

## SATISFICING AND SUBSTANTIVE VALUES

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Satisficing theories, whether of rationality or morality, do not require agents to maximize the good. They demand only that agents bring about outcomes that are, in one or both of two senses, “good enough.” In the first sense, an outcome is good enough if it is above some absolute threshold of goodness; this yields a view that I will call absolute-level satisficing. In the second sense, an outcome is good enough if it is reasonably close to the best outcome the agent could bring about; this leads to what I will call comparative satisficing. These two views coincide in their implications for a specific sort of case, in which the situation is now fairly far below the absolute-level threshold and an agent can at best bring it to a point somewhat above that threshold. Here both absolute-level and comparative satisficing say he need not bring about his best available outcome, though of course he may; he is required only to improve the situation to the absolute threshold. But in other cases the views diverge. If the situation is now far below the absolute threshold and, no matter what, will remain below it, absolute-level satisficing requires an agent to everything he can to improve the situation; here its implications coincide with those of maximizing. But comparative satisficing is less demanding, requiring him only to make some reasonable percentage of the largest improvement he can. By contrast, if the situation is already above the absolute threshold, absolute-level satisficing does not require an agent to do anything at all to improve it, whereas comparative satisficing, which is now more demanding, still requires him to make some reasonable percentage of his best possible improvement.

Because of these differences, a satisficing theory can take either of three forms. It can

adopt only absolute-level satisficing, only comparative satisficing, or both. Michael Slote's influential writings make both absolute-level and comparative claims, and therefore suggest a theory that relaxes in both possible ways the demands of maximizing.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever its form, a satisficing view can be stated independently of any substantive view about the good. More specifically, it can be stated independently of the choice between subjective and objective views of each person's good. Subjective views equate this good with some subjective state of the person such as pleasure, happiness, or the satisfaction of her desires; objective or perfectionist views equate it with states such as knowledge, achievement, and virtue that they value independently of how much she wants or enjoys these states. But both views can be combined in the same way with satisficing. Thus, if the good is pleasure, absolute-level satisficing requires agents to ensure that everyone is above some threshold level of pleasure, whereas if the good includes knowledge, the same view requires them to ensure that everyone has at least some threshold quantity of knowledge.

Formally, then, satisficing views are independent of views about the good. But I believe that, intuitively, these views are more plausible given some views about the good than others. More specifically, there is a form of satisficing that is intuitively very attractive given subjective values but is not attractive given objective or perfectionist values; for the latter, maximizing is the intuitively preferable alternative. This is not an unusual phenomenon, since it often happens that formal principles that are plausible given one set of values are not so given another.<sup>2</sup> For an illustration, consider Nietzsche's antiegalitarian view that society should be organized so as to maximize the excellence of its few most excellent members.<sup>3</sup> Given the perfectionist values Nietzsche assumes this view is at least intelligible, in that we can understand how someone with

those values might care most about the lives in which they are most achieved. But the same view is not intelligible given subjective values. There is, I take it, no appeal whatever in the idea that society should strive to maximize the happiness of its happiest members.

In the case of satisficing, I think its absolute-level form is very attractive given subjective values. This is illustrated by numerous examples of Slote's. Imagine that you had a good lunch and are not now hungry, though you are also not sated. You would enjoy a chocolate bar or soft drink if you had one, and such snacks are in fact available close by at no charge.<sup>4</sup> A maximizing view says you act wrongly if you do not get a chocolate or drink, but surely that is implausible. If you are already reasonably content, why must you make yourself more so? The same point applies to a bystander: she too need not get you a chocolate or a drink. She would be required to make you happier if you were miserable, but not if you are feeling fine. Given subjective values, there is no requirement to improve anyone's condition beyond a reasonable level of pleasure or contentment. By contrast, the comparative form of satisficing does not seem to me plausible for these values. It implies that if a person is in intense pain and you can at no cost relieve all of his pain, you do no wrong if you relieve only some reasonable percentage of his pain, or that if many people are in pain, you again do no wrong if you relieve the pain of only some of them. Because I find these implications unacceptable, I also find comparative satisficing unacceptable. But absolute-level satisficing seems positively attractive given subjective values. If a situation is already reasonably good by subjective standards, there is no moral demand to make it better. Though we are required to do what we can to ensure that people are reasonably happy, we are not required beyond that to make them ecstatic.

Given objective values, however, the same form of satisficing is not attractive. These

values generate a duty to develop one's talents, just as an end in itself. But imagine someone, say a Bach or an Einstein, whose talents are so great that with only a small effort he can reach the satisficing threshold for achievement in his specific field and also for achievement generally. (If this is not so, the threshold is set so high that it will never come into play for most people.) Then absolute-level satisficing says this person has no duty to expend more than this small effort, which is counterintuitive. Intuitively, the duty to develop one's talents applies no less to those with the greatest talents than to those with the least, so it is unacceptable to say it vanishes for a Bach or an Einstein. It may be said that in making this judgement we are influenced by the contribution this person can make to other people's achieving objective goods, by giving them beautiful music to listen to or a deeper understanding of the universe. But though these other-regarding reasons for developing one's talents certainly exist, I think we can separate the self-regarding reasons from them. And when we do, I do not think we find these reasons weakest for those whose talents are greatest. If anything, it is more plausible to hold that the self-regarding duty to develop one's talents is stronger for those with more talent, so they do a greater wrong if they fail to fulfil it. (Something like this view is implicit in Nietzsche's emphasis on the excellence of the most excellent.) But even if we do not go this far, the idea that there is an absolute level of perfectionist achievement beyond which there is no duty to pursue further achievement is simply not plausible. However appealing this form of satisficing is for subjective values, it does not intuitively fit with objective ones. For these values the most attractive view makes the duty to develop one's talents always the maximizing duty to develop them as far as possible.<sup>5</sup>

