"The Problem of Remote Desires"

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(rough draft of May 10, 2017;
bibliography incomplete and many citations missing)

1. Introduction

According to the desire theory of welfare, human welfare consists in the satisfaction of desire. Whenever what a person wants to be the case is in fact the case, this constitutes a benefit for this person. Whenever a person's desires are frustrated, this constitutes a basic harm. The theory recognizes no other fundamental sources of benefit and harm. Many other kinds of event – making money, becoming sick, being stood up, appreciating beauty – can cause our lives to go better or worse, but only by being things that we want or don't want, or by causing us to get, or fail to get, other things that we want or don't want. *How* good or bad a desire satisfaction or frustration is for its subject, according to the theory, is a function of the strength of the desire; the more deeply we want something to be the case, the better it is for us if it is the case, and the worse it is if it's not. Finally, how well things go for us overall in life is determined by the extent to which we get what we want throughout our lives, both on a day-to-day basis and with respect to larger life goals.

This brief description raises many questions. Do all desires count, or only some privileged subset? So, Do desires that are based on ignorance or irrationality count? Do desires that we wish we didn't have count? Do past desires that we no longer have count? Does it matter how long the desire has been held? How is the strength of a desire to be determined, especially when comparing day-to-day desires with life goals? What is a desire anyway? Are there different kinds of desire, psychologically speaking, and if so, are all kinds relevant to welfare, or only some? Many of the ways of making the theory clearer or more specific by answering these questions would not affect the topic of this paper, and so we'll ignore them here. Some such ways might affect our topic here, and may come up in the discussion to come.

Very many lines of criticism have been leveled against the desire theory of welfare, some having to do with some of the questions above. This essays focuses on just one objection to desire theories, what I call 'the problem of remote desires'. In what follows, I lay out the criticism, mostly in the words of others. I explain and criticize two extant solutions to it. I present and defend my favored solution to it. And I close with a brief mention of important issues still requiring attention, issues I hope to address elsewhere.

2. The Problem of Remote Desires

The problem of remote desires can be presented in an abstract form, as in this passage by James Griffin:

> The breadth of the [desire] account, which is its attraction, is also its great flaw. … It allows my utility to be determined not only by things that I am not aware of (that seems

> right: if you cheat me out of an inheritance that I never expected, I might not know but still be worse off for it), but also by things that do not affect my life in any way at all. The trouble is that one's desires spread themselves so widely over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one's own well-being. (1986: 16-17)

L.W. Sumner's description is similar:

> Since my desires can range over spatially and temporally remote states of affairs, it follows that the satisfaction of many of them will occur at times or places too distant from me to have any discernible effect on me. In such cases it is difficult to see how having my desire satisfied could possibly make my life go better. (1996: p. 125)

It is also presented using concrete cases, which serve as counterexamples to the desire theory. Derek Parfit's case has become stock in the literature:

> Suppose I meet a stranger who has what is believed to be a fatal disease. My sympathy is aroused, and I strongly want this stranger to be cured. We never meet again. Later, unknown to me, this stranger is cured. On the Unrestricted Desire-Fulfilment Theory, this event is good for me, and makes my life go better. This is not plausible. We should reject this theory. (1984: 494)

Shelly Kagan also has a nice case:

> Suppose … that I am a large fan of prime numbers, and so I hope and desire that the total number of atoms in the universe is prime. Imagine, furthermore, that the total number of atoms in the universe is, in point of fact, prime. Since this desire is satisfied, the preference theory must say that I am better off for it…. But this is absurd! The number of atoms in the universe has nothing at all to do with the quality of my life. … So the preference theory must be false. (1998: 37)

Some philosophers call the problem the 'scope problem' for desire theories of welfare (Darwall 2002: 27; Fletcher 2013: 216-17; and also Sumner 1996: 135;). Mark Lukas calls it 'the problem of irrelevant desires' (Lukas 2010).[1]

For some advocates of the objection from remote desires, the clearest refutation of the standard desire theory comes when we consider the fact that our desires can be satisfied after we are dead. Griffin suggests this in the following passage (the passage mentions something called 'the Experience Requirement', which we can ignore for now, but which will come up later):

> … any moderately decent person wants people living in the twenty-second century to be happy and prosperous. And we know that Leonardo had an informed desire that

[1] [From Fletcher 2013: For discussion of the Scope Problem see, for example, S. Darwall, Welfare and Rational Care (Princeton, 2004), pp. 29–31; Griffin, Well-Being, p. 17; B. Hooker, 'Mark Overvold's Contribution to Philosophy', Journal of Philosophical Research 16 (1990–1), pp. 333–44; M. Overvold, 'Self-Interest and the Concepts of Self-Sacrifice', Canadian Journal of Philosophy 10 (1980), pp. 105–18; Parfit, Reasons and Persons, p. 494; D. Portmore, 'Desire-fulfilment and Posthumous Harm', American Philosophical Quarterly 44 (2007), pp. 27–38; and D. Sobel, 'Well-being as the Object of Moral Consideration', Economics and Philosophy 14 (1998), pp. 249–81, at 268.]

> humans fly, which the Wright brothers fulfilled centuries later. Indeed, without the Experience Requirement, why would utility not include the desires of the dead? And would that not mean the account had gone badly awry?[2]

The intuition that we cannot be benefitted or harmed after death is widely held, though not universal. (We are assuming here that death is end of our existence.) Mark Overvold, himself a desire theorist, admits that "it is hard to see how anything which happens after one no longer exists can contribute to one's self-interest" (1980: 108). Ernest Partridge argues that "the concept of 'posthumous interests' is incoherent" (1981: 264). Don Marquis considers it "grossly counterintuitive" (1985: 160), and Joan Callahan "paradoxical" (1987, p. 341). Both D.W. Haslett (1990: 81) and Alan Fuchs (1993) explicitly argue against standard desire-satisfaction theories of welfare from the impossibility of posthumous harm.[3] Cases of posthumous desire satisfaction may constitute the most acute form of the problem of remote desires.

Let's call a 'remote desire' a desire whose object extends "outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one's own well-being" (Griffin 1986: 16-17). The problem of remote desires for desire theories of welfare is then that simple desire theories imply that the satisfaction of remote desires benefits us. Two kinds of strategies for solving the problem stand out right away. The most common strategy is *restriction*: the desire theorist restricts the theory so that it no longer counts the satisfaction of remote desires as beneficial to us. To do this, the desire theorist must provide an account of remote desires – that is, a specification, in non-welfare-laden terms, of what distinguishes remote desires from non-remote desires. For this strategy to work, the specification must be extensionally adequate. That is, the feature to which this strategy appeals must divide cases of non-benefit from benefit in a plausible way. The solutions criticized below are forms of this strategy.

