



## The Status of Well-Being

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*The Status of Well-Being*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly supposed that there is a single notion of individual well-being that plays the following three roles. First, it serves as an important basis for the decisions of a single rational individual, at least for those decisions in which he or she alone is concerned (that is to say, in which moral obligations and concerns for others can be left aside). Second, it is what a concerned benefactor, such as a friend or parent, has reason to promote. Third, it is the basis on which an individual's interests are taken into account in moral argument. This last claim is most plausible when the morality in question is utilitarian, since on a utilitarian account the moral point of view is just the point of view of a benefactor who is impartially concerned with everyone, and hence, if the second claim is correct, with the well-being of everyone. But it is commonly said that any moral theory, even a nonutilitarian one, must rely on a notion of individual well-being insofar as it acknowledges a duty of benevolence and insofar as it holds that moral principles are to be justified, at least in part, by the impact they have on individuals' lives.

While well-being is supposed to play all three of the roles I have just listed, the first of these roles is generally held to be primary: well-being is important in the thinking of a benefactor and in moral argument because of its importance for the individual whose well-being it is. In particular, while the notion of well-being is important *for* morality, it is not itself a moral notion. It represents what an individual has reason to want for himself or

I am indebted to my commentators, Peter Hammond and Shelly Kagan, and also to many members of the audience at the University of Michigan, for their stimulating and helpful comments. Many others have also provided advice and criticism that has led to substantial changes. In particular, I am grateful to Leonard Katz, Derek Parfit, Amartya Sen, Angela Smith, and L. W. Sumner.

herself, leaving aside concern for others and any moral restraints or obligations. Well-being is thus an input into moral thinking that is not already shaped by moral assumptions.

Well-being is also commonly supposed to be a notion that admits of quantitative comparisons of at least some of the following kinds: comparisons of the levels of well-being enjoyed by different individuals under various circumstances, comparisons of the increments in individuals' well-being that would result from various changes, and perhaps also comparisons of the amounts of well-being represented by different lives, considered as a whole. It is taken to be an important task (important both for moral theory and for theories of "rationality" or "prudence") to come up with a theory of well-being: a systematic account of "what makes someone's life go better" that clarifies the boundary of this concept (the line between those things that contribute to a person's well-being and those that are desirable on other grounds) and perhaps provides a clearer basis for quantitative comparisons of the kinds just mentioned.

I will argue in this lecture that many of these suppositions are mistaken. To put the point briefly: it is a mistake to think that there is a single notion of well-being that plays all of the roles I have mentioned and that we need a theory of well-being to clarify this concept. We do have a rough intuitive idea of individual well-being, and we can make rough comparative judgments about what makes a life go better and worse from the point of view of the person who lives it. But this concept of well-being has surprisingly little role to play in the thinking of the rational individual whose life is in question. It sounds absurd to say that individuals have no reason to be concerned with their own well-being, because this seems to imply that they have no reason to be concerned with those things that make their lives better. Clearly they do have reason to be concerned with these things. But in regard to their own lives they have little need to use the concept of well-being itself, either in giving justifications or in drawing

distinctions. In particular, individuals have no need for a theory that would clarify the boundaries of their own well-being and provide a basis for sharper quantitative comparisons.

From a third-person point of view, such as that of a benefactor, a notion of well-being has greater significance. In moral thinking, also, we may need to appeal to various conceptions of well-being and to make comparisons of how well-off people would be under various conditions, as measured by these conceptions. But what are employed in moral argument are generally not notions of well-being that individuals would use to evaluate their own lives but, rather, various moral conceptions of how well-off a person is—that is to say, conceptions that are shaped by one or another idea of what we owe to and can claim from one another. This is most obvious in political philosophy in the various standards that have been proposed as measures of distributive shares for purposes of assessing claims of justice, such as John Rawls's primary social goods (income and wealth, powers and liberties, and the social bases of self-respect) and Amartya Sen's capability sets (which include the "functionings" such as good health, ability to take part in social life, and so on of which an individual is capable).<sup>1</sup> From an individual's own perspective, these criteria offer very incomplete measures of how well his or her life is going. One life might be much better than another from an individual's point of view—happier, more successful and so on—even though the two lives were the same as measured by Rawls's or Sen's criteria. This divergence is due to the fact that these criteria are supposed to measure only those aspects of a life that, according to the theories in question, it is the responsibility of basic social institutions to provide for. I believe that the conceptions of well-being that figure in

<sup>1</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, §5, and "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond*; Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, chapter 3. It is clear that Rawls and Sen are not intending to offer accounts of "what makes a life better from the point of view of the person who lives it." Rawls, in particular, is quite clear about this. (See, for example, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," p. 169.)

moral thinking more generally can be expected to diverge in similar ways from the conceptions that individuals might use in assessing their own lives. Whether they diverge or not, however, these conceptions of well-being will be moral conceptions, that is to say, they derive their significance and to a certain extent their distinctive shape from their role in the moral structures in which they figure.

My argument will proceed as follows. In the next two sections I will identify the intuitive question of well-being that I am discussing and identify some of the fixed points that any plausible theory of well-being in this sense would have to preserve. I will then argue that the concept of one's own well-being in the sense thus characterized has little role to play in the thinking of a rational individual and that in thinking about his or her own life an individual has no need for a *theory* of well-being. After this I will return to the question of the significance of well-being from third person and moral perspectives.

## 2. QUESTIONS OF WELL-BEING

The notion of well-being that I am concerned with here is, although somewhat vague, nonetheless intuitively familiar and widely discussed. It is, for example, the subject of James Griffin's book *Well-Being* and of Derek Parfit's well-known discussion of "What Makes Someone's Life Go Best?"<sup>2</sup> Both of these discussions take up the question of well-being partly because of its significance for morality, but both treat it as a question that, first and foremost, can be asked by, and is important to, the person whose life it is. Even when we focus on assessments of a life from this perspective —the point of view of the person whose life it is — there are a number of different questions that can be asked. To identify the question of well-being with which I am concerned it will be helpful to begin by distinguishing it from four other ideas of "the quality of a life" with which it might be confused.

<sup>2</sup> James Griffin, *Well-Being*; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, appendix I.

On one natural interpretation, the quality of life can mean the quality of the conditions under which life is lived, including such things as freedom from illness and danger, access to nutrition, education, and other opportunities and resources. Quality of life in this sense, which might be called “material welfare,” seems to be what we have in mind, for example, when we say that the quality of life in Japan or Sweden is higher than in Somalia. Although there may be disagreements about how best to measure it, material welfare is a relatively clear notion, and it captures one important aspect of a life, from the point of view of the person who lives it. But well-being, from that point of view, includes more than this: one person can have a much better life than another —much happier and more successful, for example—even though their lives are lived under equally good, or bad, material conditions.

The phrase “from the point of view of the person who lives it” calls to mind a second aspect of a life, namely its experiential quality or “what it would be like to live it.” Like material welfare, experiential quality is a relatively clear notion, and an important one. We all care about the experiential quality of our lives and have reason to do so. It has sometimes been claimed that the quality of a life in the sense I am concerned with—the level of well-being it represents—is completely determined by its experiential quality.<sup>3</sup> But this is a substantive claim, which can sensibly be denied. It makes sense to say that the life of a person who is contented and happy only because he is systematically deceived about what his life is really like is for that reason a worse life, for him, than a life would be that was similarly happy where this happiness was based on true beliefs. To take the standard example, it makes sense to say that the life of a person who is happy only because he does not know that the people whom he regards as devoted friends are in fact artful deceivers is worse, for the person who lives it, than a similar life in which the person is made happy

<sup>3</sup> This is implied, for example, by Henry Sidgwick’s claim that desirable consciousness is the only ultimate good. See *Methods of Ethics*, book 3, chapter 14.



by true friends. I myself believe that this claim not only makes sense but is in fact true. Even if I am mistaken, however, and experiential quality is the complete and correct answer to the question of well-being, it remains true that this is a substantive claim, not true by definition. So the question of well-being and the question of experiential quality are not the same question.

A third interpretation of the quality of a life is what I will call its worthiness or value, as constituted, for example, by the contribution it makes to other goods and the degree to which it is particularly admirable and worthy of respect. Value in this sense is, again, clearly distinct from well-being. The life of a person who sacrifices his own well-being for the sake of others may be, for that reason, a particularly valuable one, and in order for this to be true there must be a sacrifice involved.

The question of whether a person should prefer such a life of sacrifice over the available alternatives would be an example of what I will call the question of choiceworthiness. Each of the first three notions I have considered —material welfare, experiential quality, and worthiness or value —is a factor that may bear on the choiceworthiness of a life. So also is well-being in the sense I am discussing. We might say, for example, that there is reason to choose a certain life because of its great value, even though it involves a low level of well-being, or that the value of a life did not in fact make it worth choosing given the sacrifice in well-being that it would involve.<sup>4</sup> So choiceworthiness is a different notion from any of the other four taken alone.

<sup>4</sup> It might seem that when we say this we are identifying well-being with experiential quality and that when these two are carefully distinguished the question of well-being turns out to be the same as the question of choiceworthiness. But this is not so. A person who abandons a valued ambition in order to help his family may have made a net sacrifice in the quality of his life, by giving up the accomplishments he would have made, even if the experiential quality of the life he chooses is no lower than that of the one he foregoes. It may, for example, involve more joy and less struggle, stress, and frustration. The life he lives can therefore be more choiceworthy and involve no loss in experiential quality while still being a worse life for him, in the sense with which I am here concerned.

The intuitive notion of well-being that I am concerned with, then, is an idea of the quality of a life for the person who lives it that is broader than material welfare, at least potentially broader than experiential quality, different from worthiness or value, and narrower than choiceworthiness, all things considered. Having roughly identified the question of well-being and distinguished it from some others, I want now to consider how this question might be answered.

