3, Article 1: "Happiness is the last end, to which man's will tends naturally." If the fulfillment theory of happiness is true, we can show that this intuition, in a certain sense, is true. To establish this result, we must first define what we mean by "a final, complete, last, supreme, or highest end." This concept can be defined in many different ways. In this paper, I will use the following definition:

D6. Something A is a final end for the individual x iff x wants A and everything x wants is a necessary means to A .

Given this definition, we can prove our last two theorems (**T6** and **T7**).

T6. *For every individual x , there are no two distinct (not necessarily equivalent) final ends for x . In other words, if A is a final end for x and B is a final end for x , then A and B are necessarily equivalent.*

Proof. Left to the reader.

T7. *Perfect happiness is a final, complete, last, supreme, highest end for every perfectly rational individual. In other words, it is necessary that if x is perfectly rational then x wants to be perfectly happy and everything x wants is a necessary means to x 's perfect happiness.*

Proof. Suppose **T7** is not valid. Then there is a possible world, w_1 , in which there is a perfectly rational individual, c , that does not want to be perfectly happy or else it is not true in w_1 that everything c wants is a necessary means to c 's perfect happiness. But we have already shown that it is necessary that every perfectly rational individual wants to be perfectly happy (**T1**). Hence, c wants to be perfectly happy in w_1 . Accordingly, it is not true in w_1 that everything c wants is a necessary means to c 's perfect happiness. Consequently, c wants something, X , in w_1 that is not a necessary means to c 's perfect happiness in w_1 . It follows that there is a possible world, w_2 , that is alethically accessible from w_1 in which c is perfectly happy and X is false. Since c is perfectly happy in w_2 , everything c wants is in fact the case in w_2 . So, it is true in w_2 that if c wants it to be the case that X , then X . Since X is false in w_2 , it follows that it is false that c wants it to be the case that X in w_2 . Therefore, X is false in some possible world, say w_3 , that c accepts in w_2 . By assumption c wants it to be the case that X in w_2 , for c wants it to be the case that X in w_1 and w_2 is alethically accessible from w_1 . It follows that X is true in w_3 . Yet, this is absurd. Q.E.D.

Philosophers have for a long time thought that there is something special about happiness. Happiness is not just an end among other ends, like power, money or fame; it is a higher order end or an all-inclusive end, an end that includes all other ends. If happiness is perfect fulfillment, we can show that this is the case (for all rational individuals). This fact makes the fulfillment theory of happiness very attractive.³⁴

³⁴ Before I end this section, I would like to discuss one possible argument against **T1**. Suppose c is perfectly rational. Then c wants to be perfectly happy (from **T1**). Imagine that c has several wants (or desires), W_1 , W_2 and W_3 , and so on, that take a lot of efforts to satisfy, including a desire to write a book on happiness. Furthermore, suppose that a neuroscientist offers c some surgery that will rid c of all c 's desires, except some very basic desires (like the desires to eat and sleep), which will allow c to become perfectly happy after the surgery. Since c wants to be perfectly happy, c will accept this offer. But this is absurd. It is clear that rationality does not compel c to accept the scientist's offer. For accepting the scientist's offer will prevent c from ever fulfilling his actual wants (W_1 , W_2 , W_3 , etc., including the desire to write a book on happiness). Hence, **T1** is false.

However, this is not a serious problem for the theory in this paper. For the theory does not entail that a perfectly rational individual would accept the scientist's offer. Suppose that it is necessary that if the scientist performs the surgery, then c will not write a book on happiness (which c wants to do). Assume that c wants to go through with the surgery (for reductio). Then c wants

5. Arguments against the fulfillment theory

There are many potential arguments against the fulfillment theory of happiness. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all possible problems. However, as far as I know there are no conclusive arguments against the theory. Still, let me briefly address some possible objections.³⁵

Firstly, we should not call the theory in this paper a theory of (perfect) happiness because happiness is not perfect fulfillment. Fulfillment does not 'deserve' the label 'happiness,' for happiness is clearly something purely mental. However, this objection seems to beg the question. If the fulfillment theory is correct, then happiness is not something purely mental. The following argument suggests that it is reasonable to call perfect fulfillment 'perfect happiness.' Happiness is the final end. It is that 'thing' for the sake of which we want everything we want. This idea goes back at least to Aristotle (see Section 4 above). But we have proved that perfect fulfillment is a final end for every perfectly rational individual (**T7**). In the light of theorem **T6**, we can see that perfect fulfillment is not just *a* final end, but *the* final end for every perfectly rational individual. Therefore, (perfect) happiness is (perfect) fulfillment. This does not entail that we cannot use 'happiness' in other senses too, for example for some kind of mental state or property of a mental state. Furthermore, I am not alone in using the term in this sense. Many other philosophers (see **Q1** above) have used 'happiness' in a similar sense throughout history.³⁶

Secondly, it is unreasonable to claim that every individual that does not want anything is perfectly happy. But we have already seen how we can respond to this argument (see **Q5** above). If we want to avoid this conclusion, we can restrict our theory to things that have (or can have) desires. Then things that do not (are not able to) want anything are not perfectly happy.