A second strategy is *biting the bullet*. To make this reply is to claim that there are in fact no remote desires, that anytime a person gets what she wants, no matter how unconnected it might seem from her and her life, she is benefitted. This strategy will thus claim that the stranger's being cured is good for Parfit, that the fact that the number of atoms in the universe is prime makes Kagan better off, and that Leonardo da Vinci was benefitted centuries after his death when the Wright brothers took flight.[4] Although this strategy has its adherents,[5] most philosophers who have commented on the topic find these implications too hard to accept. Nevertheless, this view should not be dismissed out of hand. Though I'm inclined to doubt it, it could be that the problem cases are simply cases of *small* benefit, which we indiscriminately judge to be of *no* benefit. Furthermore, we might find ourselves more open to biting the bullet if other strategy fails. I won't be able to explore this option in this paper.

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[2] [Griffin reconsiders this later (1986: 23).]

[3] See also Sumner 1996: 126-127 and, for discussion less sympathetic to the objection, Carson 2000: 76-78. I believe that we can give an independent argument against the possibility of posthumous harm, based on the irrelevance of satisfying merely past desires.

[4] There is in fact a more moderate position that counts the satisfaction of *present* remote desires but not *past* remote desires. This theory avoids the result that posthumous harm and benefit is possible. Parfit [CITE] claims [argues?] that the moderate position is unstable. See also Griffin [cite] and Dorsey [CITE].

[5] See Lukas 2010 for a nice defense of this response to the problem.

The strategy I favor is in some ways like the first and in some ways like the second. It agrees with the second strategy that there are no desires whose contents are so unconnected from our lives as to render these desires irrelevant to how well things go for us. But it agrees with the first strategy about the case intuitions, and holds that the stranger's being cured is of no benefit to Parfit, that the number of atoms being prime is of no benefit to Kagan, and that we cannot be benefitted or harmed after death. The strategy doesn't restrict which desires count towards welfare according to a desire's *contents*; instead, it posits a condition on all desire satisfactions that must be met if they are to benefit us, a condition that happens not to be met in the cases that figure in the problem of remote desires.

3. Restricting Solutions

a. Self-Regarding Desires

Probably the most common reaction to the problem of remote desires is that the desire theory should exclude desires that are not about the desirer herself or her own life. This is the solution Parfit favors (1984: 494; though he is not committed to the desire theory). Such a restriction has also been considered as a way to save preference utilitarian theories of right action and social policy – theories that include desire accounts of welfare as components – from certain objections.[6] Ronald Dworkin, for example, suggests that preference utilitarian theories should not count "external preferences," which he defines as preferences concerning "the assignment of goods and opportunities to others," and should count only "personal preferences," which are preferences a person has "for his own enjoyment of some goods or opportunities" (1977: 234; though Dworkin is not a utilitarian). Elsewhere Dworkin defines 'personal preferences' differently, as people's preferences "about their own experiences or situation" (1981: 192). John Harsanyi takes Dworkin's suggestion, and makes explicit that it is these personal preferences that determine our "personal interests," or welfare (1988: 97). This solution would hope to exclude Parfit's desire that the stranger be cured, Kagan's desire about the number of atoms in the universe, and da Vinci's desire about human flight on the grounds that these desires aren't about their own lives, or aren't about their own enjoyment of goods, or their own experiences or situation.[7]

Parfit admits that "When this theory appeals only to desires that are about our own lives, it may be unclear what this excludes" (494). For this solution to be successful, we need an account of what it is for a state of affairs to be about one's own life. This isn't just because we can't otherwise fully understand and apply the proposal, and so evaluate whether it succeeds; it's also because there is a real danger of circularity here. It

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[6] Such as the complaint that such theories fail to live up to their egalitarian aspirations, and from problems concerning alleged double-counting of welfare. [EXPLAIN more]

[7] See also Gauthier and "non-tuistic" preferences. See also Kaplow and Shavell (2002: 424, n54). And Kagan 1992: "This suggests that the unrestricted desire theory is hopelessly broad. A theory of well-being must explain which facts constitute my being better off. So they must be facts about *me*" (171). He goes on to say that "the desire theory must be restricted to desires concerning the state of the person." See also Brandt (1982: 172-3). [And Hare?]

could be that when we react intuitively to the ostensibly descriptive question of whether some desire is about the desirer's own life, our intuition is partly responding to whether we judge the satisfaction of this desire to be beneficial to the person. If that's true, then this restricted theory might then be claiming, trivially, that it is good for us to have satisfied just those desires that it is good for us to have satisfied.

In 1980, Mark Overvold published an influential paper arguing that standard desire theories of welfare go wrong for a reason related to the problem of remote desires: that these theories cannot accommodate the possibility of voluntary self-sacrifice.[8] Overvold, who is sympathetic to the desire theory of self-interest, sketches his solution to this problem. I mention it here because it also provides a solution to the problem of remote desires, and in particular a way of specifying what it is for a desire to be about the desirer and his own life, or, as Overvold puts it, to "directly concern the agent" (1980: 10n).

On Overvold's view, a desire directly concerns the desirer just in case it is a desire for a state of affairs that can obtain at some time only if the desirer exists at that time (1980: 10n). Thus, the following possible states of affairs "directly concern me" or are about me: *my working on this paper right now*, *my sleeping well tonight*, *my visiting New York next week*. This is because none of them can occur at the time they would occur unless I exist at that time. Any desires on my part for these states of affairs to obtain, or not, are thus relevant to my self-interest, according to a desire theory of welfare that uses Overvold's restriction. By contrast, *the stranger's being cured* does not directly concern Parfit, and is not about him or his life, because it can obtain at some time without Parfit existing at that time. It is thus of no benefit to Parfit on this theory of welfare. The same goes for *the number of atoms in the universe being prime* and Kagan.

Overvold's theory also rules out posthumous benefit and harm, which he thinks is important, as "it is hard [for him] to see how anything which happens after one no longer exists can contribute to one's self-interest" (1980: 108). Posthumous benefit and harm is avoided because any state of affairs that occurs after one is dead fails to meet Overvold's definition: it can occur at a time even if one doesn't exist at that time. Thus, no such state of affairs can benefit one. These are all exactly the results that the desire theorist concerned with the problem of remote desires wants. Let's call the theory that employs Overvold's account of what it is for a desire to concern a person, or to be about him or his life, the *self-regarding desire theory* of welfare.[9] According to this theory, only satisfying these self-regarding desires makes one better off.[10]

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[8] The argument is that a voluntary action is one the agent most wants to do, but desire theories of welfare imply that whichever act the agent most wants to do is the act that would be most in his interest, and thus could not be an act of self-sacrifice.