### 3. ACCOUNTS OF WELL-BEING

Answers to the question, “What makes someone’s life go better?” are commonly divided into three types: experiential theories, desire theories, and “objective list” or, as I will call them, “substantive good” theories.<sup>5</sup> Experiential theories hold that the quality of a life “for the person who lives it” is completely determined by what I called above its experiential quality. Desire theories hold that the quality of a person’s life is a matter of the extent to which that person’s desires are satisfied. The hallmark of such views, as I will understand them, is that there is no standard apart from a person’s desires for assessing the quality of his or her life. Substantive good theories are just those that deny this claim and hold that there are standards for assessing the quality of a life that are not entirely dependent on the desires of the person whose life it is. On this way of looking at things, experiential theories count as one kind of substantive good theory, since they deny that the satisfaction of desires for things other than states of consciousness can make a life better.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This tripartite division follows the one Parfit gives in appendix 1 of *Reasons and Persons*. The term “substantive good theory” is taken from my “Value, Desire and Quality of Life” in M. Nussbaum and A. Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life*. The discussion of well-being in this section and the following one draws on that article but goes beyond it in a number of respects.

<sup>6</sup> This is true even of what Parfit calls “preference hedonism,” according to which the quality of a person’s life is measured by the degree to which it contains experiences of the kind that that person prefers to have (see *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 493-94).

Experiential theories provide a clear boundary for the concept of well-being: something contributes to well-being if, but only if, it affects the quality of one's experience. This clarity can be seen as a theoretical advantage; the problem, however, is that these boundaries are implausibly narrow. The difference between true and false friends, which I have already mentioned, is only one obvious example of the ways in which the quality of a life, for the person who lives it, depends on factors that go beyond how the life *seems* to that person.

Desire theories can accommodate these factors, since they hold that a person's life can be made better or worse not only by changes in the experience of living that life but also by changes in the world that affect the degree to which the world is the way that person desires it to be. But these theories are also open to serious objection. The most general view of this kind —it might be called the unrestricted actual desire theory —holds that a person's well-being is measured by the degree to which all of 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 well-being of a person who has such desires is affected by these facts themselves (as opposed to the pleasure he or she derives from having certain beliefs about them). The fact that some distant star is made up of the elements I would like it to be made of does not seem to make my life better (assuming that I am not an astronomer whose life work has been devoted to a theory that would be confirmed or refuted by this fact).

A second problem for desire theories concerns the relation between desires and reasons. Presumably one thing that makes desire theories of well-being plausible is the idea that if a person has a desire for something then (other things equal) he or she has rea-

son to do what will promote that thing. I believe, however, that the fact that a person has a certain desire is hardly ever what provides him or her with a reason for action. What an agent sees as providing reasons for action are generally not his or her desires but the considerations that, in the agent's view, make the objects of these desires desirable.<sup>7</sup> If this is correct it poses a problem for desire-based accounts of well-being, since it would be odd to claim that the factors that make something contribute to one's well-being do not provide reasons for pursuing it.

A third problem that has been raised for desire views arises from the fact that people's desires change, and what they desire at one time may conflict with what they desire at another.<sup>8</sup> When this happens, which desire determines what contributes to the person's well-being? One natural response is that it is the later desire that counts, since the satisfaction of a desire contributes to well-being only if the person has the desire at the time that it is satisfied. It would be easy to see why this should be so if what contributed to well-being were just the pleasant experience of knowing that one's desire is satisfied, but the grounds for making present desires authoritative is less clear if, as a desire theory holds, what matters is not pleasant experience but rather the desire's being satisfied, that is to say, the world's being the way the person desires it to be.

These objections can be partially met by shifting to what is commonly called an "informed desire" theory. On this view, the quality of a life for the person who lives it is determined by the degree to which that person's *informed* desires are satisfied, where informed desires are ones that are based on a full understanding of the nature of their objects and do not depend on any errors of

<sup>7</sup> I defend this claim in chapter 1 of my forthcoming book, *What We Owe to Each Other*. Similar claims have been made by others as well. See, for example, Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason*, pp. 35-42.

<sup>8</sup> A difficulty emphasized by Richard Brandt. See *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, chapter 13.

reasoning.<sup>9</sup> This constraint narrows the range of factors that contribute to a person's well-being. (Presumably not many of us would have informed desires about what Napoleon's favorite color was.) It also supplies a link between what contributes to our well-being and what we have reason to promote, since a person who has an informed desire for something is likely to have a reason for wanting to bring that thing about.

But neither of these responses fully meets the objection in question. The restriction to informed desires may eliminate some whimsical or foolish notions, but it will still include many desires whose objects lie well beyond the quality of the desirer's own life, intuitively understood. Suppose, for example, that I very much admire a certain person and therefore desire that her struggle and sacrifice will be crowned with success and happiness. This may be an informed desire; it might even be strengthened by fuller knowledge of the person's life and character. Even if this is so, if I have no connection with her beyond my admiration and this informed desire, then the quality of my life is not affected one way or the other by her fate."

The shift to informed desires also represents an important change in the role of desires as determinants of well-being. If a full appreciation of the ways in which my life would be changed if I could speak French well would lead me to have a strong desire to master that language, then it is likely both that I have reason to do this and that doing it would contribute to my well-being. But what role does the desire that I would have play in making these things true? What makes it the case that I have reason to learn

<sup>9</sup> See John Harsanyi, "Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior," in Sen and Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, pp. 47, 55–56; James Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 14. Griffin offers a lengthy and well-articulated defense of an informed desire view. In his formulation, informed desires are ones that are "formed by an appreciation of the nature of [their] objects." There are many questions about how the idea of "informed desires" is to be understood. I will discuss a few of these below.

<sup>10</sup> An example modeled on Parfit's case of "the stranger on the train." See *Reasons and Persons*, p. 494.

French is the enjoyment and other benefits I would gain from being able to speak it, not the desire that full awareness of these benefits would generate. Informed desires may correspond to reasons, and the things that fulfill them may contribute to our well-being, insofar as these desires are responses to considerations that make their objects desirable. But an account of well-being based on these facts is quite different from one based on the idea that what advances a person's well-being is the fulfillment of his or her desires.

Despite these objections, the idea that desire satisfaction is the basis of well-being has had wide appeal. Why should this be so? One natural explanation is that the term "desire" can be understood to refer to a number of different things, and those who have offered desire-based accounts of well-being may have been understanding "desire" in such a way that these objections do not arise, or are less troubling. It will be instructive to consider two of these possible interpretations.

On one interpretation, "desires" are understood as "preferences" in the sense that figures in formal theories of individual and social choice. A central claim of these theories is that the preferences of a rational individual can be represented by a utility function  $u(x)$ , such that for any states  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $u(x) > u(y)$  if and only if the individual prefers  $x$  to  $y$ . It might seem that a person's level of utility, as defined by such a function, should be taken as a measure of well-being in the sense we are now concerned with and that this would amount to a desire-based theory of well-being. So it is worth asking whether such theories are subject to the objections I have just considered.

The short answer is that these objections do apply insofar as the theories in question are taken to be, or involve, theories of well-being, but that this is not how those theories are most plausibly understood. Formal theories of individual choice, such as those specified by the Savage or the von Neumann-Morgenstern axioms, are, as that name implies, most plausibly understood as

accounts of what it is most rational for an individual to choose. In theories of this kind, preferences are taken as expressing an individual's conclusions about the relative desirability of various outcomes or policies, and claims are then made about what an individual has most reason to do, given these preferences. This involves no claim that preferences are the most fundamental starting points for individual deliberation, so it is no objection to such a theory to point out that from an individual's own point of view his or her preferences are not basic sources of reasons. My preference for *A* over *B* may be a reason for having certain preferences regarding probability mixtures of *A*, *B*, and other outcomes, but that preference is not what makes *A* more desirable than *B* from my point of view; what does that is, presumably, certain features of *A* and *B*. The failure of preferences to be basic sources of reasons is thus no embarrassment to formal theories of rational choice. Nor is the wide range of possible objects of preferences a problem for such theories. They are offered not as accounts of well-being (of "what makes a person's life go better") but rather of what a person has reason to do or choose all things considered, and the grounds on which these choices are to be based are explicitly intended to include preferences for things other than the person's own well-being.<sup>11</sup>

Turning now to formal theories of *social* choice, these theories are themselves subject to various interpretations.<sup>12</sup> On one com-

<sup>11</sup> Confusion on this point can arise from giving the idea that a person has reason to do what will maximize her utility an "egoistic" reading, according to which "her utility," like "her happiness," is taken to denote some benefit to *her*. But it is generally agreed that this egoistic reading is mistaken.

<sup>12</sup>The premises of Arrow's famous Possibility Theorem, for example, can be understood either as stating conditions about how acceptable ways of making social choices must be based on the preferences of the members of society or as stating conditions about how the notion of what is "good from the point of view of society" is related to what is good from the points of view of the individuals who make up that society. Amartya Sen points out the importance of distinguishing between these two interpretations in "Social Choice Theory: A Re-Examination," reprinted in his *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, pp. 158–200. John Broome also discusses this ambiguity in chapter 7 of *Weighing Goods*.

mon interpretation, however, they concern the way in which social choices should be based on individual preferences. So understood, they begin with a set (the “domain”) of alternatives among which “society” is to choose. The basic assumption of such theories is the plausible ethical one that since these are the decisions of a society they should be based on the preferences of the members of that society, and the question that these theories address is how, more exactly, they should be so “based.” It is central to the ethical idea behind such theories that for purposes of social decision-making individual preferences should be treated as sovereign (and that it would be “paternalistic” to second-guess them). This is quite compatible with the fact that, from the points of view of the individuals themselves, these same preferences are not the starting points of practical deliberation but depend on other considerations, in the way pointed out above.

