

WELL-BEING AND EXCELLENCE

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We have noted some fundamental distinctions between types of goodness or value. There is *usefulness*, or merely instrumental goodness, the value that something may have as a means to something else that is good or that is valued. Usefulness has an obvious importance, and connects with significant philosophical issues about instrumentality and probability; but more fundamental issues for ethical theory are posed by the goods or ends that the useful is to serve. Within the realm of what is good for its own sake, and not just instrumentally good, most contemporary ethical thought focuses mainly on well-being or welfare—that is, on the nature of human flourishing or what is good for a person. The theory developed here, however, gives a primary place to excellence—the type of goodness exemplified by the beauty of a sunset, a painting, or a mathematical proof, or by the greatness of a novel, the nobility of an unselfish deed, or the quality of an athletic or a philosophical performance. It is the goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration, honor or worship, rather than the good (for herself) that is possessed by one who is fortunate or happy, as such (though happiness may also be excellent, and worthy of admiration) .

Excellence is obviously an important topic for theism, inasmuch as a god must be worthy of worship, and it lies equally at the heart of Platonic conceptions of the good. In a contemporary context, however, a focus on excellence stands in need of defense. We are all interested in well-being, but many today are reluctant to give a large place in ethical theory to conceptions of excellence. In this chapter I will try to show that our interest in well-being should lead to an interest in excellence.

1. Well-Being and the Satisfaction of Desire

It is one of the more difficult tasks of ethical theory to explain what human wellbeing consists in—what it is for something to be good for a person. A successful explanation must account for both the evaluation expressed by 'good' and the relation expressed by 'for'. The relation will be particularly important if some things are good for their own sake that would not be good for every person involved in them. Retributivists, for example, may think it is good, for its own sake and not just instrumentally, that the guilty be punished, without supposing that punishment is good for the guilty.

On some theories of the nature of the good, to be sure, the relation expressed by the beneficiary 'for' in 'good for' is obvious and uninteresting. Perhaps the most important theory of this type is hedonism. If we hold that pleasure alone is good for its own sake, it will be natural to think also that my pleasure alone is noninstrumentally good for me. But there are weighty objections to a hedonistic view of what is good for us. A life rich in achievements and friendships seems much preferable to an idle and narcissistic existence, even if the latter were to feel equally pleasant to the person who lived it. Or consider a life spent on Robert Nozick's experience machine,¹ doing nothing, but having the experiences of one's choice, artificially caused by electrodes implanted in one's brain. Most of us would not think that such a life is more enviable than a somewhat less pleasant life of fairly successful coping with reality.

Currently the most influential type of account of a person's good is in terms of the person's desires. I shall discuss an important and representative theory of this sort, formulated by Henry Sidgwick in his *Methods of Ethics*. It is controversial to what extent Sidgwick himself agrees with the theory; he clearly dissents from it on one point at least,² which I will shortly discuss. It is not a "straw man," however. It is a standard reference point in discussions of desire-satisfaction theories of wellbeing. For example, it forms the core of the theory of "goodness as rationality" that is adopted in John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. I will not discuss most of the bells and whistles that Rawls adds to Sidgwick's account, because they do not seem to me to help with the problems that will engage our attention here, though they are importantly related in other ways to Rawls's larger project. I believe that Rawls inherits most of the difficulties that we will find in the theory articulated by Sidgwick. Indeed, I doubt that any desire-satisfaction theory has a plausible escape from them.

The first difficulty that desire-satisfaction theories of a person's good must face, as Sidgwick notes, is "the obvious objection that a man often desires what he knows is on the whole bad for him,"³ or, more broadly, that people often want what is not good for them, whether they know it or not. Sidgwick's solution for this difficulty is "that if we interpret the notion 'good' in relation to 'desire', we must identify it not with the actually desired, but rather with the desirable" (110f.). He suggests a definition of 'desirable' as meaning

[S1] what would be desired, with strength proportioned to the degree of desirability, if it were judged attainable by voluntary action, supposing the desirer to possess a perfect forecast, emotional as well as

intellectual, of the state of attainment or fruition. (111)

Since Sidgwick has said, earlier in the context, that he "will consider only what a man desires for itself--not as a means to an ulterior result--and for himself--not benevolently for others" (109), I take it that [S1] is meant as a definition of what is desirable for the desirer, and is intended to yield an account of what it is for something to be more than instrumentally good for a person. Going on to a related concept, Sidgwick frames a definition of "a man's future good on the whole" as

[S2] what he would now desire and seek on the whole if all the consequences of all the different lines of conduct open to him were accurately foreseen and adequately realised in imagination at the present point of time. (Ilf.)

This formulation provides for comparative evaluations, and for the consideration of merely instrumental goods, though the fundamental judgments to which it appeals are not judgments of instrumental value, since the alternative courses of action, considered together with all their consequences, form wholes so comprehensive that they are not evaluated as means to further goods.

Sidgwick has crafted the hypothetical form of these definitions, quite explicitly, with a view to enabling them to account for some of the ways in which people commonly want what is not good for them. I may want such a thing only because I mistakenly think it is a means to something else that I want, or because its "bad effects, though fore-seen, are not fore-felt," as Sidgwick puts it. I may want something that would not be good for me, and want it for its own sake, but only because I have not adequately realized what it will be like when I get it. As Sidgwick says, "It may turn out a 'Dead Sea Apple', mere dust and ashes in the eating: more often fruition will partly correspond to expectation, but may still fall short of it in a marked degree" (110). All of these possibilities are accounted for by the provision, in [S1] and [S2], that the desires that determine what is good or desirable for one are those one would have if one possessed "a perfect forecast, emotional [and imaginative] as well as intellectual," of what the realization of the desire would be like in relevant respects.

Another cause of wanting something that is not good for one on the whole is failure to consider more desirable alternatives. This is accounted for by the attention to alternatives in [S2]. And the proviso in [S1] that it is "if it were judged attainable by voluntary action" that the desirable would be desired is meant to deal with the fact that I may fail to want something because I judge it to be impossible, though it would be very good for me if I could have it (110).