[9] An annoying problem remains for this theory. Consider the desire not that the number of atoms in the universe be prime but the desire that *I be such that* the number of atoms in the universe is prime. The self-regarding desire theory will include this desire, but surely if we want to exclude Kagan's desire about the number of atoms, we'd want to exclude this one as well.

[10] Sidgwick suggests a restriction like this when he suggests that the desire theory of welfare "consider only what a man desires … for himself," by which he may mean what he would desire "assuming [his] own existence alone to be considered" (1907: xx).

Unfortunately, this solution does not seem to stand up to scrutiny.[11] It excludes both too much and not enough. First, it excludes desires for things whose occurrence does not require the desirer's existence, but that are nonetheless intuitively relevant to welfare. A persuasive example is the desire that the team one roots for wins. It is very important to some people that their team win, and they hope for it as intently as they hope for anything about themselves. When a serious fan's heart's desire is satisfied by her team's victory, it is not plausible to claim that this desire satisfaction is of no benefit to her simply because it did not involve a desire that was about her, or about a state of affairs that can obtain only if she exists.

One way to bring the point out is to compare two cases. In the first case, our fan is playing in her own tennis match, wanting very much to win. In the second case, she is now in the front row at a professional tennis match, wanting just as much that her favorite player win. Even if we think that it is a greater benefit for her to win the match she herself is participating in than it is a benefit to her when her favorite player wins – even when each is equally important to her – surely we don't think that while the former is a great benefit, the latter is no benefit.

This suggests that the self-regarding theory excludes too much. To see why it does not exclude enough, recall Kagan's case involving the number of atoms. The self-regarding theory delivers the desired result here, since the number of atoms being prime at some time does not require Kagan's existence at that time. But now consider a variant of Kagan's case. Suppose I am a fan of prime numbers, but this makes me hope and desire that the total number of atoms that compose *me* is prime. Also suppose that the total number of atoms composing me is, in point of fact, prime. This state of affairs – *that the total number of atoms composing me is prime* – is self-regarding; it can be true at a time only if I exist at that time. The self-regarding desire theory thus implies that this fact improves the quality of my life. But surely if Kagan receives no benefit in his original case, I receive no benefit in this case.[12]

[I should probably consider alternative interpretations of Parfit's "about our own life," one that makes his desire that his kids thrive about his own life.]

b. Aims

T.M. Scanlon is another philosopher who believes that remote desires present an important problem for the desire theory of welfare:

> the unrestricted actual-desire theory … holds that a person's well-being is measured by the degree to which all the person's actual desires are satisfied. Since one can have a desire about almost anything, this makes an implausibly broad range of considerations count as determinants of a person's well-being. Someone might have a desire about the chemical composition of some star, about whether blue was Napoleon's favorite color, or about whether Julius Caesar was an honest man. But it would be odd to suggest that the

[11] [Mention how K&S's treatment of the appeal to other-regarding preferences is unfair and weak?]

[12] [Portmore 2007 makes a similar argument. Re-read Portmore to see what if anything I say here is new]

> well-being of a person who has such desires is affected by these facts themselves … . (1998: 113-4)

Scanlon's solution involves his view that what is valuable in the neighborhood of desire satisfaction isn't quite desire satisfaction, but rather *aim achievement* — in particular, the achievement of *rational* aims, but this qualification won't matter in what follows (1998: 118-26). Not just any desire, Scanlon notes, is an aim or a goal; one important difference is that, for some possible outcome to be among one's aims, one must have an intention to bring about this outcome (1998: 53). That doesn't hold for desires generally; I may want it to stop raining, but I'm not foolish enough to make it a goal of mine that it stop.

"The fact that the range of a person's possible desires," Scanlon writes, "is much wider than his or her well-being" – that is, the problem of remote desires – "ceases to be a problem when we shift from informed desires to rational aims" (1998: 120). If aims are a special kind of desire rather than a different kind of mental state, we can see Scanlon's solution here as a restricting one. He is restricting the class of desires whose satisfaction counts towards welfare to include only those desires that are also aims.

The restriction to aims handles some of the problem cases well. It is no aim of Parfit's that the stranger be cured, and Kagan has not made it a goal of his that the number of atoms in the universe be prime. Thus a theory according to which well-being consists in the achievement of one's aims rather than the satisfaction of ones desires delivers the right results about these cases.

The case of posthumous benefit is less clear. Considering that he created designs for flying machines, it was probably not just a desire but also an aim of da Vinci's that humans one day fly. Suppose that it was. Does this information cause you to reverse your earlier judgment (assuming that this was your earlier judgment) that da Vinci himself received no benefit when the Wright brothers took flight? For my part, I find that it does not cause me to do this. Thus the restriction to aims does not seem to me to handle even some of the central cases of remote desires. But some advocates of the value of aim achievement may insist that this is the right result, that da Vinci does enjoy a posthumous benefit centuries after his death.[13]

But even putting the question of posthumous harm aside, the appeal to aims is, on its own, not enough to solve the problem. Consider again the devoted fan, who sometimes wants her team to win as much as she wants anything. Despite how intently she desires a victory, it is not correct to say that it is among her aims or goals that her team win. She knows that she has no control over whether they win. But, again, when a beloved team wins, this is a positive thing not only for the team itself, but for its fans. Accomplishing one's aims thus evidently cannot be the only fundamental human good. Thus a solution to the problem of remote desires that restricts the desire theory to count only desires that are also aims does not succeed.

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[13] Having once been so convinced of the impossibility of posthumous benefit that he took it as a test of adequacy on theories of welfare that they not imply otherwise, Griffin later changed his mind, particularly in connection with aims (1986: 23). Griffin acknowledged, however, that no "conclusion on this subject … is entirely comfortable" (1986: 317, 5n).

Scanlon claims that "the idea that well-being is advanced by success in one's rational aims can explain the intuitions that seem to support informed-desire accounts of well-being" (1998: 123). But cases like the above show that the appeal to aims cannot account for all of what is attractive about desire theories. One possibility for those attracted to the special value of aim achievement is to concede that satisfying mere desires counts too, even if not for as much. But then the appeal to aims does not solve the problem of remote desires, for we still need a way to exclude the desire satisfactions in cases like Parfit's and Kagan's, while retaining them in cases like the devoted fan.