Nor is the broad range of possible objects of these preferences (the fact that they may be preferences for things that lie beyond the bounds of the individuals’ own lives) a problem for theories of social choice as I am now interpreting them. The domain includes all of those things that society has to decide about, and this will naturally include things outside of the life of any single member. There may, of course, be controversy about which alternatives should be included in the domain of social choices over which all the members of the society should have a say (should this domain include what members of the society do in private, for example?<sup>13</sup>) And there are also questions about which preferences are entitled to be taken into account (should preferences based simply on hatred for other groups be counted?<sup>14</sup>) These are moral questions, and the answers to them reflect judgments about justice and politi-

<sup>13</sup> The problem raised by this question has been explored at length in the literature spawned by Amartya Sen’s “The Impossibility of a Paretian Liberal,” *Journal of Political Economy* 78 (1970).

<sup>14</sup> Harsanyi, for one, would exclude such “anti-social preferences.” See p. 56 of “Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior,” in Sen and Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, pp. 39–62.



cal rights, not simply about the scope of individual well-being. It follows that the individual utility functions that figure in social choice theory, even though they are based on individual preferences, are shaped by the larger moral and political theory of which they are a part. They do not reflect merely a conception of what would make the individuals' lives go better or even simply of what is good from the point of view of these individuals. Insofar as these functions express anything that could be called a conception of well-being at all, it is what I called above a moral conception, rather than a personal one.

Formal theories of social choice can, of course, be understood in a different way: as accounts of how what is good from the point of view of society must be related to what is good from the point of view of the individuals who make it up. Standard terminology can pull one toward this interpretation. Kenneth Arrow, for example, after presenting the problem of social choice in much the way I have above, goes on to call a function that determines a single social ordering of the domain given any collection of individual orderings a "social welfare function."<sup>15</sup> This sounds like a measure of how "well-off" the society is and thus invites one to regard individual utility functions in turn as measures of individual well-being, the idea being that the welfare of a society must be made up of the welfare (i.e., well-being) of its members. But once individual utility is regarded in this way, the theory is open to objections of the kind raised above to desire-based accounts of well-being — for example, to doubts as to whether a person's well-being is increased by the satisfaction of any preference, regardless of what its object may be.

I conclude, therefore, that the preference-based conceptions of utility that are used in formal theories of individual and social choice avoid the objections to desire-based accounts of well-being that I mentioned above just insofar as they do not involve concep-

<sup>15</sup> See *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), esp. pp. 17-19, 106.

tions of well-being in the relevant sense. Insofar as desire-based theories of well-being are modeled on the preference-based accounts of individual utility that flourish in social choice theory, or are taken to derive support from such theories, this involves mixing up two quite different things: personal conceptions of well-being and explicitly moral ones.

Let me turn, then, to another possible source of support for desire-based accounts of well-being. One of the things that can be meant by saying that a person has a desire for something in the broad sense in which that term is often used is that achieving or getting that thing is one of that person's aims. Moreover, it is also true that success in one's aims, at least insofar as these are rational, is one of the things that contributes to the quality of a life, viewed from a purely personal perspective.<sup>16</sup> It seems likely, therefore, that some of the appeal of informed desire accounts of well-being comes from the undoubted appeal of this related idea. I will argue that at least the following is true: the idea that success in one's rational aims contributes to one's well-being can account for a number of the intuitions that have seemed to support informed desire theories while avoiding most of these theories' implausible implications.

Both the idea of informed desires and the related idea of rational aims are open to broader and narrower interpretations. On the one hand, they can be understood to include those aims or desires that a person would have good reason to have. On the other hand, by a person's rational aims we might mean aims that he or she actually has, insofar as these are rational (that is to say, insofar as the nature of these aims does not provide good reason to revise or abandon them). I will refer to these as, respectively, the broad interpretation of rational aims and the narrow interpretation. My focus in what follows will be on the narrow interpretation.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Raz emphasizes the importance of success in one's main aims as an element of well-being. See chapter 12 of his *The Morality of Freedom*. I am much indebted to Raz's discussion.

I mentioned above, as a problem for an informed desire theory of well-being, that on such a view the value of desire satisfaction seems in the end to play no real role in explaining why some things contribute to a person's well-being. It may be true that something contributes to one's well-being only if one has reason to desire it. But even when this is so, what makes this thing good will not be the fact that it would satisfy that hypothetical desire but rather those considerations, whatever they may be, that provide reasons for desiring it. The fact of desire itself seems to play no role.

By contrast, the narrow interpretation of the idea of a rational aim preserves a real role for the analog of desire—that is to say, for the fact that a person actually has a certain aim—while also preserving the “critical” element that motivates the shift to informed desires. The requirement that an aim be rational incorporates this critical element by allowing for the possibility of substantive criticism of aims. This requirement also accommodates the fact that from an individual's own point of view what makes an aim worth adopting and pursuing is, first and foremost, not merely its being chosen or desired but the considerations that (in his or her view) make it worthwhile or valuable. (Given this fact, an aim that is open to rational criticism is defective from the point of view of the person who has it, not merely from that of a critical third party.) But one cannot respond to every value or pursue every end that is worthwhile, and a central part of life for a rational creature lies in selecting those things that it will pursue. It thus makes a difference whether an aim has been adopted, and this is the rationale behind the narrow interpretation of “rational aim”: if something is one of a person's aims, then (provided it is rational) success in achieving it becomes one of the things that makes that person's life better.

The term “aim” invites an interpretation that is both voluntaristic and teleological: an aim is something one “adopts,” and having an aim is a matter of intending to bring about a certain result. For present purposes, however, “aim” needs to be under-

stood in a way that is broader than its normal meaning in both of these respects. If I have the aim of being a good son, then succeeding in this contributes to my well-being even though there was no moment at which I “adopted” this aim or consciously formed this intention. Moreover, the forms of success that contribute to well-being include living up to one’s values, and as I argued above this is generally not simply a matter of achieving certain results. If, for example, I am committed to being an upright and honorable person, living up to this ideal is not merely a matter of promoting certain results, but rather of responding properly to the various reasons that these ideals involve.

The idea that well-being depends, at least in part, on success in one’s rational aims yields an account of well-being that has the “flexibility” that has been held to be an advantage of informed desire views. James Griffin, for example, finds objective accounts of well-being unsatisfactory because they seem to prescribe the same list of goods for everyone, and he argues that an informed desire account is to be preferred for this reason.<sup>17</sup> As Griffin recognizes, any plausible substantive good theory will allow for the fact that different people have different needs. In addition, any theory that recognizes pleasure as a good will have a further degree of “flexibility,” since different activities and experiences will bring pleasure to different people. But Griffin rightly holds that more variability is required, and the idea of success in one’s rational aims seems to provide it, without invoking the troublesome notion of desire. Since different people can have different rational aims, an account that makes success in one’s rational aims one determinant of well-being will allow for a further degree of variability without incorporating the full-blown subjectivity that makes desire theories implausible.

The shift from “informed desires” to “rational aims” also provides a basis for plausible responses to several other objections that plague desire theories. The first of these is the problem, men-

<sup>17</sup> See *Well-Being*, pp. 54–55.

tioned above, that a person's desires at one time may conflict with what he or she desires at another. When desires conflict in this way, how are we to determine what makes a life better? The rational aim account provides the grounds for a systematic answer.<sup>18</sup> If an aim has been an important one for a person for a significant period of his or her life, then succeeding in it generally makes that life better even if the aim is one that the person is no longer pursuing (or has given up on, perhaps through losing hope of ever succeeding). A possible exception is the case of aims that the person has abandoned on the ground that they are not, after all, worth pursuing. If this judgment is correct, then the aim was not a rational one, so succeeding in it would not, in any event, have contributed to the person's well-being. But what if the aim was a valuable one and the person was mistaken in abandoning it? I am inclined to say in that case that if this aim turns out, after the person has long since given it up, to be at least in part a success (if, for example, the political movement he started, and devoted many years to promoting, turns out to be of great social benefit) then this does make the person's life better.

This leaves the question of what to say in cases where there is a conflict between a present aim and another aim that the person held in the past but has since abandoned. Suppose, for example, that a person who started a political movement and devoted years of his life to it has now joined an opposing group. Which would do more to make the person's life better, the success of his former group, or that of the one he now works for? The answer depends, I believe, on a number of factors. The first is his reason for shifting from one to the other and, more generally, on whether these aims are, or were, rational ones. If only one is worthwhile, then it is success in that aim that contributes to his well-being. If both are rational, then the success of either could contribute. To decide which would contribute more we would need to consider such

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Shelly Kagan for helpful criticism that led me to reconsider my views on this point, but I do not know that he would agree with the conclusions I have reached.

things as the amount of time and effort he devoted to the two projects and the relative magnitude of his contribution to their success.<sup>19</sup>

Another problem for desire-based accounts of well-being arose from the fact that the range of a person's possible desires —even of informed desires —is wider than his or her well-being, intuitively understood. This ceases to be a problem when we shift from informed desires to rational aims. I mentioned above that the satisfaction of a person's desire that a distant star should have a certain chemical composition would not, normally, contribute to that person's well-being, but that things might be different if the person were an astronomer who had devoted his or her life to the development of a theory that would be confirmed or refuted by this evidence. The need for this qualification illustrates the fact that, while one can have an informed desire for something that is quite unrelated to how one's own life goes, a person's rational aims are, intuitively, an important part of his or her life. So the fulfillment of these aims is more plausibly held to contribute to well-being.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The fact that one of these projects is in the past is not a crucial factor. A person could have conflicting aims at the very same time, and it is also possible that fulfilling one of a person's present aims (while he still has it) is incompatible with fulfilling, at some later time, a different aim that he will have then. In these cases also the answer to the question of what will make the person's life better presumably depends on whether these aims are rational, on his contributions to them, and on how it would be rational for him to modify these aims, given the conflicts.