Thirdly, it is unclear why we should focus on 'perfect happiness.' Since nobody (or almost nobody) is perfectly happy, those who wish to use happiness as a measure of the success of a policy or a society will have little use for the notion of perfect happiness. This is perhaps true, but happiness is not only interesting as a measure of the success of a policy or a society. The notion of happiness can have

it to be the case that he will not write a book on happiness [from our assumptions and **L1**]. Hence, *c* wants to write a book on happiness at the same time that he wants it to be the case that he will not write a book on happiness. But it is reasonable to assume that no perfectly rational individual has inconsistent desires of this kind. Hence, our assumption is false. It is not the case that *c* wants to go through with the surgery (even though *c* wants to be perfectly happy).

³⁵ The first four arguments in this section are arguments that colleagues have raised when they have been confronted by the ideas in this paper, the last two (or versions of the last two) are arguments that can be found in the literature.

³⁶ We do not have to be dogmatic about this. If some reader insists on using 'happiness' in some other sense, we can replace all talk about 'perfect happiness' in this paper with 'perfect fulfillment.' The important thing is that (perfect) fulfillment plays many of the roles that traditionally have been ascribed to (perfect) happiness, *eudaimonia* or blessedness.

many functions. For example, we want to know if there is a final end and what this final end is, and we have seen that perfect happiness is a final end for every perfectly rational individual (see **T7** above). We have shown that all perfectly rational individuals want to be perfectly happy (see **T1** above). Hence, the notion can play an important role in a theory of rationality. The concept of perfect happiness can also play an important role in various ethical theories, for example as an element in the highest good (see footnote 27 and Wike (1994)). Again, this does not entail that we cannot use 'happiness' in other senses too, for example, to refer to someone's life-satisfaction. But this does not make the concept of perfect happiness useless.

Fourthly, it has been suggested to me that the fulfillment theory has counterintuitive consequences. Consider a very short life A, that contains just one easily satisfied desire, and a very long life B, that contains a great many satisfied desires and just one fairly trivial frustrated desire. The fulfillment theory entails that life A is happier than life B. But this is implausible and, hence, the theory must be false. This would perhaps be a serious problem for the theory if it were true that it entails that life A is happier than life B, but it does not. Perfect happiness is not a property of whole lives according to the theory. It is a property that an individual can have at a particular moment in time. The theory in itself does not even entail that it makes sense to say that one individual is happier than another. *Perfect happiness* is a property, *happier than* is a relation. It is perhaps independently plausible to claim that if individual c is perfectly happy at a particular moment in time t and individual d is not perfectly happy at t, then c is happier than d at t. Suppose that this is the case, that c is perfectly happy at t, that d is not perfectly happy at t and that d has many more desires that are fulfilled than c at t. Then it is the case that c is happier than d at t. Some might perhaps think that this conclusion is counterintuitive, but to me it seems reasonable. Individual d has more things than c at t but also wants more out of life than c, which is satisfied with what she has. Hence, it makes sense to say that c is happier than d at t.³⁷

Fifthly, the fulfillment theory might seem to be inconsistent. Bradley (2007) and Feldman (2004, 17, 2010, Sec 4.5) discuss a potential problem or paradox for "preferentism" that might also be a problem for the fulfillment theory of happiness. In the specific forms discussed in the literature, the paradox is not explicitly

³⁷ However, note that these conclusions do not follow from the fulfillment theory in itself. It is possible to deny them and still hold on to the theory. Note also that the theory does not entail that it is better to be c than d, that c's life is better than d's life or that we should choose to be c if we must choose to be c or d. The theory has no such evaluative or normative consequences. Even if it were possible to find some alternative definition of the relative happiness of whole lives such that life A is happier than life B, I am inclined to believe that this is not a conclusive argument against the fulfillment theory. Therefore, I will not consider any such definitions in this paper.

focused on the concept of perfect happiness, but it is easy to see the relevance of the problem to the theory presented in this paper.