Incidentally, it is not Scanlon's view that the achievement of rational aims is the only fundamental human good. Scanlon is a pluralist and maintains that "certain experiential states (such as various forms of satisfaction and enjoyment) [also] contribute to well-being" (1998: 124). Although Scanlon doesn't appeal to these experiential states in attempting to handle the cases in the problem of remote desires, that is, in one way of looking at things, the approach I take below. However, that solution is offered as a desire-theoretic solution, not as one that posits an additional kind of good. I believe that Scanlon's appeal to experiential goods enables him to avoid some of the problems of a theory that appeals only to aim achievement.

4. My solution: experienced desire satisfaction

The cases of remote desires that we have considered all involve desires for things that have no effect on the desirer or her life. This fact motivates the self-regarding desire theory, which excludes these desires, by excluding all desires *whose content* doesn't involve the desirer herself. But it can motivate a different reply as well, one that doesn't exclude desires for having these non-self-regarding contents, but excludes any desire satisfactions that are unconnected from us in a different way. In what way? A natural answer, and the answer I defend, is that the desire satisfactions *must enter one's awareness, or one's experience*.

According to this solution, Parfit is not benefitted when the stranger is cured simply because he never learns that the stranger is cured. Notice that, in describing the case, Parfit explicitly includes the detail that the stranger is cured "unknown to me." This suggests that he thinks that this detail is required to make the intuition clearest. Similarly, the reason Kagan is not benefitted when the number of atoms becomes prime is that this fact never enters his awareness. In describing his case, Kagan doesn't include this detail, but he doesn't need to; we already know that it is impossible to know the number of atoms in the universe. Finally, the reason da Vinci is not benefitted when the Wright brothers take flight is that da Vinci never becomes aware of the fact that they take flight. And that is why, more generally, events that occur after one's death can never harm or benefit one: they can never affect our experience of the world.

It is striking that all three of these cases have this feature. Other cases on which the objection from remote desires is built also share this feature. For example, Sumner describes a case in which he wants his estranged brother to be doing well; he goes on to describe the general problem as based in the fact that "All of us have many desires which, *unbeknownst to us*, will come to be satisfied during our lifetime" (1996: 125; emphasis added). All of this is likely no accident, as the cases are less persuasive if we

are led to assume that the desirer *is* aware that what he wants to be the case is the case. If the stranger is cured before Parfit's eyes, while Parfit still genuinely wants this to happen, it is plausible that Parfit is receiving a benefit, even if one that lasts only as long as the matter is affecting him. Likewise, if da Vinci learns of the first case of human flight because it occurs during his lifetime, it is plausible that this piece of welcome news would make his day better. Some readers might have some hesitation about the prime number case, perhaps because the desire here is odd and fetishistic; but I believe that once we get over that, and see that it's not plausible to rule against odd desires in this way, it will seem right that Kagan is benefitted when he eats up the news that the number of atoms in the universe is in fact prime. We thus have some evidence that our intuitions in the cases of remote desires are sensitive to the feature that I think the benefit depends upon.

The appeal to experienced desire satisfaction delivers the right results in the other test cases as well. First, consider the sports fan. On a desire theory that requires experience of the desire satisfaction, the dedicated sports fan is benefitted when her teams wins. In describing this case, it was implied that the fan was aware that what she wanted to be the case – her team having won – was the case. Next, recall the variant of Kagan's case, in which I want the number of atoms composing my body to be prime. The appeal to experienced desire satisfaction classifies this case along with Kagan's original case, as it should.[14]

a. A deeper justification for this solution

It is one thing for a feature of a theory to enable the theory to sort cases in an intuitively plausible way. It is better if a deeper justification for this feature can also be offered. For the appeal to awareness, there is a plausible underlying justification. There is an intuitive principle about welfare that explains the appeal to experienced desire satisfaction, one intuitive enough to be enshrined in an aphorism: the platitude that "what you don't know can't hurt you."

We have to take some care to understand this intuition properly. The slogan can be interpreted overly literally. Suppose I come across an unusual breed of apple in the produce section and decide to give it a try. To my surprise, it tastes horrible, and makes me sick. I conclude that the new breed is not for me. Unbeknownst to me, however, it wasn't the apple itself that tasted horrible and made me sick, but the worm in the apple that I unknowingly ate. Here we have a counterexample to the literal word of "what you don't know can't hurt you." I didn't know that I ate a worm, but my eating the worm still hurt me, by subjecting me to a nasty taste and making me sick. What I didn't know – that I ate a worm – did hurt me.

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[14] [Perhaps consider here the following objection (due to Alex V.): I prefer that some distant strangers be brought out of abject poverty than that my own limp be cured; suppose the strangers are brought out of poverty and I am made aware of this. Some might think that this should be of no benefit to me; I wanted rather to benefit them; but my solution implies that fulfilling this desire makes my life better. *Reply*: yes it does, but that is not implausible. And note that this can still be an act of self-sacrifice; for in any ordinary case, I would get much more experienced desire satisfaction, out of my limp being cured than I would from the strangers being helped.]

But I don't think that "what you don't know can't hurt you" is meant that way. The slogan is applied rather in situations like the following. Suppose that, still half asleep, Jim manages to locate the coffee beans, grind them down, filter some hot water through them, and make himself a cup of coffee. Ron conceals his disgust minutes later when he notices dead cockroaches among the beans. Realizing that Jim enjoyed the coffee and suffered no ill effects, Ron keeps the news from Jim, thinking to himself, "Welp, what you don't know can't hurt you."

This suggests that the slogan means something along these lines: "if you can't tell any difference — immediately or in the long term — between the case in which some event occurs and the case in which it doesn't, then this event does not harm you." This formulation is not refuted by the apple example since I certainly could tell a difference between the case in which the apple had a worm (the actual case) and the possible case in which it didn't. If the apple hadn't had the worm, I would not have been subjected to the nasty taste or the illness, and I could certainly tell that I was subjected to these things, despite my mistake as to the cause. And, on the assumption that the ground cockroach didn't affect the taste of the coffee and caused no other noticeable effects in Jim, ever, this case is a confirming instance of the principle. That his coffee contained cockroach bits made no difference to anything by his lights, and would make no such difference at any future time, and was thus, according to the principle, harmless.

What is it to be able to tell the difference between two possible outcomes? It at least requires that your experience be different in each outcome. If in each of two possible outcomes your experiences would be identical, then it follows that you cannot tell the difference between them. Thus the intuition that "what you don't know can't hurt you" comes down to the view that for an event to harm you, or make things worse for you, it must make a difference to your experience.

This idea has in fact already been noted by philosophers of welfare, and dubbed 'the experience requirement'.[15] In Sumner's words, "Such a condition would stipulate that a state of affairs can make me better off only if, in one way or another, it enters or affects my experience" (1996: 127). This, the experience requirement, is the fundamental intuition about welfare that explains why the desire theory must include some sort of awareness constraint. It is the underlying justification for our solution to the problem of remote desires.