<sup>20</sup> It is plausible to hold that nothing can contribute to a person's well-being unless it affects his or her life. In "The Limits of Well-Being" (*Social Philosophy and Policy* 9 [1992]: 169–89) Shelly Kagan describes a notion of well-being that is narrower than the one I am describing here because it is circumscribed by the stronger requirement that nothing can contribute to a person's well-being unless it benefits him or her intrinsically, where this seems to mean bringing about some change in the person's physical or psychological state. He observes in a footnote that it may be a consequence of his view that "it might be one thing for a person to be well-off and quite another for that person's life to go well" (footnote 7, p. 182). He acknowledges that there may be some question about how important this circumscribed notion of well-being is, compared with other goods (see p. 188 and footnote 10). I would agree, and I suspect that philosophers such as Parfit and Griffin have generally discussed the wider notion because it has greater claim to importance. I will argue below that the importance of even this wider notion seems to me to have been exaggerated.

A third problem for desire theories concerns the way in which the fulfillment of various desires (or success in various aims) contributes to well-being. One idea would be that a person's overall well-being is measured by the sum of his or her informed desires that are fulfilled. But it does not seem that a person's well-being is in fact always increased by increasing the number of informed desires or rational aims that he or she fulfills. If this were so then everyone would be advised to adopt as many informed desires or rational aims as possible as long as these can be satisfied, which is clearly absurd. This difficulty led Derek Parfit to suggest that what he called "summative" desire theories are less plausible than "global" versions, which hold that what counts in determining a person's well-being is the satisfaction of his or her (informed) "global desires," that is to say, informed desires about "some part of one's life considered as a whole, or . . . about one's whole life."<sup>21</sup>

There is certainly something right in this suggestion, and shifting from the terminology of desires to that of rational aims opens up the possibility for a more convincing way of putting it. The objection Parfit is responding to involves at least two problems. The first is that "summative" desire theories, by suggesting that being in a state of having one's desire satisfied is what contributes to well-being, seem to invite the absurd conclusion that one should adopt new desires with the aim of increasing the occurrence of such states. When we shift to rational aims, however, the absurdity of this conclusion points directly to a natural way of avoiding it. The fulfillment of an aim contributes to one's well-being only if that aim is one that it is rational to have. But the fact that adopting a certain aim, which could easily be satisfied, would be a way of producing a state of "having fulfilled an aim" is not, in general, a good reason for adopting that aim." So if that is one's only rea-

<sup>21</sup> *Reasons and Persons*, p. 497. Parfit himself was not advocating any form of desire theory.

<sup>22</sup> The qualifier "in general" is necessary because there may be special cases in which having fulfilled an aim might be a goal worth seeking. This might be true, for example, in the case of a person who was severely depressed, whose condition would be improved by any success, however trivial.

son for having an aim, fulfilling it does not contribute to one's well-being.

This avoids the absurd conclusion on which the original objection turned, but it does not avoid a second objection, which applies to "summative" accounts whether they identify well-being with the sum of satisfied informed desires or with the sum of rational aims that are fulfilled. During the course of a life, a person adopts many aims that are rational in the sense at issue here (one does not have good reason to reject or revise them), but which do not seem to contribute to one's well-being in a serious sense. On a vacation at the seashore, for example, I may adopt the aim of showing my child a certain unusual bird or the aim of getting exercise by swimming every day. Even though these aims are rational, it would be implausible to say that succeeding in each of them increases my well-being, and it is even more implausible to say that my well-being as a whole is measured by the sum of such successes over the course of my life. Parfit's invocation of "global desires" offers an appealing response to this problem. The quality of a life, he suggests, is not measured by the extent to which small everyday desires corresponding to the kinds of aims I have just listed are fulfilled. What counts is rather a matter of the fulfillment of larger-scale desires about how one's whole life or some significant part of it should go.

This move has a natural explanation when we shift from "desires" to "aims" and hence from "global desires" to what Joseph Raz calls "comprehensive goals" —larger-scale plans or intentions about how one's life, or some part of it, should go.<sup>23</sup> As Raz has emphasized, our goals have a "hierarchical" character. Comprehensive goals, such as the goal of succeeding in a certain profession, or being a good parent, are of necessity quite abstract.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Morality of Freedom*, p. 293. Rawls makes a similar point about the hierarchical nature of goals in *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 408–11. As pointed out above, I am using the term "aim" in a broad sense to include a person's values as well as specific objectives that he or she is attempting to bring about. When, following Raz, I use the term "goals" rather than "aims," I intend it to be understood in the same broad sense.



They need to be filled in by specifying successively more specific plans and goals. For example, someone who wants to be a successful physicist has reason to get the necessary kinds of training. This involves attending the right schools and universities, taking the right courses, reading certain books and articles, going to class and to the laboratory, and even more specific goals and actions, such as finding the right instruments for an experiment.

The idea of “comprehensiveness” that is intended here is a comparative notion. I am not suggesting that everyone has or should have a single comprehensive goal or “plan of life.” Perhaps few people have such goals. But most people do have (relatively) comprehensive goals of a more modest sort, defined by careers, friendships, marriages and family relations, and political and religious commitments. What is being claimed is that many of the specific goals that we set out to achieve in action are goals that we have reason to pursue because of their relation to more abstract goals of this kind, and when these more specific actions contribute to the quality of our lives it is mainly in virtue of this relation to these more comprehensive goals. This brings out what is wrong with a “summative” view. Succeeding in most of our goals contributes to our well-being not by being a little unit of “success” but rather by contributing to the larger goals that give us reason to pursue them.

More comprehensive goals have two kinds of “priority.” First, they have priority over the more specific goals that they give us reason to pursue because they provide the reasons that make those subsidiary goals rational. Second, they have, and confer on the subsidiary goals they support, priority over unrelated goals such as those in my vacation example. That is to say, we have reason to attach more importance to goals of the former sort than to these “free-standing” ones, and to revise or abandon goals of this latter sort in cases of conflict. If we suppose, as seems plausible, that the degree to which success in a goal contributes to one’s well-being depends on the degree of importance one has reason to attach to it

in deciding what to do, then this explains why goals like those in my vacation example should seem only trivially related to well-being. If it is asked what gives comprehensive goals this importance, the answer is that to hold something as a comprehensive goal just is to hold it as a goal that has priority of the two kinds described above.<sup>24</sup> So this priority is justified by the reasons that support adopting something *as* a comprehensive goal in the first place and that continue to give one reason not to reconsider that decision.<sup>25</sup>

I conclude 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 and can do so in a much more convincing way than informed desire accounts themselves. This makes it plausible to suppose that much of the appeal of informed desire accounts of well-being derives from a failure to distinguish between informed desires and rational aims. Whether this is so or not, any plausible account of what makes a life go better from the point of view of the person who lives it must recognize success in one's rational aims as one component of well-being.

Success in one's rational aims is not, however, a complete account of well-being. Pleasure and other forms of what Henry Sidgwick called "desirable consciousness" can contribute to one's well-being whether or not one has "aimed" at them. In addition, the idea of success in one's rational aims does not even capture all of the nonexperiential factors that make a life better even if most, or perhaps even all, of these factors depend on one's aims.

<sup>24</sup> Here I rely on the fact that adopting an aim or goal is not just a matter of coming to assign a positive value to certain results. When we adopt an aim or goal we give it one or another particular role in our practical thinking: the role of a temporary diversion, or of a career, or of a specific goal within a career, for example. Different kinds of reasons are required to justify adopting goals for these different roles.

<sup>25</sup> A desire theory could presumably explain the analog of the first kind of priority I have mentioned —priority of global desires over desires that are derived from them. Whether it could explain priority of the second kind is less clear.

To see this, consider again the example of friendship. A person cannot get the intrinsic benefits of friendship without having friendship as one of his or her own aims in the broad sense of “aim” that I have been using. A misanthrope, who cares nothing for friends but to whom others are nonetheless devoted, may get some of the instrumental benefits of friendship, such as the help that friends provide, but not those benefits that involve standing in a certain special relation to others, since he does not stand in that relation to anyone. It is debatable whether the life of such a person would be better if these people genuinely care about him than it would be if they treated him in exactly the same way out of other motives. Even if this does make a difference, however, it does not make as important a difference as it would in the case of a person who himself cared about friendship and regarded these people as friends. But even though the greater difference that the genuineness of friends makes in the latter case depends on the person’s having a certain aim, this contribution to well-being is not plausibly accounted for simply by the idea of success in one of one’s rational aims. The point is a general one: a life is made better by succeeding in one’s projects and living up to the values one holds, provided these are worthwhile; but if these aims *are* worthwhile then succeeding in them will also make one’s life better in other ways. This is true of friendship because standing in this relation to others is itself a good (albeit one that depends on one’s having certain aims), and I believe that the same can be said of, for example, the achievement of various forms of excellence.

It is an interesting question whether there are factors that contribute to well-being that are neither experiential nor dependent on a person’s aims in the broad way just described. It might be argued that there are not. In order for something to affect a person’s well-being, the argument might run, it must affect how things go *for that person*. Both experiential goods and factors involved with that person’s aims satisfy this condition, but it is difficult to see

how anything else could do so.<sup>26</sup> Physical health might be cited as a possible example, but it is not clear that it is one. Would a person's well-being in the sense we have been discussing (that is to say, the quality of her life) be diminished by the pathological functioning of some internal organ, if this did not affect either the quality of her experience or the achievement of goods connected with her aims? If, for example, she died in an accident before this condition became apparent, it would be true that while she was alive her health was less good than she thought, but not clear that her life was therefore worse than it would have been had she been entirely healthy up to the end.