This contrast is reflected in some of the language we use for the two types of value. The

term “pleasure” is neutral about how far its referent should be pursued, but “happiness,” “satisfaction,” and “contentment” have, to my ears, satisficing connotations. Though each admits of degrees, a person can be simply happy or simply satisfied or simply content, and the use of these terms therefore suggests that what matters morally is only that each person reach that simple state. Joseph Raz recognizes something like this when he says that happiness is a “satisfiable” value, one whose demands can be completely satisfied.<sup>6</sup> I think Raz is wrong when he suggests that happiness is conceptually satisfiable, so a person who is happy cannot become more happy in the way that a perfectly round circle cannot become more round. Even if on some conceptions of happiness a happy person cannot be made more so by the addition of an extra pleasure like that of an extra ice cream, as Raz points out, these conceptions allow that she would be happier if she felt a more intense satisfaction in her life as a whole.<sup>7</sup> What I think is correct is that happiness is a normatively satisfiable value, so that once a person is simply happy there is no moral demand to make her happier. This satisficing view is reflected in popular attitudes to happiness, which often tell us to aim just at simple happiness. Thus, the song lyric says, “Don’t worry, be happy,” not “Don’t worry, be as a happy as you can be.”

By contrast, the language we use for objective values often has maximizing connotations. Terms like “perfection” and “excellence” suggest that we are to pursue these values to the highest levels or as far as possible, and the same view is again implicit in popular attitudes. The common ideal is for each person to develop her talents or potentials not just to some degree but to the full; the longtime recruiting slogan of the U. S. Armed Forces was not “Be at least two thirds of all that you can be,” nor is the motto of the Olympics “Reasonably fast, reasonably high, reasonably strong.”

The same contrast appears, albeit imperfectly, in philosophical theorizing about these values. Obviously, some philosophers combine subjective values with maximizing; think of the many utilitarians who talk of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” But I find it striking that all the examples Slote uses to motivate satisficing concern subjective values like the pleasure to be had from an afternoon snack or from the pot of gold a hero can wish for in a fairy tale,<sup>8</sup> while Raz says only of happiness that it is satiable. On the other side, perfectionists have consistently associated their values with maximizing. Aristotle says we should “strain every nerve” to develop the best part of us, and that the best government is the one under which each person can act best.<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt defines each person’s good as not just some development, but “the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole,”<sup>10</sup> while F. H. Bradley says the best individual “most fully and energetically realizes human nature.” To be a good human “in all things and everywhere, to try to do always the best, and to do one’s best in it ... this and nothing short of this is the dictate of morality.”<sup>11</sup>

My claims here should not be exaggerated. I am not arguing that only one formal principle is logically possible for each type of value; on the contrary, I have insisted that each of maximizing and satisficing can be formulated independently of any substantive views about the good. Nor am I suggesting that for each of subjective and objective values one formal principle is intuitively compelling and the other completely unacceptable; my thesis is not that strong. I have argued only that, even if each of maximizing and satisficing has some plausibility for each type of value, the balance of intuitive judgements favors a different one of them in each case. Absolute-level satisficing seems to me on balance most attractive for subjective values, whereas

maximizing fits best with perfectionist ones. At the least, the intuitive appeal of the two principles is not independent of substantive values, but is greater given some values than others.

### Notes

1. Michael Slote, *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, Ch. 3; *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, Chs. 1-2.
2. For an elaboration of this theme, see my “Consequentialism and Content,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1992): 71-78.
3. See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, trans. James W. Hillesheim and Malcolm R. Simpson, South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1965, pp. 59-60; and *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1966, sec. 258. I discuss Nietzsche’s view in *Perfectionism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 75-79.
4. Slote, *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism*, p. 52.
5. Comparative satisficing is not as counterintuitive for objective values, since it still gives Bach and Einstein some duty to develop their talents. But it still seems to me less attractive than maximizing, which, as I show below, is the view that has always been applied to these values.
6. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, pp. 241-43.
7. For this view of happiness see, e.g., Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, Ch. 10; and L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, Ch. 6.
8. Slote, *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism*, p. 43.
9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, 1177b35 (see also 1169a6-8); and *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, in Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works*

of Aristotle, 1324a22-23. In her attempt to enlist Aristotle as a liberal-egalitarian, Martha Nussbaum attributes to him a satisficing view according to which society's goal is only to bring each citizen up to a threshold of capability for objectively good functioning: "The focus is always on getting more to cross the threshold, rather than further enhancing the condition of those who have already crossed it" ("Aristotelian Social Democracy," in R. Bruce Douglas, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson, eds., *Liberalism and the Good*, New York: Routledge, 1990: 203-52, p. 229). But this satisficing interpretation ignores Aristotle's many maximizing remarks, including one Nussbaum herself cites about how, whereas the usefulness of instrumental goods always has a limit, with intrinsic goods more is always better (*Politics*, 1323b7-34).

10. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, trans. J. W. Burrow, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 16.

11. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 2d ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927, pp. 228, 215.