The experience requirement is sometimes misunderstood. Consider again the earlier passage by Griffin, filled out now to include elements relevant to the present discussion:

> The breadth of the [desire] account, which is its attraction, is also its great flaw. The account drops the Experience Requirement, as we called it. It allows my utility to be determined not only by things that I am not aware of (that seems right: if you cheat me out of an inheritance that I never expected, I might not know but still be worse off for it), but also by things that do not affect my life in any way at all.

Griffin here suggests that the desire theory's dropping the experience requirement affords it a certain advantage, illustrated by the case of stolen inheritance. But this is not

[15] Griffin may have coined the term (1986: 13), influenced by a discussion of Glover (1977: 63–4), which he cites.

a genuine advantage of dropping the experience requirement, because theories that retain the experience requirement can easily explain why, if you cheat Griffin out of an inheritance that he never expected, he might not know but still be worse off for it. We can assume that the ways that cheating Griffin out of an inheritance makes him worse off are the usual ways: had he had the extra money, he would have been able to do more of what he wanted to do — for example, take some nice vacations, pay off the debt that has been hanging over his head, redo his kitchen, whatever. And this, of course, would affect his experience. Thus, theories that incorporate the experience requirement can easily explain this case, and, more generally, can accommodate the idea that one's utility can be determined by things of which one is not aware.

David Dolinko also rejects the incorporation of an experience or awareness requirement into the desire theory for a bad reason. "Death," Dolinko writes,

> plays a puzzling role if we assume that awareness of preference satisfaction or frustration is required for an effect on one's wellbeing. Suppose I shoot a sleeping man through the brain, killing him instantly: have I lowered his well-being? Here, "yes" is clearly the more appealing answer — but though I have ensured the frustration of a great many of my victim's preferences, there is no time at which he is aware of this. So the "experience requirement" would seem to entail that my action has not, after all, affected his well-being. (2002: 379-80)

It is true that this victim's death means that he will never again be in a situation in which he both wants something to be the case and is aware that it is. But that is in fact exactly why his death is bad for him on the view that welfare consists in experienced preference satisfaction. The victim's death deprives him of all the future experienced desire satisfactions he would have benefitted from. His death *is* an event that makes a difference to his experiences. It makes quite a dramatic difference to what his experiences will be: if he lives, he will have all manner of experiences; if he dies, he will have none.

It may be that these writers are running together two versions of an experience requirement, which have been distinguished, in another context, by Jeff McMahan (1988: 33). According to the narrow, more restrictive version, an event can be bad for a person only if *she experiences it as bad*. This thesis does indeed imply that stealing Griffin's inheritance is not bad for him, since he doesn't experience this event as bad (he doesn't even know about it). It also implies that the death of Dolinko's victim isn't bad for him. These implications refute the narrow version of the experience requirement, but not the principle I mean to be discussing here, which is the wide version, the view that, as McMahan puts it, "an event can be bad for someone only if it in some way affects or makes a difference to his conscious experience" (1988: 33)

All of these clarifications of the experience requirement apply, of course, to the positive version of it as well, the view that an event can *benefit* someone only if it makes a difference to his experience.

All of that said, there are popular and not unreasonable views about welfare that the experience requirement does not accommodate, and this makes the principle controversial. Before examining these, I'd like to clarify the form that a desire theory

will take that (i) solves the problem of remote desires in the way suggested above, and (ii) obeys the experience requirement.

b. From the Problem of Remote Desires and to a Mental State Theory

Though not himself a desire theorist, Sumner agrees that only by incorporating an experience requirement "will a desire or preference theory be insulated against highly counterintuitive results flowing from … desire['s] capacity to settle on spatially or temporally distant objects" (1996: 128). Sumner goes on to propose that

> A version of the desire theory which incorporated such a requirement might look like this: *x* makes me better off (directly or intrinsically) just in case (1) I desire *x*, (2) *x* occurs, and (3) I am at least aware of *x*'s occurrence. (1996: 127)

According to this proposal, in order for Parfit to be benefitted when the stranger is cured, what Parfit wants – the stranger's being cured – actually must occur, and Parfit must be aware of this. Theorists more attracted to a desire approach have flirted with ideas in this neighborhood as well. Richard Brandt, for example, mentions, though does not pass judgment on, the idea that

> utility is increased for a person with respect to his or her desire for *S*, only if both *S* obtains at some *t and* if the person *believes* at *t* that *S* has come about or obtains. (1982: 172)

The suggestions of Sumner and Brandt *add to* the conditions required for benefit to occur. The standard desire theory requires just two things: *desire* (a desire for some event or state of affairs to occur, or to have occurred, or to be occurring) and *occurrence* (the occurrence of the desired state of affairs). The suggestions of Sumner and Brandt add a third requirement: *awareness* in Sumner's case, and *belief* in Brandt's case (awareness or belief that the desired state affairs has occurred, or is occurring, or will occur).[16]

Simply adding an awareness or belief requirement onto the *desire* and *occurrence* requirements may seem to be enough to solve the problem of remote desires in the way we are here investigating. But I don't believe that it is. If the theory continues to require *occurrence*, or that the desired state of affairs actually occur, then I don't believe the problem of remote desires has gone away. It is simplest to see this with Brandt's suggested theory, which requires *desire*, *occurrence*, and *belief*.[17] Consider a variation on Parfit's case. Suppose that Parfit receives information to the effect that the stranger has been cured and so comes to believe it, all the while continuing to want him to have been cured. In other words, the *desire* and *belief* requirements are met. Brandt's proposal then implies that whether Parfit is benefitted in this case depends upon the further issue of whether the stranger has really been cured. If the stranger has in fact been cured, then

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[16] [Some desire theorists are not clear on whether their theory requires awareness (CITE: Kaplow and Shavell??)]

[17] For the record, Brandt doesn't suggest this theory explicitly as a solution to the problem of remote desires. He doesn't say why one might want to hold it. Brandt does go on to consider a problem very much like the problem of remote desires, and says that some restriction or other is required, perhaps a restriction that excludes "altruistic desires," or a restriction along Overvold's lines (1982: 172-3).

occurrence is satisfied, and, on Brandt's suggested theory, Parfit is benefitted. If the stranger has not in fact been cured (making Parfit's belief a false belief), then *occurrence* has not been satisfied, and Parfit is not benefitted.