Leaving this question open, I conclude that any plausible theory of well-being would have to recognize at least the following fixed points. First, certain experiential states (such as various forms of satisfaction and enjoyment) contribute to well-being, but well-being is not determined solely by the quality of experience. Second, well-being depends to a large extent on a person's degree of success in achieving his or her main ends in life, provided that these are worth pursuing. This component of well-being reflects the fact that the life of a rational creature is something that is to be *lived* in an active sense —that is to say, shaped by his or her choices and reactions —and that well-being is therefore in large part a matter of how well this is done —of how well the ends are selected and how successfully they are pursued. Third, many goods that contribute to a person's well-being depend on the person's aims but go beyond the good of success in achieving those aims. These include such things as friendship, other valuable personal relations, and the achievement of various forms of excellence, such as in art or science.

These intuitive fixed points provide the basis for rough judgments of comparative well-being: a person's well-being is certainly

<sup>26</sup> L.W. Sumner calls this the "subject-relative of perspectival character" of the concept of welfare. See *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, p. 42. His requirement is obviously similar to but seems broader than Kagan's, discussed in note 18 above. I am indebted to Sumner for helpful discussion of this point.

increased if her life is improved in one of the respects just mentioned while the others are held constant. But this list of fixed points does not amount to a *theory* of well-being. Such a theory would go beyond this list by doing such things as the following. It might provide a more unified account of what well-being is, on the basis of which one could see why the diverse things I have listed as contributing to well-being in fact do so. It might also provide a clearer account of the boundary of the concept —the line between contributions to one's well-being and things one has reason to pursue for other reasons. Finally, such a theory might provide a standard for making more exact comparisons of well-being —for deciding when, on balance, a person's well-being has been increased or decreased and by how much.

I doubt that we are likely to find a theory of well-being of this kind. It does not seem likely, for example, that we will find a general theory telling us how much weight to assign to the different elements of well-being I have listed: how much to enjoyment, how much to success in one's aims, and so on. I doubt that these questions have answers at this level of abstraction. Plausible answers would depend on the particular goals that a person has and on the circumstances in which he or she was placed. Perhaps a theory might tell us which goals to adopt, or at least which ones not to adopt. It does seem that there are answers to such questions, but I do not think that they are likely to be delivered by anything that could be called a general theory. Even if there were such a theory, moreover, it would need to be not just a theory of well-being, but a more general account of what is valuable and worthwhile.

One thing that philosophical reflection can do is to tell us more about particular goals: what is good or bad about them, how they are related to each other, and how their value is to be understood. There is certainly much to be learned in this way even if it does not, for the reasons just stated, amount to a theory, or to a theory of well-being. Conclusions of this kind can be useful to us in decid-

ing how to live our lives. But from a first-person point of view it does not matter very much whether a more general and ambitious theory of well-being is possible or not, since we do not need answers to the questions that it would answer. This is true in part because, as I will argue in the next section, the concept of well-being in general and its boundaries in particular are less important from the point of view of the person whose life is in question than is often supposed.

#### 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING: FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVES

There are two related ways in which the importance of the concept of well-being in a given mode of thinking might be shown. First, it might be shown in the role that concept plays in explaining and helping us to understand the importance of the particular things that contribute to well-being. Second, it might be shown in the significance of the boundary of that concept —the difference it makes whether something is or is not a contribution to well-being. I will argue that insofar as the concept of well-being has importance of either of these two kinds this is mainly from a third-person point of view, such as that of a benefactor, or from the point of view of moral theory. From the point of view of the person whose well-being it is, the concept of well-being does not appear to be significant in either of these two ways.

There are at least two levels of practical thinking at which the idea of one's own well-being might be significant. It might be significant in everyday decisions about what to do or what particular goals to aim at, or it might play a role in larger-scale decisions about how one's life is to go, such as what career to pursue or whether or not to be a parent. Taking the former case first, it is certainly true that we have reason, in "everyday" decisions about what to do, to aim at things that contribute directly to our well-being, intuitively understood. We have reason to seek enjoyment, for example, to avoid illness and injury, and to do what will pro-

mote success in achieving our aims. But the idea of well-being plays little if any role in explaining why we have reason to value these things. If you ask me why I listen to music, I may reply that I do so because I enjoy it. If you asked why that is a reason, the reply, "A life that includes enjoyment is a better life," would not be *false*, but it would be rather strange. Similarly, it would be odd to explain why I strive to succeed in philosophy by saying that my life will be a better life if I am successful in my main aims, insofar as they are rational. Again, this is true, but does not provide the right kind of reason. It would make more sense to say that I work hard at philosophy because I believe it is worthwhile, or because I enjoy it, or even because I long for the thrill of success. But it would be empty to add that these things in turn are desirable because they make my life better. Enjoyments, success in one's main aims, and substantive goods such as friendship all contribute to well-being, but the idea of well-being plays little role in explaining why they are good. This might be put by saying that well-being is what is sometimes called an "inclusive good" —one that is made up of other things that are good in their own right, not made good by their contributions to it.

But even if well-being has little role to play in explaining why the things that contribute to it are good, it might still constitute a significant category of goods. One way in which this might be true would be if losses in well-being of one kind could be fully made up for by other gains in well-being, but not by considerations of other kinds. Even if other considerations constitute good reason for accepting a loss in well-being, this loss remains a loss, but (the suggestion runs) when we give up one element of well-being for another (such as when we give up a pleasure now for the sake of an equal or greater pleasure later) there is no real loss. This might be put by saying that well-being constitutes a distinct "sphere of compensation."

This idea is appealing, but mistaken. We do speak of making a sacrifice when, for example, we give up comfort and leisure for the sake of a family member or a friend, or for the good of some

group, team, or institution of which we are a member. But it also feels like a sacrifice when we give up present comfort and leisure for the sake of our own longer life or future health. The fact that in the latter case we will be “paid back” in the same coin, our own well-being, does not make this case feel less like a sacrifice than the other at the time that it is made. The term “sacrifice” is appropriate in both cases because we give up something of present, palpable appeal for the sake of some other, possibly more distant concern. This is often difficult to do, and the difficulty is not erased in the latter case by the fact that this concern is for our own future welfare. One might reply that it *should* be erased, and would be if we were fully rational. But why should this be so in one case but not in the other? In both cases we are giving up something that we have reason to want for the sake of some other consideration that we judge to be more important. The idea that in one case there is no real sacrifice because we are paid back in kind is belied by the experience of making such choices as well as by an examination of the reasons supporting the alternatives when considered alone. If present and future experiential goods were desirable only because of the contribution they make to some separate good — my net well-being (or the net experiential quality of my life) — then giving up present comfort and leisure for the sake of greater comfort later would be no sacrifice at all. As I have argued above, however, this does not seem to be the case: well-being is more plausibly seen as an inclusive good.

In arguing against the idea that well-being is a distinct sphere of compensation I have been arguing, in effect, that the notion of *net* well-being is of little importance from the point of view of the person whose well-being is in question. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that from an individual’s own point of view the boundaries of well-being are blurred because many of the things that contribute to it are valued primarily for other reasons. In order to arrive at an estimate of our net well-being we would need to determine the contribution that succeeding in these aims



makes to our well-being, separating this both from the other reasons for pursuing them and from the costs in well-being that this pursuit may involve. It does not seem, however, that we have need to make his kind of calculation.

Consider, for example, the reasons that move us to promote the interests of our families and of groups or institutions with which we have other special relations. These reasons are often seen as having an ambiguous status. Viewed in relation to our own comfort and leisure, they seem “altruistic,” but from the point of view of what is sometimes called “impersonal morality” the reasons one has to promote the interests of one’s family, one’s group, or one’s team or institution appear “self-referential” if not fully “Self-regarding.” This ambiguity is also apparent from a first-person point of view: on the one hand, we would not want to think that we promote the interests of our friends, family, and institutions for “selfish” reasons, but, on the other hand, we would not be good friends or family members or loyal members of our institutions if we did not feel a loss to them as a loss to us. From a first-person point of view, however, we have no reason to resolve this ambiguity by deciding where the limits of our well-being should be drawn. It is of course important to us — important in our moral self-assessment — that our concern for our friends and family is not grounded entirely in benefits they bring to us. But, given that we do care about our family or friends, we have no need to determine the degree to which we benefit from benefiting them.

This point is not limited to cases of what is sometimes called “self-referential altruism,” such as concern for friends and family. As I argued above, success in one’s main rational aims is an important component of well-being. But we generally pursue these aims for reasons other than the contribution that this success will make to our well-being, and from a first-person point of view there is little reason to try to estimate this contribution.

It might be objected that I have obscured the distinctive role of an agent’s own well-being in his or her practical reasoning by con-

sidering only the contrast (or lack of it) between considerations of well-being and other ends that a person in fact cares about (with good reason). What is distinctive about well-being and the goods that make it up, it may be claimed, is that in contrast to other aims, which a person can adopt or not without rational defect, one's own well-being marks out a category of considerations that it is irrational not to care about.

This objection relies on a misuse of the charge of "irrationality." To see this, consider two kinds of cases in which a charge of irrationality might be made. There certainly are some cases in which people's failure to give weight to considerations of well-being is irrational. These are cases in which a person judges that these considerations are reasons but then fails to take them into account in deciding what to do or fails to give them the weight that he or she judges them to have. This is what is usually going on when we fail to floss our teeth or fail to wear seat belts or fail to do other things that we can see we have reason to do because they will promote our present or future aims. Cases of this kind are extremely common, and this may explain the widespread tendency to cite failure to give weight to considerations of one's own well-being as the prime example of irrationality. But there is nothing in these cases that has to do particularly with well-being. They are merely instances of the general truth that it is irrational to fail to give a consideration the weight that one judges it should have.