This strategy has its costs, however. The hypothetical form of these definitions threatens to undo some of the apparent advantages of a desire-satisfaction theory.

1. Desire-satisfaction theories have sometimes seemed politically appealing to liberals because the idea that one's good is determined by one's own preferences seems to afford a bulwark against paternalism. But the hypothetical character of [S1] and [S2] involves a radical departure from this idea, and deeply undermines any such bulwark. Anyone who has been told that something is what she herself would want if only she knew better, knows that it was not being commended to her on the basis of her own preferences, but on the basis of supposedly superior wisdom. Perhaps, in view of our frequent desires for what is bad for us, it never was very realistic to suppose that any plausible theory of a person's good can provide a bulwark against paternalism.⁴ But I think the substitution of hypothetical for actual desires is likely to undermine any advantage there may be in defining what is good or desirable for me in terms of *my own* desires. The acquisition of an understanding of reality that would be ideally adequate for decision making would change me quite drastically--so drastically, indeed, that I doubt that the question, what I would want if I had such an understanding, has a moral importance very different from that of the question, what another, better informed person would want if he were in my position, or what he would want for me if he loved me.

2. Another apparent advantage of a desire-satisfaction theory is the fact that it offers a reduction of the notion of a person's good to empirical facts about preferences. As Sidgwick puts it, it is supposed to be a notion of good that "is entirely interpretable in terms of *fact*, actual or hypothetical, and does not introduce any judgment of value fundamentally distinct from judgments relating to existence;--still less any 'dictate of Reason'" (112). This is a feature that will be attractive to many philosophers of an empiricist bent. But I see a metaphysical fly in the ointment. I am skeptical about the "hypothetical facts" to which the theory appeals. Not being a strict determinist in psychology, I see no compelling reason to believe that there are always, or even usually, objects or courses of action that I would definitely desire or prefer if I knew facts that I do not actually know.⁵

This, by the way, is the point at which Sidgwick explicitly dissents from the desire-satisfaction theory he has formulated. Not that he is skeptical, as I am, about the hypothetical facts; but it seems to him more plausible to ascribe to the notion of a person's "good on the whole" a commendatory force, a "rational dictate," as he calls it, which is not captured by [S1] and [S2].⁶ He does

not believe in reductive definitions of ethical terms. In the end, therefore, he prefers to incorporate an unreduced normative notion of "reason" in his definition,

[S3] interpreting 'ultimate good on the whole for me' to mean what I should practically desire if my desires were in harmony with reason, assuming my own existence alone to be considered. (112)

One could of course think that 'good' has a commendatory force that [S1] and [S2] fail to capture, and still believe that they accurately state the conditions under which an end is good for a person. It is not clear to me whether that is Sidgwick's view, or whether he ultimately disagrees in some further way with [S1] and [S2].⁷ In any event the main burden of my objections to [S1] and [S2] will be that they are not adequate as an account of the conditions under which an end is good for a person.

The gravest disadvantage of the theory articulated by Sidgwick in [S1] and [S2] is that though it accounts well enough for some of the ways in which we may desire what is not good for us, it cannot cope so well with all of them.⁸ I believe this is a disadvantage that it shares with other desire-satisfaction theories of the nature of a person's good. I will discuss four problems of this sort. The first two are about the force of the beneficiary 'for' in 'good for'; they impinge on [S3] as well as [S1] and [S2]. The third and fourth problems focus rather on the value signified by 'good' in 'good for'; they specifically affect [S1] and [S2].

1. Altruistic desires might lead you to sacrifice your own good for the good of another. This seems to imply that what you would prefer, on the whole, with full knowledge, is not necessarily what is best, on the whole, for you. Sidgwick attempts to deal with this problem by stipulating that altruistic desires do not enter into the determination of a person's good. He states at the outset that he will consider "only what a man desires. . . for himself--not benevolently for others" (109). This is too short a way to take with the problem.

How are we to determine which of a person's desires are "for himself"? A good test case here is the desire to be of service to others. This is not the purely other-regarding desire that others be served. It is a partly self-regarding desire. For if you have it, you want yourself to be one who does the serving. Nonetheless, it is commonly an unselfish desire. It is not a desire for one's own good as such; and in fulfilling it one might be willing to sacrifice one's own good.

Sidgwick might refuse to count the desire to serve as a desire for oneself, although it seems intuitively to be a desire that is partly for oneself. The notion of a desire "for oneself" threatens thus to become a technical one, for which an explication will be needed. But what explication can be given? In some contexts we could use the criterion that if you want something because it seems to you that it would be good for you, then the desire is for yourself. We cannot appeal without circularity to this criterion, however, if we are using the notion of a desire for oneself to define the notion of a good for oneself.

Another approach would be to restrict desires for oneself to desires for nonrelational states of oneself. This might be suggested by the phrase "assuming my own existence alone to be considered" in [S3]. This restriction may seem innocent to hedonists, if they construe pleasure as a nonrelational state of oneself; and Sidgwick was a hedonist. But he explicitly wanted his hedonism not to be presupposed in the analysis of the notion of a person's good (09). And most nonhedonists will think that some relational desires--particularly desires to be really related to other people in certain ways, and not just to believe or feel oneself so related---have as much claim as any other desires to a share in determining what is good for oneself.

Indeed, even the desire to be of service to others cannot plausibly be denied a voice in determining what would be good for the desirer, if this is to be determined by his desires. It does not seem unreasonable to count it a great blessing to be able really to help other people. A desire-satisfaction theory should therefore not exclude this desire from all influence in the definition of a person's good, but only from undue influence. This makes the discrimination all the more difficult. Perhaps Sidgwick might say that the desire to serve others is to be considered in this context to the extent that it is for oneself, being weighted according to the portion of its motivational force that is for oneself, ignoring the portion that is for the benefit of others. But here we are surely dancing on conceptual quicksand, as we have little reason to believe that the motivational force of the desire can be divided so neatly as this response would suppose into self-regarding and altruistic portions.

