What is a Good Life?

When does someone’s life go well? When does it go badly? Derek Parfit discusses three sorts of theories that suggest the answers to these questions:

1. **Desire-Satisfaction:** This is a subjective view of goodness. Desire-Satisfaction theories say that the more desires of yours that are fulfilled, the better your life is. Likewise, the more desires you have that are not fulfilled, the worse your life is.

Let’s look at several problems with this view:

a) Parfit thinks that this view, as stated, is implausible. If just ANY desire-satisfaction counted, we would get bizarre results like the following:

- **Stranger on a Train:** You meet a stranger on a train. He tells you of his battle with cancer, and that he is on his way to a specialist to seek treatment. You form the desire that he gets better. You part ways and never see him again. The stranger dies of cancer, though you never find out about this. As a result, your life is a little bit worse than it would have been.

b) This result of the “unrestricted” version of Desire-Satisfaction Theory seems mistaken. In response, philosophers restrict the view to only include desires about yourself. This modified version (which Parfit calls “Success Theory”) is subject to almost exactly the same criticism, however. Consider:

- **Bad Stranded Parent:** You have the following strong desire about yourself: You desire to be a good parent. You have children, and raise them, but are later stranded on a remote island. Unknown to you, your children become drug-addicted criminals, and they blame your parenting for their own bad choices. Though you will never find out about this, it makes your life much worse.

If it was absurd that the stranger’s illness made your life worse in Stranger On A Train, then it should also be absurd that your children’s failures make your life worse in Bad Parent.

c) Note that the Desire-Satisfaction views do not say WHEN the desire-fulfillment can or cannot affect your welfare. Those views actually allow for the possibility of events that occur after your death affecting your welfare. For instance,
- **Bad Dead Parent:** You have the following strong desire about yourself: You desire to be a good parent. You have children, and raise them, but die shortly after your children move out of the house. Your children become drug-addicted criminals, and they blame your parenting for their own bad choices. Though you are dead, this makes your life much worse.

d) Sometimes a desire-fulfilled life is not necessarily a good life. Consider:

- **Addiction:** I inject you with an incredibly addictive substance at a very early age. The substance is not even pleasurable. It merely causes you to have a very strong desire every day to inject more of this substance. I give you a life-time supply of the substance, so that you are able to keep fulfilling this desire all your life.

According to the Desire-Satisfaction Theory, I have made your life WAY better by doing this to you. But have I?

e) A related objection. Consider two possible lives:

- **Short But Happy Life:** You live to be 60 years old, but spend it incredibly happy, satisfied all the time and never regretting a moment of it.

- **Long But Dull Life:** You live for 1,000 years, just barely satisfied. The greatest amount of pleasure you ever experience is no more than the pleasure one gets while listening to Muzak (elevator music). Nothing bad happens to you, but only a small amount of good ever happens.

On the Desire-Satisfaction Theory, the second life is better than the first, just as long as the thousand years of tiny desire-fulfillments add up to a greater number than the fifty years of very great desire-fulfillments. But, this seems wrong.

**Global View:** It seems that we can’t just say that the best life is the one where all of my desires are fulfilled. Because I could have led a **different** life where all of my desires are fulfilled, but in a more satisfying way. So, my life would have been better **had I lived that life.** In response to this, and the worries in d and e, some philosophers have modified the view to be a “Global” one. That is, we don’t assess how good a life is by adding up all of the desire-fulfillments. We think of a person as being presented with a variety of possible lives to choose from. Whichever one they’d pick is the best life for them. So, for instance, while the Long But Dull Life might have a greater SUM of desire-fulfillment, most of us would still pick the Short But Happy Life instead. Therefore, the Short But Happy Life is better. Likewise, a non-addicted life is better than the one in Addiction.
2. **Preference Hedonism:** This is an objective view shared by Utilitarians, where the only thing that is intrinsically good is happiness. Hedonistic theories say that the more happiness your life is filled with, the better it is. Likewise, the more unhappiness you experience, the worse your life is.

Note that “happiness” is not synonymous with “pleasure” here (at least, not in the way that most people use the word “pleasure”). On preference hedonism, the best state for you to be in is the one that you PREFER most. But, the state that you prefer to be in is not always the state with the least amount of pain. For instance, Parfit mentions Sigmund Freud who refused painkillers at the end of his life, preferring to be in intense pain (but be able to think straight) rather than be in a state of euphoria (but with a dulled mind).

This view is similar to the Desire-Satisfaction Theory, but it avoids objections a, b, and c of that view, since Hedonism doesn’t count things you don’t know about as making your life better or worse (i.e., “what you don’t know can’t hurt you”). Hedonism is open to objections d and e, but a “Global” version of Hedonism can solve those problems, just as it did for the Desire-Satisfaction Theory.

Still, Parfit raises the following against both Global views. Consider these lives:

- **Grass Counter:** The thing that makes someone happiest is just to spend their life counting the blades of grass in their lawn. When presented with all of the possible lives they could lead, they still choose a life of counting grass blades.

- **Sadist:** The thing that makes someone happiest is to cause as much pain as possible to others around them. When presented with all of the possible lives they could lead, they would still choose the life of causing pain to others.

Even according to a Global version of Hedonism, these lives would be the best possible lives for the Grass Counter and the Sadist. But, surely this is mistaken?

3. **Objective List:** This is an objective view of goodness that shares some features with Ross’s Moderate Deontology view. Objective List theories say that there is a list of things that make a life better (e.g., being morally good, acquiring knowledge, recognizing beauty), and the more things on this list a life has, the better it is. Likewise, there is a list of things that make a life worse (e.g., being betrayed or deceived, being deprived of liberty, being morally bad), and the more of these things a life has, the worse that life is.
The primary objection to this view is that someone could lead the “best” life, but be miserable the whole time. What if someone doesn’t WANT to be morally virtuous, or acquire knowledge, or recognize beauty? They might have all of those things, but regret it, and spend their lives being unhappy.

In response, the Objective List Theorist appeals to the intuition that we are expressing when we say things like, “He doesn’t know what is best for him.” Anyone who thinks that the Grass Counter and the Sadist do not know what is best for them shares this intuition. If we think those people are simply being irrational, then the Objective List Theory may appeal to us. Still, the fact remains, if we forced those individuals to be morally virtuous, to learn, and to recognize beauty, etc., they would be unhappy. So, IS that the best life for them?

4. Parfit’s Suggestion: Parfit suggests that perhaps the “best” sort of life is one where items on an objective list are obtained AND the person desires/is made happy by those things. He says, “We might claim ... that what is good ... for someone is to have knowledge, to be engaged in rational activity, to experience mutual love, and to be aware of beauty, while strongly wanting just these things.” Is this tentative solution plausible?