2. What is the most plausible account of what makes a person’s life go well?

Over the course of human history, many interpretations of what it means to live a good life have sprung about, ranging from the hopelessly pessimistic to the highly optimistic. These theories which have withstood the test of time, are those which speak to the human experience, encapsulating within their formulation a grain of truth regarding the way we live our lives. This is especially evident in the three traditional schools of thought on the subject of happiness, such as the Hedonistic Theory, Desire Satisfaction Theory, and Objective List Theory. Of course, that is not to say that these theories are without their fair share of flaws, for it is conceivably true that what amounts to a good life for one person, may fail to be fulfilling for another, and vice versa. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the strengths and faults of each theory, we shall instead examine the conclusions drawn by such theories with regards to present day lifestyles, in order to attain a plausible instance of what it is that makes life worth living.

To do so, it may be of value to first consider the way we choose to live our lives in reality independent of any theoretical model, before introducing abstract concepts to describe human behaviour. As evident in Canadian society alone, a wide diversity of lifestyles exist, each grounded on different beliefs, values, and perspectives. It is true that similarities remain, but this is simultaneously overwhelmed by the vast differences between our ways of life, however minuscule these distinctions may be. It is precisely this contrast in thought and understanding that determining what accounts for a good life is is made difficult. For from what moral authority is an external being capable of laying judgement upon an individual? Is it not necessary to reconcile our definition of a life well lived to account for each individual? To provide a plausible account of what it means to live a meaningful life, these factors must therefore be taken into consideration.

We may need to accept then, that the human experience lies between a spectrum of two extremes: Those who endeavor to attain a higher form of being, and those who find fulfillment in their present way of existence. That is, the former aspires to attain that which is perceived as lacking, whilst the latter finds contentment with what life has bestowed upon them.

The question is, if there is ever a point when the person who strives for something more is ever satisfied. Certainly, if there comes a point when they do acquire a state of contentment, then they would simply categorize with those who find satisfaction with their lives. Should their will to improve never cease to extinguish however, then has the individual the right to claim they led a good life? According to John Stuart Mill and Utilitarians alike, they certainly have, as Mill claims, “A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering… he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence.” In a comparison akin to that between human and swine, Mill argues that, “a highly-endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for… is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections… and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections…”

There exists a certain element of nobility in Mill’s claim, as it highlights a very human desire for progress and improvement. Without acknowledging the areas in our lives for which improvements could be made, there would be no incentive, no motivation, and no reason for change. Certainly, it is these individuals who stir mankind into action, as the represent perhaps, a noble ideal. Across television, literature, and all of history, it is those individuals who persevere in the face of difficulty, who leave a lasting impression within us. For maybe we identify with those who endure suffering for the chance to grasp at their own happiness. Whether it is attained in the end is irrelevant, as it is the pursuit of happiness which has made the individual life tantamount to one well lived.

In contrast to a life devout to a lifelong search for satisfaction, at the other end of the spectrum, there similarly exists those who seemingly derive happiness from their very existence. That is, they appear perfectly content with their situation in life irrespective of what may otherwise be considered absent from their lives by others. As individuals who have already found their *raison de vivre,* the question remains of what accounts for their perceived well-being.

A possible justification by the Objective List Theory, would posit that all seven of the basic goods, as described by John Finnis, are present since the individuals find utter satisfaction with their lives. This view is further supported by the observation that many people would consider the entries upon the list to be factors which indeed contribute to a good life. While the list contains a great many elements which certainly seem beneficial, it is well within the realm of possibility for people to find fulfillment elsewhere. Surely, there cannot be one single list that describes succinctly all the possible things that would make life better for every individual, regardless of their beliefs, values, and upbringing. It is for this reason, that while the Objective List Theory holds merit in that it presents objectively worthwhile pursuits, it once again begs the question of how it is possible for a mortal being to determine what constitutes a meaningful aspect of life, and what does not.

The individuals who understand their lives to be going well, may believe so based upon completely arbitrary reasons that do not conform to the categories proposed by Finnis. To this response, we may consider the Desire Satisfaction Theory, as it relates that the satisfaction of desires is intrinsically good for the individual. This may very well be true, especially if we take that the satisfaction of certain desires benefits the individual more than others. While these individuals find more fulfillment in their lives, that is not to say that their life did not go well since they were ignorant of higher pleasures. On the contrary, they were capable of realizing themselves, during their ephemeral existence on the Earth, just what it was that made their lives worth living.

As a whole, it can be seen that against the two extremes, certain theories hold better than others in particular situations. However, a theory is good so far as it is able to accurately reflect reality. In all theories of happiness, vast generalizations are made concerning our perception of what it is that makes a life go well. Certainly, it is easy to generalize that the former individuals lead the greater life, for they inspire the greatest amount of people, yet others claim that it is indeed that latter who make the most of their lives, since they actually attain satisfaction. However, we can perceive there to be an exception to almost every situation. The question of what provides the most plausible account of what makes a person’s life go well may be misguided, for that is a question left up to the individuals themselves. For only they can be the judge of their own lives.