2. Something like the problem I have just been discussing arises in connection with desires that are not necessarily altruistic but may be called "idealistic." One may clearheadedly do what is worse for oneself out of regard for virtue, or for some other ideal. Love of truthfulness, or of human dignity, may lead a person to tell the truth, or to refuse to abase herself, at great cost to herself and for nobody else's benefit. It may be that Sidgwick meant the influence of such motives to be excluded by his announced intent to "consider only what a man desires. . . for himself" (109). For earlier in his book he seems to imply that an "ideal end, as Truth, or Freedom, or Religion," would be "extra-regarding" (51£.). But this is not a very plausible classification, when it is one's own

truthfulness, freedom, or dignity that is at stake; nor is it completely satisfying even with regard to one's own religious piety. Desires for these ends could plausibly be excluded from the realm of the self-regarding or the "for oneself" only if hedonism were presupposed, which Sidgwick did not want to do in the analysis we are discussing. Indeed, it is not clear under what description these motives could be excluded, if hedonism is not presupposed. To exclude desires for anything other than the desirer's own good would render the account viciously circular. To exclude desires for anything other than a state of the desirer's consciousness would edge back toward a presupposition of hedonism.

And idealistic desires probably ought not to be totally excluded anyway. A typical nonhedonist will think they should have something to say, though not too much to say, about what is good for the desirer, if any desires are allowed a voice on this subject. For she will not want to deny that it is better for me (other things being equal, and apart from the consequences) if I am truthful and free and uphold my dignity as a human being. And here we cannot even begin to apply the very questionable strategy I suggested for Sidgwick with regard to the desire to serve others, the strategy of saying that the end should count in determining one's good to the extent that it is an end one wants "for oneself." For we are already considering the ideal ends to the extent that one does desire them for oneself.

Of course desire-satisfaction theorists need not try to exclude in any way the influence of idealistic desires--or of altruistic desires either--if they are prepared to accept a paradox. I mean the paradox that if under the relevant conditions I would choose, all things considered, for the sake of my ideals, or for the good of others, to sacrifice my own comfort, tranquillity, physical and social pleasures, health of mind and body, and length of days, then that is what is best for me. Rawls says some things about happiness that suggest he might be prepared to take this line.⁹ But I think it is not plausible. And Sidgwick's position was less heroic. He said that "when the sacrifice is made for some ideal end, as Truth, or Freedom, or Religion: it may be a real sacrifice of the individual's happiness" (52). He must also have thought it could be a real sacrifice of the individual's own good, since he was in the end a hedonist.

3. Quite a different class of motives that may lead us away from our own good are those that are characteristic of ill will or indifference toward oneself. I may want things that are bad for me because they are bad for me, or because they are painful, if I hate myself or despise myself or am angry at myself, or if I feel guilty and want to punish myself.¹⁰ It is only too familiar a fact that people can and often do have it in for themselves, though many theories of human nature imply the contrary. People sometimes do themselves serious bodily harm, or even kill themselves, at least partly out of self-hatred. One may refuse something that seems likely to make one happier, because one feels one does not deserve to be happy. And even without active ill will one can be indifferent toward oneself. People sometimes, in depression, exhaustion, or ennui, do not care very much about their own lives; and that is another way in which one can fail to desire what is good for oneself.¹¹ To the extent that one is influenced by ill will or indifference toward oneself, it seems unreasonable to take what one wants, or even what one would want if one had all relevant knowledge, as definitive of one's good.

This phenomenon poses a serious problem for desire-satisfaction theories of a person's good. It is one that is not already solved by the hypothetical structure of [S1] and [S2]. For it is not plausible to suppose that ill will toward oneself would disappear if one had full realization of one's alternatives and their consequences.¹² And it still is not plausible if we also demand¹³ full realization of the causal history of one's motives. A fuller understanding of our histories, capacities, and tendencies does not always make us like ourselves better.

A desire-satisfaction theorist could try to deal with this problem by adding the stipulation that one's good is determined by what one would desire if one were free of ill will and indifference toward oneself (in addition to satisfying the other conditions laid down by [S1] and [S2]). This will be circular, of course, saying only that one's good is what one would desire if one cared for one's own good, unless ill will and indifference toward a person can be understood independently of the conception of a person's good. But I think the gravest objection to this strategy is that it would carry the reliance on hypothetical preferences quite beyond the bounds of plausibility, even for those who are less skeptical than I am about hypothetical preferences in general. Consider a person in the grip of self-hatred or depression, and suppose he has not recently been free of this affliction; suppose it enduring and not merely intermittent. If we ask what he would want for himself if he cared more for himself, is that an intelligent question? Is it reasonable to assume he has a motivational structure that can be projected across such a radical change in attitude toward himself so as to determine what would be good for him? Perhaps his tastes in food and music can be projected, but more important preferences regarding personal relationships and style of life are harder to project. What he would want in such matters if his attitude toward himself were changed is likely to depend on how it got changed. Do we want to know what he would desire if he were helped by psychiatric treatment? (And shall we specify Freudian, behavior modification, or chemical treatment?) Or is our question what he would want if his feelings about himself were transformed as a result of his falling in love with someone who really loved him? (And shall we specify anything about that person's interests and lifestyle?) Or is it what he would want if his spirits were lifted by

involvement in something he perceived as a great cause? (And does it matter for our present purpose whether he would be raising money for AIDS research or walking a picket line at abortion clinics?) Alternatively, we might wonder what he would desire if he were reconciled with himself through a religious conversion--and surely it would matter what sort of religion it was. Thus instead of a single question, 'What would he want if he cared more for himself?', we have an indefinite variety of questions of the form 'What would he want if he came to care more for himself as a result of x?' These questions will have quite different answers. And while some values of x can probably be excluded as too unlikely in view of the subject's actual circumstances and character, no one of these questions can be expected to emerge as uniquely relevant to the question, what would be good for him.