But this result is problematic. For *whether the stranger has in fact been cured is a state of affairs remote to Parfit and his life*. If one was moved by Parfit's original case and thought that the mere occurrence or not of a state of affairs such as this was not enough to benefit Parfit, then it seems that one should be equally moved in this variant case as well. Those who, like me, are moved by Parfit's original case to incorporate an awareness or experience requirement into the desire theory find it implausible that we can vary a person's welfare level by varying whether a state of affairs remote to that person (such as a stranger's being cured unbeknownst to the person) obtains. But Brandt's suggested revision shares this feature exactly. Thus, simply tacking a *belief* requirement onto a traditional desire theory doesn't seem to be enough to avoid the problem of remote desires. It seems that we need to amputate the *occurrence* requirement as well, and require only that the subject believe that the desired state of affairs has obtained.

This would in effect turn the desire theory into a what Kagan (1992) calls a "mental-state theory" of well-being, according to which a person's welfare is determined solely by their mental states. States of the external world play no direct role (though of course they play a huge indirect role, since they hugely affect which mental states we are in). This marks a serious departure from traditional desire theories, and, it should be acknowledged, one that gives up a feature of traditional desire theories that has attracted some people to it: that how well off we are *does* depend on more than just our mental states. We'll address that issue in the next section.

I have just argued that if we are moved by the problem of remote desires to add a belief requirement into a desire theory, we should be similarly moved by the same problem to drop the occurrence requirement as well. Earlier I suggested that the intuition in favor of the experience requirement provides an independent and underlying justification for this solution to the problem of remote desires. Now I want to show that for the desire theory to be consistent with the experience requirement, it likewise must drop the occurrence requirement and become a mental-state theory.

The experience requirement says that an event can be good or bad for a person only if it makes a difference to their experiences; in other words, no change in welfare without a change in experiences. The standard desire theory, which contains only two requirements – *desire* and *occurrence* – clearly violates this. A person can move from a state in which just the desire obtains to a state in which the desire and the occurrence obtain without any change in his experiences. Since this is a change in his welfare according to the standard desire theory, the standard desire theory violates the experience requirement. But the same kind of thing can happen no matter what other mental or experiential requirements we add, so long as we continue to keep the occurrence requirement. We can always imagine a pair of cases with this structure: in the first case, the desire exists along with the experiential element; the second case is identical, save for the fact that the desired event actually occurs. This is a change in welfare according to the theory in question without a change in experience. To respect the experience requirement, the desire theory must drop the occurrence requirement altogether.

Sumner is thus must be mistaken when he says that

> A version of the desire theory which incorporated such a requirement [the experience requirement] might look like this: *x* makes me better off (directly or intrinsically) just in case (1) I desire *x*, (2) *x* occurs, and (3) I am at least aware of *x*'s occurrence. (1996: 127)

This version of the desire theory does not obey the experience requirement. Showing specifically that it does not is slightly more complicated than the above line of reasoning, because awareness is a state that is partly mental, or internal, and partly external. To be *aware* that an event has occurred, it is not enough for you to believe that is has occurred. For one thing, the claim that someone is aware that some event has occurred implies that the event has occurred. And belief together with occurrence is also not enough. The belief must be connected to the object of awareness in some suitable way (perhaps by causation, perhaps by causation in a certain way, we need not worry about the details here). To see that Sumner's proposal violates the experience requirement, we just need to distinguish between the internal and external components of being aware that something is the case. Then we again imagine a pair of cases: one with the desire together with the "internal conditions" of awareness (whatever is common between a state of awareness and a state experientially indistinguishable from awareness, in which the event the person thinks they are aware of is in fact not occurring); and a case identical to this, with the addition of the occurrence of the event together whatever other external conditions on awareness remain. This pair of cases will manifest a difference in well-being according to Sumner's suggested theory without a difference in experience. His own claims notwithstanding, Sumner's proposal thus violates the experience requirement.

We can illustrate this more concretely with another variant on Parfit's case. Suppose that if the stranger is cured, Parfit will come to believe this, and in whatever way is required to make it the case that Parfit is also *aware* that the stranger has been cured. Suppose also that if the stranger is not cured, Parfit will somehow still come to believe this, and indeed come to have exactly the same experiences he would have had if the stranger had been cured. In this second possibility, Parfit has exactly the same experiences as in the first possibility, though he does not count as being *aware* that the stranger has been cured. He of course thinks he is aware that the stranger has been cured, but he is not, because the stranger has not been cured. Sumner's theory implies that Parfit is benefitted in the first case, but not in the second. This violates the experience requirement. It also shows, I believe, that Sumner's suggested theory doesn't

solve the problem of remote desires, as he believes it might, for the same reason Brandt's suggested theory doesn't solve the problem.[18,19]

I conclude that in order to solve the problem of remote desires in the way we are exploring here, and in order for the desire theory to obey this solution's underlying rationale (the experience requirement), the desire theory must become a mental state theory of welfare. The resulting theory I call *subjective desire satisfactionism* because, according to it, the fundamental welfare states are states in which a desire is *subjectively satisfied*. A person's desire is subjectively satisfied just in case he believes that the content of the desire obtains, or is true. This is a mental state theory, since welfare, on this view, directly depends solely on one's mental states. As a mental state theory, it obeys the experience requirement. It also delivers the desired results in our cases. Neither Parfit, Kagan, nor da Vinci is benefitted when their desires are satisfied on this view, because none of their desires are satisfied by their own lights, or subjectively satisfied. But the devoted fan is benefitted when her team wins, because she both wants them to have won and believes that they have won (believes that they have won because they have in fact won).[20]

Other philosophers have considered and/or endorsed superficially similar incorporations of an experience requirement into a desire approach. But there are important differences between these approaches and the approach developed here. Parfit explores a desire theory that "appeals only to preferences about those features of our lives that are introspectively discernible" (1984: 494). Similarly, D.W. Haslett's "compromise model … identifies a person's utility with whatever *personal experiences* that person would prefer" (1990: 72, italics altered). Kagan (1992: 170-1) and R.M. Hare (1981: 104) discuss a similar view, which features a restriction to preferences concerning experiences.

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[18] [This issue is actually somewhat complicated. It is complicated by the fact, already noted, that to turn a case of *occurrence* and *belief* into a case of *awareness*, there may need to be certain relations between the occurrence and the belief, perhaps a causal relation. The argument that Sumner's theory does not solve the problem of remote desires will rest on a premise like the following: we can vary whether Parfit is benefitted merely by varying whether a state of affairs *remote to Parfit* obtains. So we need to consider a pair of cases like the following, in each of which he desires that the stranger be cured: (case 1) Parfit believes that the stranger is cured, but the stranger is not cured; (case 2) the stranger is cured, and this causes Parfit to believe that the stranger is cured. The allegedly remote state that we vary is complex: it includes the stranger being cured *and the causal relation to Parfit's belief*. But one of the relata of this causal relation is Parfit's belief, which is of course *not* remote to Parfit. If one of the relata is non-remote, does this make *the obtaining of the relation* non-remote? That's a hard question.]