There are other cases in which a person fails to give weight to the fact that something would promote her well-being because she fails to see that it provides her with a reason or perhaps even judges that it does not. For example, a person might deny, either naively or on the basis of some sophisticated philosophical view, that the fact that an action would promote one of her future interests gives her any reason at all, now, to do it. This may be a mistake, and if so the person is open to rational criticism. But this does not make her irrational, except in the (overly) broad sense in

which a person is irrational whenever he or she fails to see that some consideration provides her with a reason. Here again, there is no special connection between well-being and rationality. If there is irrationality in these cases, it is of a perfectly general sort, which could arise with respect to any reason.

In the argument of this section so far, I have been considering the role of well-being in everyday decisions about what to do. I conclude from the arguments I have given that while the particular things that contribute to one's well-being —things such as enjoyments, health, and success in one's central aims —are important sources of reasons in our everyday decisions about what to do, the concept of well-being itself, the boundaries of this concept, and estimates of the net effect that particular decisions would have on our well-being do not have a very significant role to play. In retrospect, this may not seem surprising. It would be odd to make our everyday choices as "artists of life" choosing each action with an eye to producing the best life, as an artist might select dots of paint with the aim of improving the value of the whole canvas. But we might expect the role of the idea of well-being to become more important when we shift from everyday decisions about particular actions to longer-range choices about what career to follow, where to live, or whether to have a family. Surely, it might be thought, when we are adopting our most comprehensive goals what we should be looking for are those that will make for the best life. If this is so, then well-being will also play a crucial, although less obvious, role in everyday decisions. Even if we do not aim at our own well-being in many of these ordinary choices, they will nonetheless be "controlled by" more comprehensive plans that, ultimately, are appraised on the grounds of the quality of the life they offer "from the point of view of the person who lives it."

A maximally comprehensive goal, if one had such a thing, would be a conception of "how to live," but it would be misleading to call such a goal a conception of well-being. Viewed from within (from the point of view of the person whose goal it is) a

comprehensive goal is not simply a conception of well-being since the reasons that it provides derive from the aims and values that it includes, and as we have seen these will generally include reasons that are not grounded in the well-being of the person in question. Viewed “from without” (from the point of view of someone deciding which comprehensive goal to adopt), it may be true that such a goal should be selected with the aim of finding the plan that will make for “the best life.” But what this phrase means here is the most *choiceworthy* life. As I argued above, the question of choiceworthiness is not the same as the question of well-being, since it makes sense to say that a person had good reason to choose a certain plan of life even though it involved a lower level of well-being —was worse from the point of view of the person who lived it—than some available alternative. This life might be more choiceworthy because of its greater value, for example, or because it offered the only way of fulfilling an obligation to care for a relative.

Even if the question to be asked in choosing a plan of life is the question of choiceworthiness rather than the question of well-being, however, this still leaves open the possibility that one’s well-being may play a particularly important role in answering this question. The fact that a person could have reason to adopt one plan of life despite the fact that it offered a lower level of well-being than some alternative may show that choiceworthiness and well-being are not the same thing. But the fact that it could make sense to make the opposite choice —for example, to reject a life of devotion to some project because of the sacrifices in well-being that it would involve —seems to show that well-being is at least one important factor in such choices.

Many of the things that contribute to one’s well-being, such as health, enjoyments, and freedom from pain and distress, are certainly important factors in such a choice. The idea of overall well-being may also play a role, but this is less clear, in part because the notion of well-being that can be appealed to in this context is un-

avoidably abstract and indeterminate.<sup>27</sup> Success in one's main aims is, as we have seen, an important element in well-being. But the stage we are now considering is one at which these aims are being chosen, so it is not yet known what will promote our well-being by contributing to our success in achieving them. Well-being becomes much more determinate only once our central aims are chosen.

In deciding what aims to adopt, we may of course give some weight to the consideration that since success in our aims makes for a better life this provides some reason to choose aims that we can achieve, and to prefer a life in which we can achieve the aims we choose. But while this is a consideration it does not seem to be a very significant one. In many cases we have independent reasons not to adopt aims that are utterly futile, since pursuing them will make no contribution to the values that make them worthwhile. In addition, the bare idea of "accomplishment" — success in one's rational aims whatever these may be — is a very abstract goal and has less weight than the value of particular goals that we may adopt. When, for example, Leo Tolstoy's character Ivan Ilych surveys his life and finds it wanting, what he regrets is not the lack of accomplishment in this abstract sense. His distress has force because it is more concrete: what bothers him is the fact that he has devoted his life to things that now strike him as unimportant and neglected others that would have been worthwhile.<sup>28</sup>

Aside from the two practical standpoints I have considered — the one we adopt when making everyday choices and the one we adopt when making decisions about larger-scale life plans — there is also the point of view we adopt when we step back from a life and ask, without either of these practical ends in view, how good a life it is. The idea of well-being may have a greater role in this kind of evaluation. This is suggested by the fact that when we take up this point of view we are likely to consider features of a life considered as a whole, not merely the value of particular ele-

<sup>27</sup> A point emphasized by Raz. See *The Morality of Freedom*, p. 345.

<sup>28</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*.

ments within it. From this point of view, for example, we might say that a life is better if it is “well-balanced” and involves responses to the achievement of a variety of goods, or that a life that begins badly but ends in success and happiness is a better life than one that contains the same particular goods differently arranged, so that it begins well but ends badly.” Of course, most lives that begin well but end badly differ in experiential quality from lives that are otherwise similar but have the opposite trajectory, and one advantage of a well-balanced life may also be that exclusive concentration on a few goals yields diminishing returns both in enjoyment and in what is accomplished. The claims I have in mind, however, hold that, even leaving aside these more concrete differences, a well-balanced life, or a life with an upward trajectory, is a better life for the person who lives it. These claims, and the evaluative standpoint from which they are made, are quite intelligible. Perhaps the claims are even correct. But they do not strike me as very important. Well-being in this refined sense is not the central notion by which our lives should be guided.

I conclude, therefore, that the concept of one’s overall well-being does not play as important a role as it is generally thought to do in the practical thinking of a rational individual. Succeeding in one’s main aims, insofar as these are rational, must be a component in any plausible notion of well-being. But this idea serves as an evaluative Trojan horse, bringing within the notion of well-being values that are not grounded in it. From an individual’s own perspective, which takes his or her main goals as given, what matters are these goals and other particular values, not the idea of well-being that they make up. From a more abstract perspective, at which these goals are not yet determined, we can say that a life goes better if the person is more successful in achieving his or her main rational goals, but the conception of well-being that can be

<sup>29</sup> The latter is suggested by J. David Velleman, who also suggests that one life is better than another if it constitutes “a better life story.” See his “Well-Being and Time,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48–77.

formulated at this level is too indeterminate, and too abstract, to be of great weight.

Concentrating on well-being in the latter sense, and hence on the contribution that success in one's rational goals makes to the quality of one's life, has two effects that are distortions from the person's own point of view. Since well-being is a state, which is to be "brought about," one effect of concentrating on well-being is to represent all values as ones that are teleological in form. But this is not how things seem from the point of view of a person whose rational aims include commitments to values that are not teleological. An individual who rationally holds these values has reason to deliberate and to act as they require, but this is not the same thing as seeking to maximize the degree to which one's actions, over one's whole life, are in conformity with these values.

Concentrating on well-being also has the effect of transforming all of a person's aims into what appear to be self-interested ones. This point might be put by noting that there are two ways in which the idea of "the good for *p*," where *p* is some individual, might be understood. In the first, broader sense, "the good for *p*" includes all those things that *p* has reason to aim at and to value — "the good," from *p*'s point of view.<sup>30</sup> But "the good for *p*" can also be understood in a narrower sense in which it includes things just insofar as they are good *for p*, that is to say, insofar as they benefit *p* by making his or her life better. The idea of well-being has a similar dual character. When we say that something contributes to a person's well-being it sounds as if we are saying that it benefits him or her. But from an individual's own point of view many of the things that contribute to his or her well-being are valued for quite other reasons.<sup>31</sup> From this point of view the idea of one's

<sup>30</sup> Peter Railton, for example, understands "an individual's good" in this broader sense. It consists, he says, in "what he would want himself to want, or pursue" if he were to contemplate his present situation from a more ideal perspective. See p. 16 of "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 24 (1986): 5–31.

<sup>31</sup> David Wiggins makes a similar point about the "instability" of desire-based accounts of value. The claim that something is good because it would satisfy a per-

own well-being is transparent. When we focus on it, it largely disappears, leaving only the values that make it up.<sup>32</sup>

##### 5. THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING: THIRD-PERSON PERSPECTIVES

These effects of concentrating on well-being cease to be distortions when we shift from a first-person point of view to the perspective of a benefactor, such as a friend or parent. A benefactor has reason to do what will benefit his or her intended beneficiary and to do it because that person will benefit.<sup>33</sup> So the analog of what was, from the first-person point of view, a distorting self-centeredness is not a problem from this perspective. Nor is there

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son's desire, as a claim about what is good, is one that should be endorsable from that person's own point of view. But from that point of view it is not the desire that matters ("Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy* [1976]: 346–47). What I am arguing is that this instability is not merely a feature of desire-based views but one that will be inherited by any plausible account of well-being, since any such account must give a place to the idea of success in one's rational aims and that idea in turn captures the element of truth in desire-based views. The lesson to be drawn is that the notion of well-being should be treated with some care, since it is, as I will argue in the next section, an evaluative idea that has its home in third-person perspectives but is often passed off as a central notion in first-person deliberation.