No doubt we often think we know what someone would want for herself if she cared more for herself. But I suspect that is mainly because we think we know what she believes would be good for her, and we assume that if she cared more for herself she would want what she (in fact) believes would be good for her--ignoring the effects that the process of transformation of her attitudes toward herself might have on her beliefs about her own good. Or perhaps we project into her transformed mind, not her actual beliefs, but our beliefs about human good in general. In either case we do not have a promising strategy for the desire-satisfaction theorist. For making the definition of a person's good depend on her beliefs or ours about what would be good for her would introduce a vicious-looking circle as soon as we start to ask what is being believed, by her or by us.

4. I have argued that our desires regarding our own lives may be too idealistic to define our good; they may also not be idealistic enough to define it. I may fail to prefer what is better for me because my desires are base. I may prefer money to friendship, idleness to creativity, casual commercial sex to love.

Are such preferences due only to failure of foresight and imagination, as [S1] and [52] would require them to be if they are not to define a person's good? I doubt it. Perhaps it will be replied that one who prefers money to friendship does not *appreciate* friendship as he should, and that this is a failure of imagination. I grant that there is a failure of appreciation here, in that such a person does not value friendship as highly as he should. But that is not a failure of imagination in the relevant sense; it is rather that which is supposed to be explained by a failure of imagination. And other explanations are possible. Sadly, it sometimes happens that one who has tasted friendship comes to prefer money or some other form of power. Must he have forgotten what friendship is like, or can he just have come to like the power more than it deserves?

Here I have in mind an argument of John Stuart Mill's. He held, famously, that pleasures must be rated as to their quality as well as their quantity. One type of pleasure is of better quality than another, on his view, if a smaller quantity of the former is preferred to a greater quantity of the latter by a great majority of "those who are competently acquainted with both."¹⁴ The crucial point in this criterion is the notion of "competent acquaintance." The effect of Mill's use of it is to stack the deck against the sensualist and in favor of intellectual, social, and moral pleasures.

This is manifest in the way Mill deals with the objection "that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness." His reply is that

those who undergo this very common change [do not] voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe (he says) that, before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. . . . It may be questioned whether anyone who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower. 15

Here we must ask how those who have fallen have lost their capacity for the higher pleasures. Is this really a change that could have *preceded* the change in their preferences? I think not. The only way in which people can plausibly be said to have lost their capacity for social or moral pleasures in such cases is by ceasing to *care* very much about other people and about morality.

Mill's deck is stacked against the sensory pleasures precisely because we are all susceptible to them. It requires no devotion to maintain a capacity for them. Therefore even those who are devoted to higher things are still competently acquainted with sensory pleasures. But the pleasures of friendship and moral rectitude cannot be separated from devotion to their objects. If a fully operative capacity for any given pleasure is required for "competent acquaintance" with it, small wonder that those who are "competently acquainted" with the pleasures of friendship and morality prefer them! If they did not prefer them, they would lack the devotion or interest necessary for a capacity for them.

Mill's argument can be parodied. It seems that the pleasures of vengeance must be of very high quality. Vast amounts of comfort, safety, and sensory pleasure have been sacrificed for vengeance by real connoisseurs. No doubt there are some who once tasted the fierce joys of revenge but have now become merciful and prefer the milder pleasures of forgiveness. But they are no longer

competently acquainted with the pleasures of vengeance, having lost the capacity for them. For they would not fully savor the sufferings of an enemy if fortune should offer them such a prize.

Similar considerations apply to the desire-satisfaction theory articulated by Sidgwick. If we are willing to accept a pushpin-is-as-good-as-poetry version of it, we will not be bothered by this problem. But if we think that people sometimes choose what is worse for them because of desires that are base, or insufficiently idealistic, we will think that the better ways of life are adequately appreciated only by people who are "into" them. But the superiority of a way of life cannot be established by the fact that it is preferred by people who are into it, for preferring a way of life is part of being into it.

In view of all these considerations, I do not think the prospects are very bright for a desire-satisfaction theory accounting for all the gaps between what we want and what would be good for us. But that is probably not my deepest reason for rejecting such a theory. Someone more favorably disposed than I am to the theory may be able to arm it with more successfully in ingenious epicycles than I have found to defend it against some of the objections I have presented. Even if it could be rescued from all of them, however, I think a desire-satisfaction theory is not particularly plausible in view of the quite different roles that considerations about people's desires and about their well-being play in our lives.

We do sometimes ask, 'What would be the wisest thing for me to do, in view of all my aims?' and, 'What would she want, if she considered these facts?' But note that neither question excludes altruistic desires from consideration. In these questions we are inquiring about what is best from the point of view of the person whose desires are being considered, but I think we are not normally inquiring about what is best for that person, as such.

The question, what would be best for a given person, is less characteristic of that person's own point of view (the point of view defined by the whole system of his aims) than of the point of view of someone who loves him. The lover could of course be himself, but the focus of self-love is quite different from that of trying to optimize the satisfaction of all one's aims. (The former is typically narrower than the latter.) The question 'What would be best *for* him?' is particularly apt to arise (perhaps indeed most apt to arise) in situations in which some measure of paternalism is inevitable, in which we have to decide on behalf of a child or some other person whose system of preferences is undeveloped or immature, or whose capacities for choice are in some way impaired. Our interests and desires are in large part the product of our education; and though our desires are in some ways corrupted by our culture, the desires we would have had without any education or cultural influences at all would hardly constitute a fully human motivational system, let alone one adequate to define our good. In thinking about what would be good for a child for whose education we are responsible, therefore, we must think about what interests and habits of choice to encourage and foster in her, and cannot presuppose a system of preferences and volitional tendencies already in her as defining the good that we intend for her. This is emphatically not to deny that a child's actual desires claim our attention and respect; but their claim cannot be satisfied by respecting her hypothetical desires. Respecting a child's actual desires and caring for his good are obviously distinct, and both important. Respecting his hypothetical desires is yet a third thing, and has, in its own right, no obvious moral claim on us.