[19] [Indeed, it would seem that the experience requirement in fact implies that the only thing that can be intrinsically good for us are certain experiences (on the assumption that something is intrinsically good for us). For consider an arbitrary entity X that is not an experience. Since X is not an experience, it can come into existence without affecting a person's experiences. The claim X is good for us …. this argument is actually complicated]

[20] The theory I ultimately defend is a qualified version of this theory. On this view, only *occurrent* desires and beliefs count; as do what I call "desires in the genuine attraction sense." These qualifications won't play a role in what follows.

The view I am laying out is not a restricted theory, and in particular makes no such restrictions to desires about experiences. Desires about the external world count too. Of course, these desires are involved in a benefit only when the subject believes that their objects obtain, but their object can be any content whatever. I believe my approach is preferable because it is less restrictive. In some cases of intuitive benefit, such as the fan witnessing her team's victory, the person may be giving no thought to the quality of her experiences and so is having no desires about her experiences; all of her attention is focused outward, on the external world (which she accesses through her experiences, of course). The restriction to desires about experiences implausibly excludes such cases.

One final point of clarification about subjective desire satisfaction. Subjective desire satisfaction is not the notion of believing that one's desire is satisfied. Rather, it is the notion of desiring and believing the same thing. When one has a subjective desire satisfaction, one will often also have the further higher-order belief the desire is satisfied, but one need not. And when the desirer in question is a small child or an animal, they typically will not. This is in fact why it would be problematic if subjective desire satisfaction were defined as believing that a desire of one's is satisfied. Things can obviously go better or worse for small children and some animals even if they are incapable of having beliefs about their own intentional states.

5. Are Mental State Theories Defensible? [this section is rough and incomplete]

I have explained a desire-theoretic solution to the problem of remote desires that I believe (i) is superior to other desire-theoretic solutions (the restriction to self-regarding desires, the restriction to aims, biting the bullet, and we could also include the restriction just mentioned, to desires about one's own experience), and (ii) coheres with a compelling intuition about welfare, the experience requirement. The resulting desire theory is a mental-state theory of welfare. But mental-state theories face a serious kind of objection, one that some find decisive. In this section, I attempt to rebut this objection.

a. The Experience Machine

The most vivid and well-known version of this objection is based on a thought experiment by Robert Nozick:

> Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? … [W]hile in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening. … Would you plug in? (1974: 44-45).

Few of us would plug in.

But what follows? Mental state theories of well-being certainly don't imply that any of us would plug in. As theories of value, they make no predictions about what anyone would do. They don't even imply that we *should* plug in. Many of our reasons for action, which are what determine what we should do, are unrelated to our own welfare. What mental-state theories imply, given certain stipulations about our lives, is rather

that some of us would *benefit more* if we were to plug in than if we were to live out the rest of our lives in normal fashion.

Many people report that they find that claim, too, to be counterintuitive. I accept the claim; I think I would receive more benefit on the experience machine (assuming certain facts about the actual future I have in store and the sorts of experiences the machine would give me). I'm led to this view because I find the general principle that a person can be benefitted or harmed only if her experience of the world is affected almost irresistible.[21] I find additional support for it in the fact that the best solution to the problem of remote desires seems to be the one that appeals to experienced desire satisfaction, which in turn supports a mental state theory. Finally, I find that my intuition that something is amiss with a life on the experience machine is reasonably well accounted for by the many non-welfare-related ways that the life is, intuitively, amiss. I will now elaborate on this last point.

It is commonly observed that how well off a person is or how good his life is for him is just one mode of evaluation of people and their lives. There are many other ways that we evaluate people and their lives. A person and/or his life can

- be beneficial to others
- be morally good or praiseworthy
- be meaningful
- manifest excellence (such as in arts, letters, science, sports, etc.)
- have a degrading existence
- make great achievements
- make for a good story.

A life on the experience machine lacks many of these other potential values. If you choose to live on the experience machine, your life will be of no benefit to others. It will likely have less moral value than your actual life will have (some moral virtues probably require affecting the world in some way). It will be far less meaningful and perhaps even meaningless, since affecting the world is the most important way for a life to be meaningful. You will likely participate less in excellent activity (while it may seem to you, on the experience machine, that you are, for example, a virtuoso cellist, in fact you won't know how to play the cello at all). Your life may be degrading (perhaps lying dormant in a machine one's whole life, being fed hallucinations, and being deceived about everything, is a degrading existence, unbecoming of rational creatures). You will

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[21] Another principle, very similar but not identical to the experience requirement, also lends support. This is the view that a person can be made better or worse off only if *she herself* is affected. Shelly Kagan tries to make vivid the appeal of this principle, despite being uncomfortable with its implications:

> If something constitutes an (ultimate) benefit to a person, it must involve the person's intrinsic properties. … Is [this] claim correct? Much to my dismay, I find myself strongly inclined to think that it *is*. If something is to be of genuine (ultimate) benefit *to* a person, then it must *affect* the person; in must make a difference *in* the person. Otherwise, there would be nothing in it *for him*. … one might point to some intuitively plausible example where one is strongly disposed to claim that something affects well-being even though it does not affect the person's body or mind. … But when I reconsider the claim once more I find myself unable to maintain this rejection. How could something be of genuine benefit *to* the person, if it never 'touches' her, if it never alters the person at all." (1992: 186)

accomplish little to nothing of significance (such as curing some terrible disease, running a marathon, or writing a great novel). There are thus many evaluative dimensions on which you in the experience-machine would rate very poorly.

We can thus conclude that a life on the experience machine would not be a very good life (we can say this because 'good', as the most general adjective of positive evaluation, can be used to cover any value). We can say that it is, overall, not worth choosing. The only thing we cannot say is that the life you would live on the machine would be less good *for you*, or that you would be less *well off* in it, or that you would *benefit less* from it. I believe that when we appreciate all of the ways in which a life on the experience machine is intuitively amiss, combined with an appreciation of the inherent plausibility of the experience requirement, the best view on the matter is that a life on the machine would indeed be of greater benefit to us, and that our sense that the life is in some important way undesirable is accounted for by the other values that the life lacks.[22,23]

b. The Deceived Businessman

The experience machine thought experiment is the most famous putative counterexample to mental-state theories of welfare. But another kind of case is also popular, and the reply made above to the experience machine objection may apply less well to this other case, and so it is worth considering it too. The case also happens to be less far-fetched, which some think matters. It is the case of an ordinary person who is deceived about the things in life most important to him. Here is Kagan's version, which is derived from a case of Thomas Nagel's:

> Imagine a man who dies contented, thinking he has achieved everything he wanted in life: his wife and family love him, he is a respected member of the community, and he has founded a successful business. Or so he thinks. In reality, however, he has been completely deceived: his wife cheated on him, his daughter and son were only nice to him so that they would be able to borrow the car, the other members of the community only pretend to respect him for the sake of the charitable contributions he sometimes made, and the business partner has been embezzling funds from the company, which will soon go bankrupt. In thinking about this man's life, it is difficult to believe that it is all a life could be, that this life has gone about as well as a life could go. (1998: 34-5)

Mental-state theories, however, must say that, because none of these facts about his life made any difference to his mental states, they did not make him any worse off.