<sup>32</sup>The two distortions I have mentioned (the transformation into apparently self-interested goals and into a teleological form) are combined in objections to deontology that interpret an agent's concern not to act wrongly as a concern with preserving his own moral purity —that is to say, with gaining for himself the good of having succeeded in conforming to his own principles.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Darwall notes a similar divergence of points of view in "Self-Interest and Self-Concern," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 158–78. Darwall identifies a person's good, or interest, with what someone who cares about that person would rationally want for him for his sake (see, e.g., p. 76), and he stresses the divergence between a person's good, so understood, and what that person has reason to want. Darwall suggests that "the idea of a person's good or *interest* . . . is one we need insofar as we (or he) care about him" (p. 159). As the parenthetical qualification indicates, he holds, plausibly, that the contrast in question is not, strictly speaking, one between first- and third-person perspectives, since a person can be concerned with his own interest in this sense —that is to say, can take the perspective of a benefactor toward himself. I agree that one can take this perspective, but deny that it is a perspective that has particular importance for us. For one thing, as noted above, this attitude is incompatible with the attitude that we normally take toward many of our own aims, which we value for reasons that do not refer to our interest. As I note in the text this tension is greatly reduced when the benefactor is another person.



a problem of transparency: our benefactors' reasons generally take a different form than our own, even though they arise from reasons that we have. Consider three classes of such reasons.

In the first class of cases, I have reason to do certain things because I will benefit from them: I have reason to do what will bring me pleasure, for example, what will relieve my pain, what will extend my life, and what will insure my comfort in the future. In the second class of cases I also have reason to do certain things because of their relation to me: I have reason to promote the safety and security of *my* parents and children, for example, to do what will benefit *my* friends, and to promote the glory of *my* city. But in these cases my reasons are not (or need not be) grounded in imagined benefits to myself. In the third class of cases my choice of certain aims may not depend on any relation to me at all. I may, for example, work to prevent Venice from collapsing or to save the rain forest. Insofar as these are my aims, however, succeeding in them makes my life better. So, taking these three classes together, from my point of view the range of things I have reason to promote, whether or not it is broader than the class of things that will benefit me, is at least broader than the class of things I have reason to promote because they will benefit me.

From my benefactor's point of view, however, benefiting me has special significance. In the first of the three classes just listed, the reason my benefactor has to promote things (my pleasure, my health, and so on) is the same as my own. My benefactor may also have reason to promote the things listed in my second class (the health and comfort of my family, the flourishing of my city) because of their connection with me, but in these cases the benefactor's reasons differ from mine. If my benefactor saves my child or my parents, or restores some buildings in my city, and does this *qua* benefactor, that is to say, *for me*, he is doing it because he sees this as benefiting me in some way, or at least because *I* want it. In my own case, by contrast, I would hope not to be moved by such reasons: I see myself as acting for the sake of others. Finally, in

the third class of cases, while I might imagine a wealthy benefactor who saved Venice saying that he did it for me, meaning just that he did it because he knew I wanted Venice to survive, this seems odd (as well as unlikely). This is partly because this reason is so clearly distinct from the reasons why Venice is worth saving, which have nothing to do with me. It makes more sense to think of my benefactor as contributing to *my campaign* to save Venice, in order that that campaign should succeed. Here the connection with me is more plausible although, again, it is a connection that I hope is not crucial to my own motivation.

These examples illustrate two points. The first is the divergence between the first-person and third-person outlooks. The second is that it is not clear how important the boundaries of well-being are, even from a benefactor's point of view. I have been speaking so far of "a benefactor," understood as someone who has reason to do what benefits me (that is to say, contributes to my well-being), and I have spoken as if friends, parents, and spouses are all benefactors in this sense. But this way of putting things is too schematic. It is not always clear that someone who stands in one of these relations to us therefore has reason to do what will "make our life go better," as opposed to reason to help us to do what we have reason to want to do, whether or not this will conduce to our well-being. Suppose, for example, that I have good reason to pursue a career as an artist, or as a labor organizer, even though this may lead to a lower level of well-being for me overall. Suppose also that I cannot do this without help from some friends or family members. Do they have reason to help me? It seems to me that they may.<sup>34</sup> But the answer may depend on the nature of the relation that the person stands in to me — whether it is a friend, a lover, a parent, or some other family member. Just clarifying the notion of well-being will not settle the matter.

<sup>34</sup> Darwall considers a similar example in "Self-Interest and Self-Concern," pp. 174–75. He suggests that in such a case a benefactor's concern for the person for her sake may be in tension with "respect and concern for her as an autonomous agent."

Both of these points —the lack of transparency and the fact that while well-being may be significant it does not provide a uniquely important definition of the concern that others should have for us —are apparent also from a moral perspective, to which I will now turn.

#### 6. THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING: MORAL PERSPECTIVE

As I remarked at the beginning of this lecture, it is commonly supposed that there is a single notion of individual well-being that (1) serves as a basis for the decisions of a single rational individual, at least as far as he or she alone is concerned (that is to say, leaving aside moral obligations and concerns for others); (2) is what a concerned benefactor, such as a friend or parent, has reason to promote; and (3) is the basis on which an individual's interests are taken into account in moral argument. This notion of well-being is assumed to admit of at least rough quantitative comparisons of levels and increments and to be independent of morality.

If what I have argued so far is correct, however, then at least the first part of this common assumption is mistaken. The particular goods that make up well-being are important from the point of view of the individual whose well-being it is, and we can make and need to make at least rough quantitative comparisons within these dimensions of well-being (comparisons of levels of comfort and enjoyment, for example). But the boundary between one's own well-being and other aims is unclear, and we have no need to clarify it. It does not matter that quantitative comparisons of levels or increments of our own overall well-being are difficult to make. We rightly view the world through a framework of reasons, largely shaped by the aims and values that we have adopted, and we rightly make particular decisions by determining what these reasons support on balance, not by comparing net changes in our overall balance of well-being. Among these reasons are those pro-

vided by ideas of right and wrong, justice, and other moral values. These values constitute some of an individual's most important "aims" in the sense I have been discussing, and they also play an important role in shaping a person's other goals, including the most comprehensive ones. It follows that an individual has little use for a notion of well-being that abstracts from moral considerations.

In light of this, it is reasonable to ask why it should have been thought that there was a notion of well-being of the kind just described, one that plays a central role both in individual decisions and in moral argument. One explanation is that this is another instance of "the shadow of hedonism." If what an individual had reason to do (leaving others aside) was simply to promote his or her own pleasure, and if what morality required of us was simply to give positive weight to promoting the net pleasure of others, then something close to the picture described above would be correct. There would be a single notion of well-being (in this case pleasure) that played the role described both in individual and moral thinking and in the thinking of a concerned benefactor. This notion would be defined independently of any moral ideas about what an individual was entitled to or what he or she was obligated to do, and it would admit of quantitative comparisons. One possibility, then, is that the idea that there is a notion of well-being with these properties results from supposing that although hedonism is false there must be some other notion that plays this same role.

The idea that there must be such a notion might also arise from what are taken to be the needs of moral theory. A theory of the morality of right and wrong might rely on a notion of well-being in three ways. First, this notion might figure in the content of moral requirements. For example, we may be morally required, at least in certain circumstances, to promote the well-being of others, giving preference to those whose well-being we can improve the most or to those whose level of well-being is the lowest. Second, well-being might play a role in the justification of moral principles

even when it does not figure in their content. A principle requiring us to respect a certain right, for example, or to refrain from treating any individual in specified ways, might be justified on the ground that its observance would promote individual well-being. On the view I have argued for, for example, principles are assessed by asking whether they could or could not be reasonably rejected.<sup>35</sup> So some basis is needed for assessing the force of various possible grounds for rejecting principles, and it might be thought that a notion of well-being is needed to provide this basis: that, for example, the strength of a person's objection to a principle is properly measured by the cost that this principle would have for that person's well-being, or by the level of well-being to which he or she would be reduced if it were accepted. Third, insofar as a moral theory needs to provide some justification for morality as a whole — some answer to the question, "Why be moral?" — it might seem, again, that this is best supplied by showing how morality contributes to each person's well-being.

The first and second of these tasks require a notion of well-being that admits of quantitative comparisons. The second and third appear to require a notion that is important to individuals and independent of morality itself. It would seem to be circular to justify moral principles on grounds that already presupposed what people were entitled to, and it would seem that an interesting answer to the question, "Why be moral?" must proceed by linking morality to something that individuals can be assumed to care about without supposing that they are already concerned with morality itself. Putting these points together, we seem to reach the conclusion that moral theory requires a notion of well-being with the properties listed above. It therefore seems to be an important task for moral theory to come up with a systematic account of well-being that meets these requirements.

<sup>35</sup> See "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in A. Sen and B. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* pp.103-28.

This line of thinking may be in part responsible for the widespread belief that there is a notion of well-being of the kind I have described, and it would explain the emphasis generally given to theories of well-being within moral philosophy. As a substantive matter, however, I do not believe that these claims about the importance of well-being for moral theory are sound. To explain briefly why I think this, I will say a few words here about each of three ways in which a theory of right and wrong might be thought to rely upon a notion of well-being: in the content of moral principles, in the justification offered for these principles, and in the justification of morality as a whole.

First, as to content, there certainly are some moral principles whose content involves overall assessments of how well-off various individuals are. The clearest examples are principles for assessing the justice of social institutions and policies. Applying these principles often requires us to make comparative judgments of how well-off different people are, or would be under alternative policies, and perhaps also judgments about the relative magnitude of these changes. Moreover, the notions of better-off and worse-off that are employed here are not transparent in the way noted above: the fact that a certain change in someone's situation would make that person better-off in the relevant sense gives that change moral significance, and it is therefore important to draw clearly the boundary between those changes that do and those that do not have significance of this kind. This is therefore a place where something like a theory of well-being seems to be needed, and it is noteworthy that most of the systematic accounts that have been offered of how well-off a person is have in fact been developed to serve the needs of such principles.

These accounts do not, however, generally coincide with the intuitive notion of individual well-being. They are either broader than this notion, as are the utility functions underlying social choice theories as I interpreted them above, or else narrower, as are such notions as Rawls's primary social goods or Sen's capability sets.