2. Well-Being as Enjoyment of the Excellent

If desire-satisfaction theories of the nature of a person's good won't do, what will? Without pretending to offer here a complete theory of the nature of a person's good, I wish to explore the idea that what is good for a person is a life characterized by enjoyment of the excellent. More precisely, I shall argue that the principal thing that can be noninstrumentally good for a person is a life that is hers, and that two criteria (perhaps not the only criteria) for a life being a good one for a person are that she should enjoy it, and that what she enjoys should be, in some objective sense,¹⁶ excellent. Its being more excellent, and her enjoying it more, will both be reasons for thinking it better for her, other things being equal--though (for reasons that will become clearer in chapter 4, section 5) I distrust judgments based on comparative evaluations of widely different types of excellence, and I do not mean to endorse any maximizing or optimizing calculus. The exposition of my view will come mainly in three parts: about the idea of a life, and about the criteria of enjoyment and of excellence.

1. It is in your life, primarily if not exclusively, that what is non-instrumentally good for you must be found.¹⁷ I insert the qualification 'primarily if not exclusively' because it has sometimes been supposed, quite apart from any belief in life after death (which would be part of your "life," in the relevant sense), that things happening after your death could be good for you--things such as posthumous fame or the prosperity of your grandchildren or the execution of your last will and testament. Such goods seem to lie outside the bounds of your life. But even if they are, arguably, good for you, they could not plausibly be made a primary criterion of your happiness or good. It is not easy to formulate a criterion for what is to count as "in" your life, and what lies outside its bounds. Your subjective experiences and your actions are certainly part of your life. So are some of your relations, but it is harder to say which ones. Most of us would count it an important feature of our lives that we have real, and not just illusory,

friends. Distant and very external relations that only philosophers would think of, on the other hand, such as sharing a birthday with quintuplets you have never heard of, can plausibly be excluded from your life. The effects caused by your actions are often part of your life. It can make a difference to the character of your life whether some benefit or harm to other people really was a result of what you did. But if the effect were both unknown to you and remote from your agency in such a way as to relieve you of moral responsibility, it might be thought to lie outside your life.

Difficult questions can also be raised as to what counts as a life, what you are, and which lives could be yours. It may be doubted, for instance, whether "life" on Nozick's experience machine would really be a life in the sense that now concerns us, even apart from doubts about its excellence. Whatever else is to be true of an existence that is a good one for me, it must be a life that I am living; and plugging into the machine seems distressingly like giving up the chance to live a real life. What is good for me depends in part on what I am. I am indeed a subject of experience; and considered purely as a subject of experience, I might have a good enough time on the experience machine. But I am more than a subject of experience. I am also an agent, and an existence without agency would not be a real life, let alone a good one, for me. Other issues, which I will leave aside here, are connected with the plausible thesis that a life, in the relevant sense, must have at least a minimal narrative unity. 18

2. Another truth about human well-being that is intuitively evident is that a person's good is not very fully realized¹⁹ unless she likes or enjoys her life in the long run. You may be very virtuous; you may be brilliant, beautiful, successful, rich, and famous; but if you do not enjoy your life, it cannot plausibly be called a good life *for you*. We may think of this as the kernel of truth in hedonism, or as the important truth to be found in the neighborhood of hedonism.

Satisfaction of desire regarding one's life does not entail enjoyment; that is obviously important for my argument.²⁰ A self-sacrificing person may be satisfying a predominant preference regarding her life in being tortured to death for her devotion to a great cause, but the event will not necessarily contribute anything to her enjoyment of her life. Enjoyment essentially involves an occurrent quality of life that can hardly be present when one's consciousness is wholly swallowed up by pain. (The consciousness of a martyr of extraordinary fortitude or saintliness may perhaps not be swallowed up even by extreme torture, but the self-sacrificing person I have in mind here is not that extraordinary.) In enjoyment, what one likes or values about one's life must be able to hold a dominant place in one's consciousness.

At the same time, enjoyment must be understood here as including more than what is usually meant by 'pleasure'. Enjoying life is not simply a matter of "feeling good" or having pleasant experiences. It is also, and much more, a matter of the zest or interest with which one engages in the activities of life. The jaded sensualist may have sensations that are pleasant in themselves, but fail to enjoy them because he has lost interest in them. On the other hand, the "old curmudgeon" who sincerely complains about almost everything, but who pursues a variety of projects with evident interest and energy, and with considerable success, is enjoying life in the sense that interests me--though we may grant that grouching less might be a sign of even greater enjoyment. Of course one can also enjoy a lazy day, but not if one is thoroughly uninterested in everything that is going on in and around one.

What we enjoy, likewise, is not limited to states of consciousness, but also includes actions, and objects to which we are related. Swimmers enjoy swimming by doing it. Nature lovers enjoy woods by walking in them, and birds by hearing and seeing them. We enjoy our friends by relating to them in many ways; and some people have claimed to enjoy God. None of this enjoyment is without experience, but it is not only the experiences that are enjoyed. Because we can enjoy objects distinct from ourselves, we can enjoy excellence that is not our own. No doubt the ability to enjoy what is excellent is itself an excellence, but we are not necessarily excellent in proportion to the excellence we enjoy.

In insisting thus on what we might call the "external" aspects of enjoyment, I am not motivated by a general skepticism about feelings or inner states. Behaviorist, or even Wittgensteinian, views in the philosophy of mind might lead one to interpret enjoyment in terms of ways of acting rather than introspectible feelings; but I have never found those views plausible. I take it that feelings of pleasure are real and important, and that exemplary cases of enjoyment will be characterized by feelings of pleasure as well as by active interest.

There is yet another point, however, at which an obsession with pleasure might mislead us about the kind of enjoyment or liking of one's life that is essential to a person's good; and that is the relation of the enjoyment to time. If we think of enjoyment in terms of feelings of pleasure, it will be natural to think that what matters is that the moments of one's life should be enjoyed or liked while they are occurring. That certainly adds to one's enjoyment of life, if it happens, but it is not the only thing to be taken into account when considering to what extent someone has enjoyed her life. Suppose she has succeeded in swimming the English Channel. Perhaps the hours she spent in the water were mostly unpleasant, full of weariness, anxiety, and cold. Nonetheless, we may count her swimming the Channel as something that she enjoys in her life, if she savors the achievement.