Here is the puzzle. Suppose some person, c , is not perfectly rational. Suppose he has only one desire – the desire not to be perfectly happy. Then (according to the theory) if he is not perfectly happy, then his sole desire has been satisfied and so he is perfectly happy. But if he is perfectly happy, then his desire has been frustrated and he is not perfectly happy. Then his sole desire has been satisfied, and so on. The theory seems to imply that such a person, with the stipulated desire, would be perfectly happy if and only if he is not perfectly happy. Thus we seem to have a paradox that arises for the theory of perfect happiness defended in this paper. Let ‘ Pc ’ stand for “ c is perfectly happy.” Then the argument can be symbolized in the following way:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. $Wc \neg Pc$ | [Assumption] |
| 2. Pc | [Assumption] |
| 3. $\forall A(WcA \rightarrow A)$ | [From 2 by the definition of perfect happiness] |
| 4. $Wc \neg Pc \rightarrow \neg Pc$ | [Instance of 3, $\neg Pc/A$] |
| 5. $\neg Pc$ | [1, 4, Modus Ponens] |
| 6. $Pc \rightarrow \neg Pc$ | [2–5, discharging the assumption] |
| 7. $\neg Pc$ | [Assumption] |
| 8. $Wc \neg Pc \rightarrow \neg Pc$ | [1, 7, Propositional logic] |
| 9. $\forall A(WcA \rightarrow A)$ | [8, c only has one desire] |
| 10. Pc | [From 9 by the definition of perfect happiness] |
| 11. $\neg Pc \rightarrow Pc$ | [7–10, discharging the assumption] |
| 12. $Pc \leftrightarrow \neg Pc$ | [6, 11, Propositional logic] |

This might seem to be a devastating argument against the fulfillment theory. But when we symbolize the derivation as above it is easy to see a serious problem with the argument. The universal quantifier in 3 is a propositional quantifier and in 4 we have instantiated A with $\neg Pc$. But $\neg Pc$ is an abbreviation of $\neg \forall A(WcA \rightarrow A)$ and this sentence includes a propositional quantifier. It is well-known that it is problematic to allow universally quantified sentences to be instantiated with universally quantified sentences when we use \forall -elimination for propositional quantifiers. To see one of the problems, let $A = \forall XX$ and assume that our substitution-instances can include any formula whatsoever. Then $A[A/X] = A$, where $A[B/X]$ is the result of replacing all free occurrences of the variable X in A by B , for $\forall XX[\forall XX/X] = \forall XX$. So, to know if $\forall XX$ is true or not we must first know the truth-value of $\forall XX$. This clearly seems to generate a vicious circle. To avoid this problem such instances are often prohibited (for more on some systems that solve this problem, see Rønnedal (2019)). Hence, step 4 in the derivation above is

not permitted. But then the conclusion does not follow from our assumption. Consequently, we can avoid this 'paradox.'³⁸

The arguments I have discussed so far do not strike me as particularly strong. Nevertheless, the discussion has hopefully made the fulfillment theory somewhat clearer. I will now discuss one of the most serious arguments against the theory.

According to this argument, getting what you want will not make you happy, and hence there must be something wrong with the fulfillment theory of happiness. This argument has been nicely expressed by Kekes (1982):

Consider a man who has all he wants. ... we must concentrate on a man who has all he seriously wants. But suppose that he wants only one thing; he pursues it single-mindedly, to the exclusion of everything else, and while he gets it, his soul shrivels. Rich misers, successful avengers, triumphant climbers of greasy poles notoriously find themselves empty, once their obsessions are satisfied. Or a man may want only what he does not have, and when he gets it, like Don Juan, he no longer wants it. Yet others are mistaken in thinking that what they want will satisfy them. The glittering sophistication of an inner circle may pale once the outsider finds himself accepted. Having what one wants, therefore, is no guarantee of happiness. Nor should it be supposed that doing all that one really wants leads to happiness.