These notions are all shaped by moral ideas arising from the particular moral questions that they are supposed to answer: in the case of social choice theory by the idea that citizens' preferences should be taken into account in shaping social decisions, and in the case of Rawls' and Sen's accounts by ideas about the line between those aspects of individuals' situations that are the responsibility of social institutions and those that are properly left to individuals themselves.

There may, of course, be other moral principles whose content is specified in terms of something closer to the intuitive idea of well-being. For example, there might be a principle of benevolence requiring us to promote the well-being of others insofar as we can do so without great sacrifice. A theory of well-being might then be needed in order to interpret this duty. But it does not seem to me, intuitively, that the duty of benevolence that we owe to others in general in fact takes this form —that is to say, a form that requires us to clarify the boundaries of well-being and to make overall assessments of the quality of various lives. Parents certainly have reason to want their children's lives to go as well as possible, taking into account all the various elements of well-being, and they may be open to moral criticism when they fail to promote this. But this is a special case, and the concern we owe to others in general is more limited. We are certainly required to avoid harming or interfering with others, and to benefit them in specific ways, such as by relieving their pain and distress, at least when we can do so without great sacrifice. But these duties do not, it seems to me, derive from a more general duty to promote their well-being, and we therefore do not need a theory of well-being in order to figure out what our duties to aid others require of us. I may, of course, be mistaken about this. There may be a more general duty of this kind, but if there is such a duty, its content, like that of the principles of justice referred to above, will be shaped by moral considerations. It is not simply provided by a notion derived from the realm of individual rationality, where, as I have argued above, the idea of overall well-being in any event plays little role.

Even if the idea of individual well-being does not figure explicitly in the content of moral principles or principles of justice, however, it might be suggested that this notion plays a role at the deeper level at which these principles are justified. So, for example, in arriving at standards for the justice of distributions we might start from the idea of individual well-being as the most basic ground for assessing a person's situation, and then ask which of the various things that promote well-being are properly the responsibility of social institutions and which are the responsibility of individuals themselves. If the justification of moral principles generally followed this pattern, then it would be important to clarify the notion of well-being in order to have a clearer idea which principles are justified.

It is true that when we are assessing the justifiability of moral principles we must appeal to things that individuals have reason to want and that many of these are things that contribute to well-being intuitively understood. But not all of the reasons individuals have for rejecting principles are of this form, so we cannot delimit the range of considerations that figure in justification by defining the boundaries of well-being.

Moreover, the well-being of any given individual is quite indeterminate until we know what his or her main aims are. This means that at the level of argument at which we are choosing principles or policies to apply to individuals in general, well-being is not yet well defined. All we have to work with is an abstract notion of well-being that includes various place holders, such as "success in one's main rational aims, whatever these may be." There are two ways of responding to this indeterminacy. One might argue that, although we cannot say, in advance, what will promote the well-being of the particular individuals who will be affected by a principle, we do know that individuals have reason to value well-being abstractly described, and the principles they have reason to accept will therefore be ones that include this notion in their content —such as principles that tell us to promote the



well-being of particular individuals with whom we interact, whose well-being is determinate and can be known. Alternatively, justification can appeal to more specific forms of opportunity, assistance, and forbearance that we all have reason to want, rather than to the idea of well-being abstractly conceived. This leads to a moral analog of Rawls's primary social goods or Sen's capability sets.

Another consequence of the fact that what advances a person's well-being depends on what aims he or she has adopted is that the content of well-being itself depends on decisions that are plausibly seen as the responsibility of the individual in question. So questions of responsibility cannot be deferred to the stage at which well-being is well defined and we are asking only what will promote it. In particular, deciding between the two strategies of justification just described —between appealing to an abstract idea of well-being and appealing to concrete factors that contribute to it— involves a substantive moral choice. It follows that, to the degree that the concept of well-being plays a role in the justification of moral principles, it does not serve as a starting point for justification that is itself without moral presuppositions. This may seem to pose a problem for moral theory, but I believe that it does not. While a justification for a moral principle would be circular if it presupposed that principle itself, it is unnecessary and, I believe, unrealistic to demand that such justifications be free of all moral content.

Let me turn, finally, to the possible role of well-being in answering the question, "Why be moral?" When a conception of well-being figures in the content of a moral principle, its boundaries mark an important moral distinction: it is thus not transparent in the way that it becomes from a first-person point of view. The perspective of a person who is applying such a principle is in this respect like that of a benefactor, as I described it above. But the question, "Why be moral?" is asked from a first-person point of view. That is to say, we are asking what reasons an individual

has to take moral requirements seriously. An answer must therefore be framed in terms of reasons as they appear to the agent whose reasons they are. From this point of view, I have argued, the concept of well-being is largely transparent: the things that make it up are important, but its boundaries are not. The absence of a clear boundary here would be a problem for moral theory if an explanation of our reasons for caring about right and wrong had to involve showing how this concern serves ends that can be certified as nonmoral. But an account of the motivational basis of right and wrong need not take this form. It is enough to characterize our ideas of right and wrong themselves in a way that makes clear why they are worth caring about and how it can make sense, given the other things we have reason to value, to give them the importance that they claim.

#### 7. CONCLUSION : WELL-BEING NOT A MASTER VALUE

I have tried in this lecture to characterize the intuitive idea of well-being and to identify the fixed points that any plausible account of this notion would have to include. It would be absurd to deny that well-being is important —that it matters how well our lives go. But I have argued that the concept of well-being has less importance, or at least a different kind of importance, than is commonly supposed and that there is little to be gained by constructing a theory of well-being.

From a first-person point of view, the things that contribute to (one's own) well-being are obviously important, but the concept of well-being plays little role in explaining why they are important, and the boundaries of this concept are not very significant. Well-being has its greatest significance from a third-person point of view, such as that of a benefactor, and, at least arguably, in our thinking about right and wrong. From both of these perspectives it remains true that the things that contribute to a person's well-being are important because of their importance to that person. But the importance of well-being as a *category* and the shape

and importance of particular conceptions of well-being derive from the distinctive features of those perspectives: from the distinctive concerns of a (certain kind of) benefactor and from the special requirements of moral argument.

Let me return, finally, to the idea that well-being is a “master value”: that other things are valuable only insofar as they contribute to individual well-being. There is an element of truth in this idea, but put in this way it invites misunderstanding. The misunderstanding would be to take well-being to be a good separate from other values, which are made valuable in turn by the degree to which they promote it. As we have seen, well-being is not a separate good in this sense. It is best understood as an “inclusive” good, and among the things that make a life more successful, and hence better for the person who lives it, is the successful pursuit of worthwhile goals. Although successful pursuit of all of these goals contributes to the agent’s well-being, this contribution is not always what makes them worthwhile. In some cases, what makes an activity worthwhile is its contribution to the well-being of others, so in these cases well-being in general (one’s own and that of others) is what is fundamental. But not all values are of this kind. Consider two classes of examples.

The first are various moral values. Treating others fairly may make my life, and theirs, go better, but this is not my reason for believing it to be worthwhile. Rather, it is worthwhile because it is required by the more general value of treating others in ways that could be justified to them. Living up to the requirements of this more general value may also make our lives better, by making it possible for us to live in greater harmony with one another. But, again, this possible contribution to our well-being is not the only thing, or the most basic thing, that gives us reason to be concerned with what we owe to each other. One more basic reason is the fact that this is part of what is required by our value as rational creatures.

The second class of examples are the values of various forms of excellence. If I devote my life, or a part of it, to research in

pure mathematics, or to mastering the rudiments of theoretical physics, these activities contribute to making my life better. But what makes these pursuits worthwhile is not that contribution (or the possible contribution that their applications might make to the well-being of others) but rather the fact that they constitute serious attempts to understand deep and important questions.

The element of truth in the idea that other things are valuable only insofar as they contribute to individual well-being is this: A reason to value something is a reason *for us* to value it, that is to say, a reason to adopt certain attitudes toward it and to allow the idea of respect for, and perhaps pursuit of, that value to shape our lives in certain ways. There are many things that are of value, and a person cannot respond to every value that there is. Even so, it will be true of most values that insofar as they are valuable at least some people have reason to respond to them in definite ways. If so, then responding in these ways will count among their rational aims in the broad sense defined above, and their lives will be more successful, hence better, if they so respond.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps there are some things that are of value —the grandeur of the universe might be an example— that no one is ever in a position to respond to in any way except passively, by being in awe of it, say. In such a case it might stretch the idea of success in one's aims, and the idea of well-being, too far to say that responding in this way made one's life better. If there are such values, however, they are rare, and it remains true that most things are of value only if they figure in the well-being of at least some individuals.

But even if there are no such values and it is therefore true that nothing is of value unless it contributes to (or forms a part of) individual well-being, this still would not be true in the way that would be required to make well-being a “master value” in the

<sup>36</sup> The claim that nothing is of value unless it figures in this way in people's well-being is similar to John Stuart Mill's famous claim in *Utilitarianism* that “happiness is not an abstract idea but a concrete whole” with parts, each of which is desirable in itself, and that nothing is desired for its own sake unless it is desired as a part of happiness (*Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan, pp. 308–10).

sense described above: not all values would be reducible to the value of well-being.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In line with the idea, argued for above, that the most important conceptions of well-being are moral conceptions and their importance lies in their distinctive role in one or another form of moral argument, the claim that well-being is a “master value” might be understood as a moral claim. This claim would be that the only thing of ultimate moral importance (or of ultimate importance for the purposes of a certain kind of moral argument) is individual well-being; other things have moral importance (or moral importance of this particular kind) only by way of the contribution they make to individual well-being. So, for example, it could be claimed that individual well-being is the only thing that matters, ultimately, for the justifiability of moral principles or for the assessment of social institutions. The idea that well-being is a master *value* may derive some plausibility from being confused with one or another such moral claim, but these claims are distinct from it and need to be assessed on their own merits.

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