Savoring the achievement is important. It was not so much while she was doing it as after she had done it, and knew that she had succeeded, that she liked the swim. And the value that she sets on it retrospectively seems, intuitively, quite relevant to how good it was for her that her life included this episode. But this "savoring" is not to be evaluated by counting moments of pleasure spent remembering or celebrating what she had done. It would be quite wrongheaded to try to calculate the cumulative duration of the moments of retrospective pleasure, and their intensity, and weigh them against the duration and intensity of unpleasant moments involved in the swim and in the preparations for it, in order to ascertain whether doing it really made a net contribution to her good. Suppose, for instance, that she died of some unrelated²¹ cause so soon after the swim that she did not have time to accumulate moments of retrospective pleasure equivalent in duration and intensity to the unpleasantness she had endured. It would be misguided to argue that in that case she would have enjoyed her life more on the whole if she had not made the swim.

More important than the duration and intensity of the moments of retrospective pleasure, when we are considering whether she enjoyed her life more by making the swim, is "what it meant to her"--what difference her knowing that she had done it made to the value that she set on her life as a whole, or on some major part of it. The relation of this consideration to moments of consciousness is complex. On the one hand, it does matter that there be a moment, well connected to the rest of her life, in which she knows that she has accomplished the thing that means so much to her. Without such a moment of knowledge, her achievement would contribute nothing to her *enjoyment* of life. The loss of enjoyment would be reflected in such comments as "What a pity she never knew that she succeeded!" (And if the moment of savoring or joy does not follow the swimming so closely as to form a single event with it, but comes some time later, we may think that what she enjoyed was not swimming the Channel but having swum it.)

On the other hand, the meaningful knowledge requires only a moment to make its chief contribution to the enjoyment of life. This is reflected in the very frequent concern that people should know certain things before they die, even if the good news arrives only at the last minute. Doubtless it is even better to have more time to savor the joy; but I think the attainment of the highly valued knowledge matters much more than its duration in assessing how much the person enjoyed her life.

We probably do not have a metric that yields a nice mathematical treatment for questions of how much a person enjoys her life. There is no perspective on one's life such that how much one likes it as a whole from that point of view settles how much one has enjoyed it, for most of the enjoyment of life is found in enjoying it as one goes along. On the other hand, as noted previously, adding up the enjoyment value (if it could be computed) of minutes and seconds of consciousness does not seem to correspond very well to what we are after in asking about the enjoyment of life; what we really and reasonably care about in life is not very amenable to mathematical treatment. The enjoyment (and the excellence) of somewhat enduring projects and relationships that tend to give meaning and unity to one's life as a whole, or to major parts of it, is important to the fully human enjoyment of one's life (and to the excellence of what is enjoyed).

3. The most controversial of my theses about a person's good (and the most important for my larger aims in ethical theory) is that it depends on the excellence of what she enjoys. In practice we tend to think in accordance with this thesis. I have claimed that the primary point of view from which the question about a person's good arises is that of a person who loves her. And we surely do desire for those we love the enjoyment of the excellent, in preference to the enjoyment of things of lower quality, though they might be equally enjoyed. Few parents would desire for their children a lifetime of narcotic highs, no matter how much they would be enjoyed. We do not regard such pleasures, in any amount or intensity, as an acceptable substitute for friendship, knowledge, or accomplishment. Many of us, likewise, would not wish for our children or our students a life of devotion to wealth or power or fame--not because those things cannot be enjoyed, but because we think there are better things to enjoy. Probably we also believe that the greater goods are likely in fact to yield more enjoyment; but I do not think that is the main reason we believe enjoying the greater goods would be better for people. We will not conclude that our fears for someone have proved empty if her devotion to mammon leads to a long and apparently contented life of enthusiastic moneygrubbing and conspicuous consumption.

In hoping that those we love will enjoy what is excellent in preference to what is not, we are not merely hoping that they will share our personal likes and dislikes. It is not particularly a manifestation of benevolence toward someone if I hope that he will prefer raspberries (which I love) to sea cucumber (which I detested the one time I ate it). But it may well be a manifestation of love to hope that he will prefer good art to bad. This presupposes belief that excellence is objective, at least in a way that personal likes and dislikes are not. Our hopes and aspirations for people we love give reason to think that most of us hold such a belief, at least in practice and with respect to some realms of value.

The support I have offered thus far for taking the excellence of what is enjoyed as a criterion of a person's good is little more than an appeal to intuition. It is an appeal that I think most of us cannot consistently disregard unless we are prepared to change some

important attitudes and practices; but it is certainly not the strongest sort of argument. It will be worthwhile, therefore, to add an argument drawn from the internal dynamics of enjoyment.

I begin with a Butlerian point.²² Enjoyment, of the sort characteristic of persons, as distinct from merely animal pleasure, presupposes a life somewhat structured by purposes and valuing. To enjoy life as a whole, or as an ongoing project, it is important, probably necessary, to enjoy things that one values. And we could hardly enjoy them as we do, if we thought that our valuing them was objectively deluded or mistaken. Indeed, we could hardly value them if we thought the valuing mistaken. And few of us think we would be fortunate to live, and like very much, a life based on mistaken values. It would therefore be very hard for us to accept, in our own case, the view that the excellence of what we enjoy is irrelevant to the question how good for us it is that we enjoy it. It is important to our good to enjoy things that we think are in some degree excellent. So if we think we would not be fortunate to be deluded in such matters, we should think it important to our good to enjoy things that really are in some degree excellent.

That is, we should think so insofar as we believe that some things are objectively more excellent than others. Could we sustain our valuing and enjoying if we regarded the valuing as purely subjective, merely a matter of our individual likes and dislikes? Perhaps, but it may be doubted. I suspect the interest in such activities as art or sport would be hard to sustain if we thought (or better, if we really felt) there was nothing more to the value of the activities and the ends we pursue in them than our liking them. It would also be hard to find meaning or interest in our lives, more broadly, if we thought that about all our activities and ends.