Does this argument refute the fulfillment theory? I will now try to argue that it does not. Consider the following scenario. At time t_1 , individual c wants to be a millionaire and this is the only thing c wants at t_1 . At time t_2 , c becomes a millionaire. But at t_2 this is not enough for c anymore. At t_2 , c wants to be a billionaire, or at t_2 , c 'realizes' that there is more to life than money. Now, at t_2 , c wants friends and family, for example, something c has 'neglected' up until t_2 . So, c is not perfectly happy at t_2 since everything c wants at t_2 is not the case. We can still say that c at t_1 is perfectly happy (given, the unrealistic assumption, that the only thing c wanted at t_1 was to be a millionaire). Again, consider the following scenario. At t_1 , c wants to become a member of an inner circle, and at t_2 , c finds himself accepted. But at t_2 (or soon after) c does not want to be a member any longer, and it is even the case that c wants to leave the circle. Then c is not perfectly happy at t_2 . The following scenario is similar. At t_1 , c wants to become famous, and at t_2 , her dream comes true. But c soon discovers all sorts of negative effects of being famous; it was nothing like she expected it to be. Being famous, c has little privacy and is constantly chased by paparazzi; people lie about her in the media;

³⁸ Someone who wants to use this argument against the fulfillment theory must show why we should accept step 4 in the derivation above and how we can avoid all the problems that follow if we allow universally quantified sentences to be instantiated with universally quantified sentences when we use \forall -elimination for propositional quantifiers. Note that this kind of response also takes care of other similar potential 'paradoxes.' For example, we do not have to assume that we must first (in some sense) 'know' that a perfectly rational individual is perfectly happy to decide that a perfectly rational individual is perfectly happy, even though every perfectly rational individual, according to our theory, wants to be perfectly happy.

she receives anonymous death threats, and is stalked by some fanatic fan; etc. As a consequence, *c* no longer wants to be famous. Then, *c* is not perfectly happy at t_2 . In these cases, we also assume that it is true at t_1 that *c* believes that being a member of the inner circle or being famous will make *c* *feel* satisfied and fulfilled (at t_2) and that *c* *wants* to feel satisfied and fulfilled. However, in these scenarios, *c* does *not* feel satisfied or fulfilled at t_2 . Hence, *c* is neither happy at t_1 nor at t_2 . So, these thought-experiments are no threat to the fulfillment theory. Other cases are similar, for example the scenarios that concern what someone wants to do. In some cases, it might be correct to say that *c* was happy at t_1 (given that all *c*'s wants at t_1 are fulfilled). In some cases, *c* is neither perfectly happy at t_1 nor at t_2 . If *c* expects and wants to *feel* happy when *c*'s goal is satisfied at t_2 and *c* does not experience this kind of satisfaction at t_2 , then we cannot say that *c* was perfectly happy at t_1 .

It should also be noted that some of these scenarios are unrealistic. Few people only want *one* thing, for example to be rich, famous, a member of some inner circle, etc. People usually want many things. True, a lot of individuals want to be rich and famous, but they usually also want other things: friends, family, respect, security, love. Someone might, for example, want to be rich at t_1 because he thinks that then he will be respected by everyone in some group, and he wants to be respected. But at a later time, t_2 , when he is rich, he finds out that even though he is now rich everyone in the group does not respect him. Therefore, we cannot say that *c* is perfectly happy either at t_1 or at t_2 . Single-mindedly striving for only one thing in life, may lead to the fact that many of our desires will never be fulfilled.

There is wisdom in the advice that you should be careful what you wish for and in the proverb that all that glitters is not gold. Nothing of this, however, can be used as a refutation of the fulfillment theory of happiness.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have developed a new theory of the nature of happiness, or perfect happiness. I have tried to explain what perfect happiness *is* and what it *is not* according to this theory. The basic idea is a development of the old view that happiness is getting what you want and can be classified as a kind of desire-satisfaction theory. According to the theory, which we called "the fulfillment theory," perfect happiness is perfect fulfillment. Even though this idea is old, we have seen that the particular version developed in the present paper is new. According to the fulfillment theory of happiness, it is necessarily the case that an individual *x* is perfectly happy iff all *x*'s wants are fulfilled. Desire-satisfaction theorists have usually not said much about what it means for a desire to be satisfied. In the present paper, I have tried to make this idea more precise. I have proved several interesting theorems that follow from the theory and I have tried to defend it against some potentially serious counterarguments. We have seen that perfect happiness is a final end for everyone who is perfectly rational according to the theory, and that everyone who is perfectly rational wants to be

perfectly happy and consistent (since it is not possible to be perfectly happy without being consistent). The theory has many other interesting consequences and more could be said to defend it against various possible problems. Elsewhere, I explore some relationships between the concepts of virtue, perfect happiness and the highest good and try to show that the concept of perfect fulfillment can play an important role in a certain Kantian ethical theory (Rønnedal, forthcoming). The upshot is that the analysis of the nature of (perfect) happiness developed in the present paper is quite attractive.³⁹

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