The point made above about the experience-machine case – that the life on the machine is lacking in so many other values that we may care about, and that this

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[22] [Sumner (1996: 126-7) may make a similar point.]

[23] [I don't believe that the point being made here requires the view that these other alleged values (excellence, degradation, etc.) are real values, or are phenomena that really matter. So the point being made here does not commit me denying, for example, welfarism, the view that all that ultimately matters is the welfare of welfare subjects. All that the point here requires is the idea that these other factors matter *intuitively*, which they do. This is because I am appealing to them to explain an intuition: the intuition that the experience-machine life is undesirable. It is possible that, after subjecting these other alleged values to philosophical scrutiny, we may conclude that their apparent value is an illusion. But this would not undermine the claim that they initially appear to matter.]

accounts for our negative assessment of it – is at least somewhat less effective here. For the deceived businessman's life might have been reasonably beneficial to others, he might have been a morally decent person, he may have excelled reasonably in certain worthwhile pursuits, and he may have made some decent achievements in business. Thus I cannot say that we judge his life poorly because it rates poorly in these areas.

But I do think that the same general kind of reply is effective enough. First, notice that it is plausible to say that the deceived businessman's situation is degrading. He is treated with serious disrespect and disregard by the people most important to him. Respect is something we care about and, intuitively, have good reason to care about, even if it is not itself an ingredient of well-being. There is a second important defect in the businessman's life. Certain of our attitudes and mental acts have *conditions of success* built into them. Thus, a belief is successful just in case it is true; a belief that is false is, for that reason, defective. As it is of the nature of belief to "aim" at the truth, false beliefs fail, as it were, on their own terms, or according to their own standards. Intentions or aims themselves also have conditions of success. An intention is successful just when what is intended comes about. Or perhaps we should just say that a person who has an aim is successful, with respect to that aim, just in case what is aimed it comes about. If a person intends to bring about some result, but the result never in fact obtains, this is a kind of failure. Many of the aims that were most important to the deceived businessman – that he have a successful marriage and family life, that he be a respected member of the community, that his business succeed – are not achieved. He, or these attitudes, thus fail to meet their conditions of success. In this way, they mar his life.[24] But it is a further question whether these defects are *harmful* to him. And even assuming that they are not harmful, they are still a kind of defect, and so can account for the intuitive defectiveness of the businessman's life. I conjecture that when we, with Kagan, judge the deceived businessman's life to be not all that a life could be, we base this judgment on the fact that the life is degrading and full of failed aims. But I think that, due to the businessman's being unaware of any of this, these features of his life, thankfully, at least do not to harm him, or make him any worse off.[25]

I admit that it is not easy to tell whether this is right, and that some who reflect on these cases in an honest way will judge that the deceived businessman is genuinely *harmed* by the fact that he is unknowingly disrespected and that his aims in life have failed unbeknownst to him. The stalemate here may be difficult to overcome. I will close with an attempt to elicit an intuition that seems to conflict with this judgment.

In one of my ethics classes, we consider a classic argument against utilitarianism having to do with the importance of promise-keeping. The objection is based on a thought experiment that is laid out in an introductory textbook, which I will quote at length:

> Suppose a young man has been generously supported throughout his college career by his kindly grandfather. As a graduation present, the grandfather has taken the youth on a round-the-world sailboat trip. The grandson is delighted to go on the trip, since he loves fishing.

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[24] [CITE Boonin]

[25] [Something about the expression "how did it go?" perhaps in reference to some goal-oriented activity such as a treasure hunt, and how it relates to "how did his life go." Perhaps the latter isn't asking about well-being.]

> However, a storm wrecks their boat, and they are washed ashore on a deserted tropical island. The youth feels fit and healthy, but the ordeal is hard on the grandfather. The old man weakens, and at last is on the verge of death. He calls the youth to his side, and asks one last favor. "Before I die," he says, "promise me that once I am gone you will bury my body in a suitable grave, and say a prayer over it." "Certainly, Grandfather," says the youth. "I promise that your remains will be treated with respect." Then the grandfather dies.
>
> The grandson reflects on his alternatives. He could treat the body as he has promised. This would be somewhat painful, since it would require him to dig a grave, carry the grandfather's body to it, and then fill it up again. That would entail a lot of hard work, and would produce no pleasure at all. For the grandson, being a cold-hearted ingrate, would get no pleasure from seeing the promise kept, and the grandfather, being dead, is in no position to benefit from a proper burial. Since the island is otherwise deserted, no one else will be affected in any way by the grandson's action.
>
> Another alternative would be to cut up the grandfather's body and use it for bait. The grandson loves fishing, and would really like to do some surf casting. Of course, he doesn't need to go fishing, since the island is well stocked with bananas, pineapples, and mangoes. Nevertheless, he would enjoy using the body for this purpose. Furthermore, he is so callous that he would feel no shame, horror, or disgust at thus misusing the body of his deceased benefactor. (Feldman 1978: 52).

The author goes on to spell out the implications of this thought experiment for act utilitarianism.

In class, I ask for a volunteer to remind us of the details of the thought experiment. Then I ask the student a clarificatory question about the case; I ask, "In the example, if the grandson uses the grandfather's body for bait, will anyone be harmed?" The student always answers, "No." I have also put this question several times on a quiz. Virtually everyone always answers, "No." This is certainly the intuitive reaction that I myself have to the case. I suspect that it is the reaction that many people will have.

But this intuition is in tension with the idea that the deceived businessman is harmed by the relevant events that go in his life.[26] Thus, even those who disagree with me about the deceived businessman will, in order to maintain their view on that case, have to give up on a widely shared intuition. I hope this convinces the reader that taking the alternative course (i.e., accepting the intuition about the present desert-island case and rejecting the deceived businessman intuition) is at least a reasonable thing to do. And note that if we reject the deceived businessman intuition, and, more generally, accept the experience requirement, then we have what seems to me to be the best solution to the problem of remote desires.

[26] [will need to defend this claim]

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