Some activities, such as subsistence farming, might be thought to yield direct pleasure even though they are valued only instrumentally, as means to the satisfaction of physical desires so basic as to be virtually instinctive (and independent of value beliefs). But I doubt that those who enjoy subsistence farming are likely to have that simply utilitarian an attitude toward it. I suspect that they typically experience it as an activity that puts them in touch with something felt to be objectively excellent--whether the life of plants and animals, or (more abstractly) nature, or (religiously) the gods. Here too I am inclined to think that the loss of the sense of objective excellence would undermine the valuing that supports the enjoyment of the activity. For this reason even backbreaking labor in a traditional society may not be "alienating" in the way that industrial labor is apt to be when it is valued only instrumentally. This may be true even if the traditional society is objectively very unfair, so long as it sees the labor as meaningfully related, in a more than utilitarian way, to objects whose value transcends their being liked (and even transcends their being eaten).

Some philosophers may object to the use of excellence as a criterion for a person's good because they fear it will have elitist or paternalist consequences. I think the most obnoxious sort of elitist consequence cannot fairly be laid to its charge. For nothing that has been said here implies that people who have achieved greater excellence, or who have more capacity for excellence, ought to have more rights or opportunities than others. To say that the excellence of what is enjoyed is a criterion of each person's good is not to say anything about how the good of different persons should be weighed in the principles of right or justice.²³ If one holds a consequentialist theory of right according to which action ought always to maximize the total or average good of persons, then the adoption of excellence as a criterion of a person's good may lead to the conclusion that action ought to favor those persons who are capable of greater excellence. But this is no worse than concluding, as some utilitarians must, that action ought to favor those persons who have a greater capacity for pleasure. Both conclusions are objectionable, but the fault in both cases can be laid at the door of the maximizing consequentialist theory of right.

A larger fear of inegalitarian consequences concerns the application of concepts of excellence to persons themselves, and not just to what they enjoy. That may be thought to threaten the moral ideal of equal regard for persons. In order to deal with this fear we will need some account of the value that belongs to persons as persons, and that will be one of the topics of chapter 4.

As for the issue of *paternalistic* implications, a theory of the good life for human beings that emphasizes excellence will not support a fastidious reverence for all human desires or wishes as such. But such reverence is implausible anyway. We are all surely aware of having had many desires whose fulfillment was never of any importance for morality or for the quality of our lives. We have also had desires whose satisfaction would have been bad for us--and this obvious fact has led desire-satisfaction theories of the nature of a person's good to abandon exclusive reliance on actual desires and appeal to hypothetical desires. But theories that appeal to hypothetical desires do not provide much of a bulwark against paternalism, as I argued in section 1. The excellence criterion of a person's good can support a strong respect for individual autonomy if we believe, as John Stuart Mill did,²⁴ that the greatest excellences in human life involve or presuppose autonomous choice. The emphasis on excellence can particularly support a respect for the individual quest that seeks something beyond the conventional or the presumptively natural.

The excellence criterion may lead to a somewhat selective respect for people's preferences; but that is not an implausible result. Probably most of us believe that much stricter protection should be given to freedom of speech, religion, and association than to economic freedoms. This belief could not be based very solidly on the assumption that people care more about the former than about the latter freedoms, which (alas!) is often false. A more plausible ground for paying more respect to the former freedoms is that they protect areas of choice that are essential to the enjoyment of more excellent goods.²⁵

Having focused first on the criterion of enjoyment and then on that of excellence, it remains, in this section, to discuss how they are related in constituting our good. It may already have occurred to the reader that there is a parallelism between my account and an informed-desire-satisfaction account of well-being--that enjoyment and excellence in the former correspond, respectively, to the satisfaction and the well-informedness of desire in the latter. This is true, but there are also significant differences. The most important is my commitment to objective excellence. By insisting that enjoyment that constitutes my good should be enjoyment of what is excellent, rather than insisting that desires that define my good should be perfectly well informed, I substitute a frankly and irreducibly value-laden criterion for one that is ostensibly procedural. I think this is necessary if we are to deal adequately with the fact that our desires can be too base to define our good.

A further difference is that enjoyment is internal to my life, and even to my consciousness, in a way that the satisfaction of my desires need not be. Even though what I enjoy is often external to myself, the enjoyment itself must be an event in my experience. Because of this, the enjoyment criterion helps to assure that what we are assessing is my good rather than some other good that I care about.

At the same time, it may be wondered whether the enjoyment criterion does not make my good too independent of what is external to me, since it seems that illusory friendships and illusory accomplishments, for example, can be enjoyed as much as real ones. But the enjoyment criterion does not stand alone in dealing with this problem. The excellence criterion comes to its aid, as we can see in considering another question about the relation between the two criteria: are enjoyment and excellence constituents of our good independently of each other;²⁶ or is it the enjoyment only of excellence, and excellence only as enjoyed, that is good for us, as my phrasing thus far has suggested?

I doubt that enjoyment of what is not in any way or degree excellent can be a constituent of our good; surely it cannot at any rate be an important constituent of our well-being. There may be relatively little enjoyment that is not enjoyment of excellence. In particular, the enjoyment of physical pleasure as such is normally an enjoyment of healthy life, which I believe is an excellence, an imaging of the divine life.²⁷ Unfortunately, however, there is some enjoyment that is not enjoyment of excellence because it is enjoyment of the bad. Among the clearest cases of this are enjoyments that are malicious or vain, such as *schadenfreude* or the savoring of inflated fantasies of one's own importance.²⁸ These seem to me not to contribute noninstrumentally to our good at all; one reason that they do not may be that the enjoyments themselves are bad in a way that diminishes the excellence of our lives. This is not to deny that it may sometimes be better, instrumentally, for our mental health to indulge in such pleasures than to repress them. Some cases are more complex. It might be snobbish to deny that the enjoyment of bad art can be an innocent pleasure that enhances many people's lives; but then I suspect that "bad art" that is enjoyed typically has excellences, in some degree, which are the object of much of the enjoyment.

It is hard to maintain without qualification that excellence is a constituent of our good only as enjoyed. Some aspect of the relevant excellence may not be accessible to one's experience, and may therefore not affect one's enjoyment. Real friendships and real accomplishments are more excellent than illusory ones, and are therefore better for us, even if the illusions would yield as much subjective enjoyment. Thus, as I claimed earlier, the excellence criterion keeps the enjoyment criterion from making my good too independent of what is external to me.

I am not denying, of course, that real friendships and real achievements are enjoyed; so it does not follow from these examples that the excellence of what is not enjoyed *at all* can constitute part of one's well-being. Probably it can, for it is plausible to think it remains better for oneself to do what is excellent when no available course of action affords any enjoyment. But a life rich only in that sort of excellence is no life to wish on a friend. It is in the enjoyment of excellence that a person's good is primarily to be sought.²⁹

Notes

1. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 42-45.

2. Shaver, "Sidgwick's False Friends," rightly emphasizes that the theory is not exactly Sidgwick's own, and documents the extent of the controversy.
3. Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 109f. Subsequent references to this work (and to no other) will be given, in the present section, by page numbers in parentheses in the text.
4. A similar point is made well in Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 11.
5. I have developed this sort of skepticism much more fully in Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil."
6. This is the only explicit objection to [S1] and [S2] that I have found in Sidgwick. Shaver ("Sidgwick's False Friends," p. 316) argues that Sidgwick thought they do not deal adequately with the possibility of weakness of will. Shaver seems to take it that when Sidgwick speaks of "a rational dictate to aim at this end [one's own good on the whole], if in any case a conflicting desire urges the will in an opposite direction," the "conflicting desire" is a desire that conflicts with one's good even though it is formed under the ideal conditions specified in [S1] and [S2]. I think it much likelier, however, that Sidgwick meant a desire, not so formed, that conflicts with the desire formed in the ideal conditions. Schneewind (*Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, p. 225) thinks Sidgwick objects to the privileged role of present desire in [S2]; but Sidgwick (p. 111) seems to me rather to suppose (rightly or wrongly) that equal regard for all relevant times is adequately provided for in [S2] by the requirement of full imagination of the whole future. Parfit (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 500) suggests that Sidgwick objects to the desire-satisfaction account (as I will) on the ground that my desires, though fully informed, might still be too base to define my good; but I see no clear evidence of that in the text of Sidgwick.
7. Sidgwick grants that they supply "an intelligible and admissible interpretation of the terms 'good' (substantive) and 'desirable,' as giving philosophical precision to the vaguer meaning with which they are used in ordinary discourse" (p. 112). On the other hand, the desire-satisfaction theory does not play a clear explicit role in Sidgwick's argument when he concludes, chapters later, that pleasure alone is the ultimate good for anyone.
8. As indicated in note 6, Sidgwick does not seem to me to object to [S1] and [S2] on this ground.
9. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 550f.
10. The possibility of a desire to punish oneself is developed persuasively as a counterexample to desire-satisfaction theories of a person's good in Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good," p. 40f.
11. See the persuasive treatment of this subject in Stocker, "Desiring the Bad."
12. This is noted, in a similar context, by Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, p. 131, where she also notes the interesting point that some kinds of overvaluation of oneself, such as vanity, "can also lead one to desire things that are not good for oneself."
13. With Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 419f., and Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*.
14. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2, paragraph 5.
15. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2, paragraph 7.
16. The realism of my view of excellence plays a part in my arguments here. I acknowledge, however, that it is not such a prominent part that the main arguments of the present chapter, taken in isolation from the rest of the book, could not be adapted for use in a less realist or less cognitivist theory. The main task of this chapter is not the defense of moral realism, but the vindication of the place of excellence in ethics.
17. Cf. Griffin, *Well-Being*, pp. 21-23.
18. For a particularly interesting discussion of the relation of narrative unity to a person's good (claiming more than I would be prepared to claim for the importance of this factor), see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 203f.

19. I say "not very fully realized" because I wish to allow that in tragic circumstances a life that is not enjoyable might be the best that is possible for a person.
20. I am indebted to Owen McLeod for an acute question that brought this point to my attention.
21. I say 'unrelated' because I want a case in which the swim does not cause her death. Many natural or accidental causes of sudden death in this situation would not be unrelated in this sense. One that would be unrelated, though particularly gruesome, is a nuclear war so bad that it would have killed her wherever she was
22. CE. Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, sermon 11.
23. Indeed, it is not yet to say anything at all about the role (if any) that should be assigned to excellence in political ethics. That is the subject of chapter 14, and the issue of equality in political philosophy will be taken up in the first section of that chapter.
24. Mill, *On Liberty*, chap. 3. Cf. also Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 71, and Hurka, *Perfectionism*, chap. 11.
25. This point will be discussed more fully in chapter 14, section 2.
26. As may be suggested by the inclusion of enjoyment in a "list" of "the ends of life" in Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 67.
27. Conversely, physical pain is a diminishment of that enjoyment, and as such is bad for us. On this point I disagree with Richard Kraut, whose views are in many ways similar to mine, but who doubts that pain is intrinsically bad for us, seeing "no feature of it that makes it worthy of avoidance" (Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good," p. 46). I think I have just mentioned a feature of pain that makes it worthy of avoidance, though perhaps Kraut won't think so; he does assign enjoyment a place in the human good (*ibid.*, p. 52 n. 13), but it is not clear to me whether he means to allow it as large a place as I do. More will be said in chapter 4, section 5, about the excellence of healthy life.
28. On *schadenfreude* I am disagreeing with the (to my mind, underargued) position of Griffin (*Well-Being*, pp. 24-26).
29. I hope that this treatment of the relation between enjoyment and excellence helps deal with the objection to defining well-being (purely) in terms of enjoyment in Griffin, *Well-Being*, pp. 18-20.